CHAPTER 4
MAHESH DATTANI: From the Present to the Past

"The meaning of all words finally is history. History devours the future.... History and the future are one. Primitive and therefore Eternal."
(Kulkami in Uddhwasta Dharmashala)
– G. P. Deshpande

I hate it when people say ‘playwright Mahesh Dattani’. I would rather say ‘dramatist’. I prefer that word. (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 24)

These words, quoted in an interview, absolutely justify the creative genius of Mahesh Dattani. During his childhood Dattani had watched Gujarati theatre, which was a community event in Bangalore. He was (particularly) highly influenced by the Gujarati playwright Madhu Rye’s play Koi Pun Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo To. It had the concept of a play-within-a-play, where at the end the protagonist shoots at someone in the audience. This concept came as a shock to the audience, for it had broken away from the proscenium theatre system. Dattani was highly excited on seeing this play at the age of twelve. He too, wrote and enacted plays with his friends and presented them in front of the friends’ families.

Though his parents were traditional, they never imposed their views on him. He was in his father’s business for almost ten years and worked as a copywriter in an advertising firm before taking up theatre full-time. The first English play that he saw was Alan Ayckbourn’s Table Manners, produced by Bangalore Little Theatre. Dattani was impressed by the Comedy of Manners, especially of the English. He joined the Bangalore Little Theatre as an actor and the first workshop that he attended was by Vijay Padki, which helped him to learn many facets of theatre. The first play that he directed in collaboration with Abhijit Sengupta was Shaw’s Passion, Poison and Putrefaction. Till this point he had not started writing plays. When Dattani went to Mumbai, he got acquainted with the theatre of that place. He saw Neela Kamra directed by Shafi Inamdar, again a play by Madhu Rye. This play was about sexuality – about sexual relations between a sister-in-law and a brother-in-law – a theme, which was usually not seen in Gujarati theatre. Dattani liked the structure and content of this play. He also liked the plays directed by Arjun Sajnani, a well-known director of Bangalore. He found all these plays very challenging in terms of form. He was also influenced by Ashok Mandanna and attended his workshop on voice training and
group work. These various kinds of trainings helped him in working with the other actors of his group. Another thing that helped him was his training in dance. He learnt ballet at Alliance Francaise and was introduced to Western classical music. His dancing was not graceful, but it gave him a better sense of pace. Later on, he was fascinated by Bharatnatyam, a well-known dance form of South India, and began to learn it from U. S. Chandrabagha Devi. He gave up ballet because the two forms clashed. Dattani learned Bharatnatyam for six years, which again developed his sense of pace. His suggestion to actors is to learn this form of dance that teaches a kind of discipline and rhythm. He believes that learning this dance form helps the actors in spiritual growth, as he puts it:

> The natya element is very much a part of Bharatnatyam – you have the nritya, the natya and the abhinaya.... just devotion, the yearning for something exalted, of a higher order, I think that’s something which is very good for an actor’s spiritual growth. (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 29)

Dattani is of the opinion that the character is the most important part of a play. Every character in his play is given his own space to develop himself. In an interview with Madhuri Velegar K., he says: “I tend to undermine my perceptions and allow my characters to develop their own desires and actions and points of view. Every character thus reveals itself through actions and intentions” (Femina 109). His women characters are full of complexities as he gives them liberty to act as human beings. Both, the male and female characters of his plays, are inspired by real life. Even though his female characters are victimized, they emerge in a stronger light. They do not stick to the stereotyped roles and are also oppressors, which might not make him popular with the traditionalists whose belief of the mother-image is that of purity and sacredness. The reason for such an understanding about women can be his sharp sensitivity, as Bamzai observes: “... being surrounded by women has allowed Dattani to understand a lot of the schizophrenia that middle-class women caught between two worlds, have to live with.” The male characters are complex too and have to fight against many aspects in order to survive in the world. But they are unable to fight as successfully as the women because while the women are able to survive all odds, the men are not. The men, like the women, also have to struggle to oppose the roles prescribed to them by society. Dattani’s plays also deal with characters such as homosexuals and hijras. These characters question the lack of honesty in sexual
orientation and thus, exhibit the ways in which society wants to keep itself away from these facts of life. These plays comment upon the hypocrisy in such realities of human life. The playwright also focuses on how such conditioning can ruin the psychology of human beings, as for example, the closet homosexuals who seek to hide their nature by entering into convenient marriages. C. K. Meena, in his observation of Dattani’s plays, questions such characters: “... they manage to fool the society, but are they cheating their own selves as well?” (9). Thus, through the characters there arises conflict in every kind of relationship between human beings. Dattani insists that dialogue emerges from characters, hence not the dialogue (as is commonly thought) but the characters make the story.

Dattani wants playwrights to understand that one should write for space and not for page. The play is written not only to be read, but also to be enacted. The playwright must keep in mind that on stage certain incidents can be viewed and do not require to be spoken of, as the playwright explains: “... you’re writing for space, you’re not writing for page. A lot of playwrights write for page, whereas you have to think of space.... No amount of theorizing helps there” (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 22). In his workshops, the playwrights and actors work parallel, trying to find out the exact pre-requisites in each other’s contributions. According to Dattani, even action, be it physical or psychological, is equally important. He believes that brevity (by using pauses in between) in phrase or speech or writing in day-to-day, naturalistic conversation is also a necessity in a play. He feels that good melodrama is a better way of understanding the craft of the trade. His plays are full of humour and suspense – humour which is wild and ironically wicked, exhibiting hypocrisy; suspense which gives away little surprises and heightens the tension to create multiple climaxes. The well-made structure of the play also gives him an opportunity to experiment with time and space, using the technique of flashbacks and oscillation between past and present. His characters speak an English, which is not ‘Queen’s English’, but something that the Indians speak with the regional accent. He recognizes English as his first language in which he can think and write. This can be the reason for his writing in English and also working in the same language in theatre, as aptly justified by Girish Karnad: “You write a spoken dialogue – you just don’t write a dialogue. This has been the major problem with most Indians trying to write in English, you know, to write as they might have learnt in an English class” (Indian Review of Books 4).
Before venturing into playwriting, Mahesh Dattani directed a few plays like Woody Allen’s *God*, Paul Zindel’s *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-moon Marigolds* and Sartre’s *In Camera*. All the plays ran successfully with his direction and he decided to take up this profession seriously. During that period he had written a short ‘playlet’ called *Seasons Greetings*, which was not a great piece of art. The first serious writing was the translation of Madhu Rye’s *Kumarni Agashe* into English. But as Vijay Padki had already translated the play, Dattani could not work on it further. The first play he wrote was *Where There’s A Will* (1986), a comedy, which was quite successful. He initially wrote for his own theatre group, and gradually his plays were adopted by other theatre academies. The next play, *Dance Like A Man* (1989) received great appreciation in Bangalore, so it was also performed at Mumbai. There, Shanta Gokhale, a critic in the Arts section of *The Times of India*, gave publicity to this play. The publicity brought personalities like Alyque Padamsee to watch the play. Dattani considers this as a turning point in his career as Padamsee was impressed by his work, especially because an Indian play was being performed in English. Padamsee praised the playwright, as noted in the Preface to the *Collected Plays*, in these words: “At last a playwright with some conviction” (xii). He also made a deal to direct Dattani’s next play *Tara* (originally *Twinkle Tara*) (1990). Padamsee gave him constant reminders to send the draft, which induced Dattani to finish it soon. But the playwright wanted to direct his own play, so there were two troupes directing the play – one was by Padamsee at Mumbai and another by Dattani at Bangalore. Dattani has always insisted on directing his own plays, as he says: “… I write because I want to direct” (*Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 30). He expresses his gratitude to Padamsee who had seen in him enough potential to help him call himself a professional playwright and director. Other than Padamsee, Lillete Dubey had also approached Dattani with an offer to produce *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991). She took a copy of the play, but never produced it. Later on, she produced *Dance Like A Man*, which created a record of more than a hundred shows in India, London, Dubai, Colombo etc. Dattani specially liked the way Dubey had provided colour and texture to the character she played. She also produced *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), which talks about the travails of gay men and women in metropolitan cities. It was due to Dubey that this play could be performed in front of the main-stream audiences. Dattani feels indebted to these two theatre personalities who made his plays reach out to people globally and achieve unimagined fame for him.
The major influences on the development of Dattani as a playwright are Madhu Rye, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar, all of them writing about human relations, trying to cope with these relations and about survival. He is also influenced by Tennessee Williams, whose dramatic conventions, according to Dattani, are like poetry. Williams’s plays deal with violence on women and human relationships in society. Dattani’s plays deal with issues such as gender bias, sexuality, generation gap, urban angst in emerging Indian culture, religious tensions and modern psyche in a realistic way. His plays portray the fight of an individual to establish his own self, to push oneself beyond boundaries, as he explains:

... push the boundaries of what establishment is... it is not individual versus establishment... the individual is the establishment, but sort of redefining what the establishment is... Gender obviously is a major part of it. (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 32)

Dattani’s concept of genius is not one-dimensional. He believes that every human being has a feminine and a masculine side to him/her, and when one fights against the other, it is a fight against the self. Each one is incomplete without the other. His philosophy brings to mind the theory of Ardhanarishwar, propounded as the union of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Ashok Vohra’s observation of this theory is the same as Dattani’s philosophy, which also explains the equality of man and woman:

Shiva is pervaded by the power of Parvati, and she is pervaded by the power of Shiva. So, Ardhanarishwar incorporates a synthesis of opposites and on the other integrates the opposites to show that they complement each other.... Ardhanarishwar give us the mistaken impression that it represents a being which is half female and half male. In reality, there is no such being. The symbolic representation of Ardhanarishwar is a metaphor, which represents a being the whole of which is Shiva and the whole of which is Shakti at the same time. (10)

Dattani very firmly believes that he writes for theatre and for his own productions. He considers this craft as his strength as it enables him to infuse complexities in a simple subject, and he wishes to continue writing in the same vein, unconcerned about the critics:
... critics 'hate' me. I mean it nicely and without remorse. For if they loved me, I would probably write boring plays full of self-importance that nobody really wants to produce, direct, act in or go to stuffy halls with inadequate facilities to see. (Collected Plays xi)

He does not want his plays to be limited to a specific audience; in fact he detests it when told that certain plays are only meant for rural, non-English speaking public as he feels that it is sheer hypocrisy to think that the others are all liberal-minded. Another issue that he does not appreciate is his being labelled as an Indian English playwright. People seem to think that his plays are only for English speaking, elitist, upper class kind of audience/readers. In fact, Dattani is teaching the emerging artists to work in a language, which is not an issue: "I think I am doing that in the studio space, spawning talent and having playwrights and actors emerge to whom Indian English drama is not an issue. It's there, it's what you do, it's the norm" (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 33). He is advised not only about the language but also to write about the working-class, which will bring him more success. But he cannot do so because what he finds around himself is the same environment as he depicts in his plays; and his plays take inspiration from real life.

The playwright finds it a sorry state that there is no guiding institution for playwrights in the country. Though there are great playwrights, they are all individuals; there has been no movement in Indian theatre like the one in England or America. He firmly believes that unless there is some progressive movement, there will be no properly recognized Indian theatre. He does not consider adaptations of classics or other European plays as progressive because: "... the minute you keep falling back on classics, you do a great disservice to your time" (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 33). The playwright is hopeful that his studio will contribute in some way to the development of an Indian theatre. He wants to continue with his work of writing and, "... carrying on with the business of holding a mirror up to society" (Collected Plays xv). Not only this but he is also very optimistic about the current changing times. He believes that even though India has stuck to its traditional values and heritage, it has still become a part of the Coca-Cola and Mac Donald's culture. And he is very positive in observing that Indians have started accepting the fusion of the two cultures in a very balanced way, as he tells Kaveree Bamzai: "But I think we have started seeing ourselves in more realistic terms now. There have been many
positive changes, we have become more and more interactive with ourselves and with the world.”

Dattani’s plays are mostly about an individual and a family or society. His family is usually Gujarati, the one that he has lived in and seen around himself. Bamzai explains: “Dattani’s inspiration comes from the family (it could even be his). His characters are invariably Parikhs, Patels or Mehtas...” Like Tendulkar, Dattani also derives his plots from real-life situations and experiences. His first full-length play, Where There’s A Will, is his only light and humorous play. It is a play about the established patriarchy where women think that they are born to be suppressed by men, and men think it their prerogative to dominate the weaker ones. Usually this domination is in the form of a father figure. Hasmukh Mehta, the father in Where There’s A Will, also thinks along the same lines; he feels that he is the only authority at home and in business, and his family members should simply obey him. He expects his son Ajit to follow his ways in the same manner that he had followed his father. He wants to suppress Ajit not only in business, but also in speech and behaviour. But Ajit revolts, and so Mehta makes a will where his son and daughter-in-law cannot have access to his wealth or business for the next twenty-three years. After his death, Mehta lingers on as a ghost to watch his family’s helplessness and he enjoys it. The crucial point is that he has made Kiran Jhaveri, his secretary-cum-mistress, trustee of his will. The play takes a turn when Jhaveri comes to live with the Mehtas; the relationships take a twist as Kiran and Mehta’s wife, Sonal, put every piece of Hasmukh Mehta together – Mehta as a man who could never be an individual. The tables turn on Mehta as he sees his own trick going against himself. There is a pun on the word ‘will’, referring to the will made by Mehta and also as one’s desire/wish. Sita Raina, who has directed the play, says: “… It is not only thought provoking and introspective but also provides an evening of pure entertainment. Where There’s A Will has several interesting aspects. Mahesh described it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code” (451). Dattani wrote this play to participate in a Festival, organized by a leading newspaper of Bangalore, The Deccan Herald. He had the idea of a Gujarati family in mind, with conflict between the father and the son, a scheming daughter-in-law, a suppressed mother and a mistress. He wrote about ten pages and read it out to his group, who asked him to complete it. The rehearsals began even before the play was finished on paper. It was a huge success, and was also performed at Mumbai, where it received much praise. While writing this play, Dattani was
constantly concerned with the structure, as he explains: "... I did want it to be different. I did want to break away from the expected" (Seagull Theatre Quarterly 29). After this play, Dattani took to writing about more serious issues; humour in his plays became secondary and the plays were full of irony and pathos.

*Dance Like A Man*, Dattani’s next play, led him to think of himself seriously as a playwright. The play was performed for the same Deccan Herald Festival and its reviews spurred him to perform at Mumbai. This play germinated from the playwright’s training in dance, especially Bharatnatyam. The play is about two old retired Bharatnatyam dancers, who remember their lives and the struggles they had to go through to pursue dance as a career. It is a story of how a man is restricted from learning dance by his father only because dance is considered a prerogative of women and lower classes. This father believes that any man who dances cannot be ‘masculine’, and so he makes schemes to prevent his son from taking up dance as a career. The father is helped by his daughter-in-law, who does it for selfish motives. In doing so, they ruin the man’s identity as an individual. The play works in flashbacks, the younger actors taking on the roles of the older actors in the past and vice versa. In this play also the autocratic father figure re-appears as one who wants his son to be like him. Mitharen Devnasen questions this: “Are we the liberal minded people we would like to believe that we are or do we blindly kowtow to unwritten laws of family conduct that is the easier path to take?” (383). The play also has the story of the young daughter of these dancers and her lover. She represents the new generation for whom things are comparatively easy to achieve, and the parents try to make her dance career successful in order to compensate for what they could not have. *Tara*, which was written for Padamsee, is a story of Siamese twins, conjoined at birth and then separated by operation. The important part is that the twins are a boy and a girl. They are separated from the lower body and the third leg is given to the boy against the advice of the doctor. This is because the idea of the superiority of male-child is prominent in the minds of their mother Bharati and their maternal grandfather. The girl Tara is cleverer and smarter than the boy Chandan. Yet she withers away due to her physical deformity. The siblings are very close to each other. When they know the truth about their mother’s injustice, they are disillusioned. And after Tara’s death, Chandan goes away to London to escape from the guilt of her death. The playwright also portrays the psychological workings of the parents’ minds. He shows how the father of these twins suffers because of the liberty given to the mother to choose,
while Bharati suffers in agony and tries to cover up her guilt by showering too much of affection on Tara. Dattani finds Bharati’s character very challenging, as he tells Vellegar K.: “Bharati in *Tara* was a real challenge. She wanted to kill herself because she wasn’t allowed to rescue Tara by offering her her kidney. I wanted to keep her alive. I lost” (*Femina* 110). The play begins in London where the grown-up Chandan is trying to write a play on Tara. It has scenes from the past interspersed with Chandan’s thought-processes and the doctor’s medical explanations. Chandan is trying to come to terms with the reality of Tara’s death and wants to break away from his family history. Erin Mee, a theatre director, quotes the observation made by one of his students about this play:

... Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara’s story. Dan writes Tara’s story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole. (320)

This play has been included in a volume of contemporary Indian plays, *Drama Contemporary: India* (2000), published by the Performing Arts Journal in the USA.

The next play, *Bravely Fought the Queen* was directed by Dattani along with Michael Walling, and produced by Border Crossings, U.K. The play revolves around a family of two brothers married to two sisters. The play works on many levels and is layered with meanings at the internal level. The women of the household are stifled in the house, but their husbands are absolutely indifferent towards them and their needs. The men, too, seem to be struggling to create their own image in society. The play also reveals the psychological aspect of mother-son relationship. The frustrated wife does not want her sons to follow their father’s footsteps. So, she instigates them against the father, and later on, against the wives, who are again a threat to her dominance over the sons. The mother, perhaps, feels insecure due to her past experiences with the husband. She even instigates her son to kick his pregnant wife, who then gives birth to a spastic child due to the injury. There is a constant struggle and tug of war at various levels. The image of the alluring young cook with whom one of the women has an imaginary sexual relation, the dancing in the rain, the homosexual guilt, the beggar-woman, the shadow of Baa – are all different levels of the same violence. The play progresses from an incident when an outing is cancelled and the women make a hue and cry in front of an outsider. They pour out their woes.
thinking that the outsider would never care to reprimand them. This incident was an actual experience that the playwright had:

... I was a house guest in a Mumbai home. On one occasion, the women of the house were all dressed to go out, when their husbands cancelled the programme at the last minute. What ensued was the verbal battle between the women, who blamed each other, not their husbands. Thus emerged Bravely Fought the Queen, in which the women tell their story to an outsider (it struck me much later that the women in Mumbai were fully aware of my presence in the room). (Femina 110)

The play has three levels and settings – one is the interior of the house, the other is the interior of an office and the central area is the bar representing an addiction for both, men and women. Act I depicts the women, while Act II depicts the men, picking up the conversations with the women from the previous Act. This play is an illustration of superb dramatic and theatrical technique. The next play, On A Muggy Night in Mumbai deals with another aspect of society. It is the story of the travails of gay men and women in a metropolitan city. The play throws light on certain conventions of Indian society, which typically condition one to believe that homosexuality is taboo. The various characters of the play present various perspectives of homosexuality. Kamlesh and Deepali are quite comfortable being gays, and Kamlesh does not mind exploiting others for his physical needs. Sharad is happy being a gay, but wants Kamlesh to confirm his love for him. Bunny, the T.V., actor is more of a traditional Indian man who hides his sexuality and is married 'happily'. Ranjit cannot bear the hypocrisy of Indian society, so has settled in Europe where he can live 'openly'. The suspense of the play revolves around Ed, the former lover of Kamlesh, and known as Prakash to his present lover Kiran. To be a conformist in a traditional society, Ed wants to marry Kiran, Kamlesh’s sister, and still have a secret relationship with Kamlesh. He is a part of the society that cannot revolt or believe in oneself and so abides by hypocrisy and deception. In doing so, he cheats himself and others. The contrast in the play is presented through two situations – the photograph of Kamlesh and Ed, which is the reminder of their past relationship and the on-going wedding procession outside, which is a reminder of the outside world. The action takes place in the interior of Kamlesh’s flat. But there is a platform in the centre, which is used by the characters to reveal the inner workings of their
mind. The play also explores mental space along with the physical one. John Mc Rae feels: "... It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates" (45). Dattani is surprised as to how Lillete Dubey managed to make this play a commercial success, and that too, to the mainstream audiences.

Dattani’s Final Solutions is a slightly different kind of a play. It is a socio-political play, based on communal riots and religious tensions. Padamsee was keen to have a play written on Mumbai riots and so he approached Dattani. The playwright refused at first, thinking that it was too large a canvas for him and he would be unable to write it. So Padamsee set up a workshop in which his actors ad-libbed a situation where two Muslim boys are running away from a mob and take shelter in a Hindu house. This was enough for the playwright’s genius to be ‘ignited’ and he wrote Final Solutions. The play opens with Ramnik Gandhi taking into his house two strangers – two Muslim boys Javed and Babban, who are running from an infuriated mob. The atmosphere is full of tension due to the riots that have ensued between Hindus and Muslims on the occasion of the rathyatra, and curfew has been imposed. The play reveals six layers of interwoven perspectives. Daksha, the old mother of Gandhi, has seen and suffered the agonies of Partition. She had to suffer at the hands of her husband and in-laws because she was often in the company of Zarine, a Muslim girl, who was her best friend. Since then Daksha has nursed a hatred against Muslims. Ramnik suffers from a guilt feeling because his shop’s foundations are based on a Muslim owner’s shop, which his father had burned down. Daksha comes to know of this years later, only when her son tells her about it. Aruna, Gandhi’s wife, is a simple, religious woman who blindly believes in religion and caste. She does not allow the Muslim boys to touch anything in her house. Ramnik’s daughter, Smita, is a liberal minded girl with a modern outlook and does not believe in casteism. Yet, she cannot bring herself to marry Babban, the Muslim boy, whom she loves. Babban and Javed are representatives of a Minority who feel threatened in a Hindu locality. Babban is calm and balanced and is ready to adjust because he feels ashamed of his religious identity; Javed cannot forgive and forget the tortures he has witnessed as a child due to the religious divide. Interwoven at so many levels, the play explores the psychological action in the mind of every character and also of the Mob, which becomes Hindu and Muslim by turns. The Mob signifies mass mentality, which is neither entirely Hindu nor Muslim, but is only blind, selfish and power-hungry. The
play brings to mind the incidents related to Ayodhya-Babri Masjid massacre and all the riots that followed. It took the playwright two years to complete the play and yet its theme is a never-ending one. The playwright, in a conversation with Girish Karnad, says that: "... The play is still I feel, a play in progress, in spite of four or five different productions" (Indian Review of Books 6).

Dattani’s play, *30 days in September* (2000) has also been performed successfully. The play revolves around a niece who is sexually exploited by her maternal uncle during childhood. The girl, now grown up, is trying to come to terms with her trauma when all of a sudden the uncle arrives again. The interesting part is that he has not changed at all or does not have any guilt feelings. The mother, though she knows everything about her brother, does not say anything and instead tries to drown herself in Krishna bhakti. The truth is that she herself has suffered the same trauma at the hands of the same man, her brother, and lacks the courage to revolt. The play also explores the mother-daughter relationship. It was written on a request by Rahi, an institution that works to rehabilitate people who have had a mental breakdown due to tortures inflicted by their relatives. Bhayani is of the opinion that: "30 days in September is not a light entertainment for an evening. It is a study of the perversions present in our society" (46). Dattani has also written radio plays like *Seven Steps Around the Fire, Clearing the Rubble, Do the Needful, The Swami and Winston, Uma and the Fairy Queen* and *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child. Seven Steps Around the Fire* was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 9th January, 1999. It depicts the no-man’s land inhabited by the eunuchs and the issues concerning them. This play has the theme of gender bias; for instance, the daughter-in-law, Uma Rao, is often taken to the doctor by her mother-in-law to test the reason for her not getting pregnant. The biological fault lies with the husband, yet the wife is blamed. *The Swami and Winston* is the second play in the sequel to the Uma Rao plays. This play was broadcast on 3rd June, 2000 on BBC Radio 4. Uma Rao acts as the detective trying to solve a murder mystery concerning an Englishwoman. The play also deals with issues of religious fanaticism at its extreme. *Uma and the Fairy Queen* is the third play of the sequel, broadcast on 16th August, 2003 on BBC Radio 4. The play is again a murder mystery in which Uma Rao tries to solve the case of the murder of an English actor. She gradually solves the case, but in turn is left with her own personal dilemmas. *Do the Needful* was broadcast on 14th August 1997. It explores the traditional beliefs of arranged marriages and anti-homosexuality in India. The play
brings together a man and a woman in an arranged marriage; the man is a homosexual and the woman is in love with a married man. So, they marry each other and continue their lives with their respective lovers. The playwright once again, through this play, brings to the fore the hypocrisy that one lives with or is forced to live with because of unreasonable values. Dattani was commissioned by BBC Radio to write a play on the earthquake in Bhuj in 2001. He wrote *Clearing the Rubble*, which was broadcast on 17th January, 2002. It tells the story of three people whose lives were affected by the earthquake; the stories are told by the people who themselves are either trapped in the rubble or trying to help with the relief work. *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* was broadcast across BBC Radio 3 and 4 in the last week of October 2000. This play tells the story of an English woman who comes back to a local village in India after twenty years. She comes to the house of the local villager with whom she was in love. But she arrives to find the village in drought and decides to help the man’s family. Dattani also deals with issues of marriage in many of his plays. He believes that a marriage can be good or bad on the basis of the price one pays for it:

... Marriage is a contract, whether you signed on the dotted line of your own free will, or because your parents forced you to. It’s a contract where the fine print is written in invisible ink that disappears several times down the line. *(Femina 110)*

The plays of Dattani are theme oriented and present the problems through miscellaneous themes interwoven into each other. Broadly speaking, the plays can be divided into two wide areas – social and political. The social part deals with issues such as gender bias, individual against the family/society, struggling to fight against the prescribed roles that society expects one to follow, establishing one’s own identity, especially of homosexuals etc. The contemporary issues of casteism and authority are also interwoven in the social areas. The playwright deals with not just one issue but intermingles many issues in one play, and so each play deals with many present-day issues. Dattani makes his characters a medium to explore these issues. The political part deals with matters of religious tensions, casteism, communal harmony, political upheavals, riots etc. Whatever may be the issue, at the core of each one theme is common – a fall in human values. Dattani throws light on the fact that human values are not upheld or adhered to keeping in mind the social welfare, but are exploited for individual selfish motives. So, whether the play deals with social, political or socio-political issues, fall in human values is at its base. An attempt is
now made to analyse these themes in each play and also explore the interspersed layers in each one.

Dattani's first play *Where There's A Will* is full of humour and is the only play where the playwright has been light-hearted enough to make fun of social issues. The play has three women characters – Sonal Mehta, the wife of autocratic Hasmukh Mehta, Preeti, their daughter-in-law and Kiran Jhaveri, Mehta's mistress. Sonal comes across as a person who cannot think of anything on her own. She has been conditioned to depend on others and has no individual choice, to the extent that for every little matter she consults her sister who lives in Ahmedabad. She feels that her husband and her son Ajit still need her caring and pampering. Sonal shows her care and affection by running around Mehta and Ajit; for instance, when the cook is not in the house, she cooks elaborate meals and makes it a point that she herself serves everyone. She feels that such 'serving' is her duty and she must do it, even if it means going out of the way to do it. Sonal cannot bear a single word said against her sister even though she knows that if anything happens to Mehta, everyone would blame her, including her own sister:

> How many times have I told you not to smoke? Who do you think the doctors will blame if you get another heart attack? Me. Who else?... And my sister Minal?... My own sister blaming me for your condition! As if you would listen to me even if I was firm with you. (WTW 467)

Sonal nags Mehta for his smoking and eating habits as he has heart trouble. She does not seem to care for Mehta genuinely, but only out of a sense of duty. But she loves Ajit very dearly. Her situation is pathetic as she is caught between the differences of the father and the son, especially Mehta's, who thinks Sonal is over-pampering Ajit. It is Mehta's indifference towards her that makes Sonal all the more weak and dependent on others.

Preeti is a sly woman who comes from a middle class family and believes money to be the most important aspect of life. She wants to live a life of prosperity and luxury; she tolerates everything that Mehta says or does only because she knows that after his death she and Ajit will inherit Mehta's money. While Mehta is alive she behaves very courteously towards him and Sonal. But once he dies, she becomes the same sly woman that she is, speaking rudely to Sonal and Ajit, as she is infuriated by Mehta's will, which does not allow them to have his money for the next twenty-three
years. Preeti blames Ajit for going against his father's wishes, which makes them lose out on the matter of his wealth:

... He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother. But I didn't let him do that to me.... I gave in, I simply listened to him and didn't 'protest' like you! I knew he didn't have long to live. I thought why not humour him for a few days? After he's gone, we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money. I almost succeeded. He would have left everything to us if you hadn't 'protested'.... And I hate you for it! Oh! I curse you! Look what you have done to your wife and child! Made them paupers! All because you answered back your father! Doesn't that hurt you? (WTW 501-502)

Preeti can go to any extent for the sake of money. Her love and concern change all of a sudden only because Ajit has neither money or power nor the headship of the family in his hands. Preeti had cunningly exchanged her vitamin pills with Mehta's medicines so that they would have no effect on his heart troubles and thus cause an early death. She may be slightly practical in thinking about money, but is too shrewd and devoid of emotions to be sympathized with.

Kiran Jhaveri is the marketing executive as well as the mistress of Mehta. The play takes a turn when she enters the Mehta household as the trustee of the will. She has to stay with the family and give them the fixed allowance that Mehta has decreed. She has the power to dissolve the trust if anyone disobeys her, but she does not do so. Gradually she becomes a good friend of the Mehtas, especially of Sonal and exposes the real Hasmukh Mehta to her. Even though Mehta has sent Jhaveri to dominate in his place, she does not do so as she comprehends the value of a struggle for self-identity. She speaks out her heart to Sonal of how her mother had suffered due to her drunken father, or how her brothers' wives were suffering in the same manner. Jhaveri is sensible enough to marry a good-for-nothing drunkard who keeps out of her and Mehta's way. The reason behind her marriage was that Mehta thought it was not proper for a woman to remain single. And she continued her illicit relationship with Mehta only because she needed money, and which she confesses frankly: "Mrs. Mehta, no woman has an affair with an older man, especially a married man, for a little bit of respect and trust. It was mainly for the money" (WTW 506). Jhaveri is a

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strong-willed woman who helps Sonal to realise her own worth and discard her husband’s opinion of her. She tells her about the stupidity of men, who led by a woman, think that they have all the authority. Through the character of Jhaveri, and her relationship with Sonal, the playwright shows that women are not merely subdued instruments for men, but are even capable of turning them into the same. Jhaveri’s opinion about Mehta shows how she had used him for her own needs in exchange of her own dignity. She understands Ajit’s ‘protest’ well enough and appreciates it as a small gesture towards an individual’s revolt: “He may not be the greatest rebel on earth, but at least he is free of his father’s beliefs. He resists. In a small way, but at least it’s a start. That is enough to prove that Ajit has won and Hasmukh has lost” (WTW 510). The bonding relationship between Jhaveri and Mehta’s family is proof enough of the end of Mehta’s domination. When Jhaveri enters the household of Mehta, Sonal offers to share her bedroom with her. While sharing their feelings, they both discover how Mehta had always used them and wielded power over them, but he himself was never capable of having an independent bent, unlike Ajit. Jhaveri tells Sonal that Mehta lived a life of dreams planned by his father:

He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life. Like his father had… Hasmukh didn’t really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him!… Men never really grow up! (WTW 510)

Sonal agrees with Jhaveri and feels that if she had realised this truth while Mehta was alive, she would have definitely laughed at him. Jhaveri finds out how Preeti had exchanged the tablets of Mehta and threatens her that she would inform Ajit about it who would hate her all his life for such a degrading act. Preeti requests her not to do so and promises to behave politely with Sonal and Ajit. Ultimately, Jhaveri manages to create a happy and harmonious family atmosphere. Even though all these three women characters have different qualities, at some point they seem similar and yet manage to retain their individuality. The patriarchal society, which conditions such women to be blindly faithful to the elders and husbands and serve them sincerely, gets shattered when the women break free and establish their identity.

Dattani brings to light the fact that such conditioning and norms are for men too. They are conditioned to think that they are the dominating force, have to follow their patriarchal heads and establish a ‘masculine’ identity of their own. When men deviate
from these set norms, they are labelled either rebels or misfits. So, Mehta, the autocratic father in this play, follows all the rules of society and is proud to be an obedient son. But he is enraged at his own son Ajit, who refuses to follow in his father’s footsteps. Mehta thinks of himself as a self-made man and feels that this can be done only when one obeys his/her elders. He detests everything that Ajit does or suggests and feels that his son does not have enough sense to run his business in his own way. His belief that everything he owns is ‘his’ and belongs only to him makes him so arrogant that he forgets human values such as love and care. Thus, Mehta’s interpersonal relations with his family worsen and he turns absolutely biased towards them. He feels that his marriage to Sonal and Ajit’s birth are the greatest tragedies of his life. If Sonal shows her love for Ajit, Mehta thinks it as pampering. He discourages Ajit from learning to be independent and has a sadistic attitude towards him. Mehta, like most of the patriarchal fathers, believes that Ajit needs to be educated on business and social matters, needs to be ‘seasoned’, so that he can fend for himself. In his opinion Ajit can reach nowhere on his own: “Nowhere! That is just my point! If you are you, then you are nowhere. You are nothing just a big zero. No matter what you do, you’ll remain a zero. Over the years you’ll just keep adding zeros to your zero...” (WTW 461).

Mehta wants to teach Ajit many things and make him exactly like himself before he dies. He wants his son to do what he himself had done – follow his father’s footsteps blindly and merely be his shadow. Mehta feels discontented by Sonal and Preeti too. He considers them to be foolish and shrewd respectively, and feels that he is wasting a lot of money on them. He believes that his family is out to kill him for his money. Through the character of Hasmukh Mehta, Dattani shows how a person, conditioned by patriarchy, thinks blindly in one direction only. Mehta goes to the extent of revealing that he had never even enjoyed sex with Sonal; this had made him pick up prostitutes, and later on a mistress: “… Twenty-five years of marriage and I don’t think she has ever enjoyed sex. Twenty-five years of marriage and I haven’t enjoyed sex with her.... I needed a safer relationship.... A mistress!” (WTW 473). Mehta finds his mistress, Jhaveri, a shrewd woman with brains to match his own. Though she is one of the directors in his company, he attributes this achievement solely as his ‘favours’ on her. In an effort to fulfil his physical desires and later on his position in his family, he makes Jhaveri an instrument.
Through the character of Ajit, the playwright has portrayed the modern youth; Ajit is of an independent bent of mind and is confident that he can run the business of his father in his own way. He is a rebel, rejecting the old notion of complete obedience to the father. Ajit does not want to follow Mehta's footsteps, but wants to be himself. Mehta does not trust him or give him a chance to prove his abilities; he is completely biased towards his son and has a sadistic attitude as pointed by Ajit: “… Anything I do is wrong for you! Just because you are a self-made man and had a deprived childhood, you feel that I am having it too easy. Nothing I do will ever seem intelligent to you. You are prejudiced” (WTW 459). Mehta rejects Ajit's projects on the basis that they must be worthless because his 'brainless' son has prepared them. Ajit finds it all the more humiliating when Mehta finds faults with his speech and behaviour also. Mehta wants to make his son another 'Hasmukh Mehta' to which Ajit retaliates: “And what becomes of me. I mean, if I am you, then where am I?” (461).

Even after his father's death, Ajit is constantly blamed by his mother and wife that it was due to his rebellious nature that Mehta did not entrust his money to them. Hence, Ajit has to bear such criticism even when his father is not present.

The title of the play is derived from the central issue of 'will' around which the play revolves. Hasmukh Mehta wants to ensure that even after his death, he dominates over his family. Hence, he lays down an elaborate will according to which, if his family did not abide by his rules, they would be given nothing even after twenty-one years. Ajit can inherit the money only at the age of forty-three, the age in which Mehta died. Mehta not only rules through the will but also lingers on as a ghost (that is physically present) and feels happy on seeing the helplessness of his own family. In addition to this, he dominates through Jhaveri, his mistress and the person in charge of the will, who lives with his family and gives allowances for their expenditure out of Mehta's money. But soon the tables are turned on Mehta as Jhaveri, Sonal, Ajit and Preeti develop an interestingly wonderful relationship. The play ends on the note where Jhaveri and Sonal unanimously declare that Mehta had no identity, but was a mere shadow of his own father. Gradually, the truth dawns on Mehta's ghost too: “… Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father's aspirations for me? Have I been my father's ghost? If that is true, then where was I? What became of me, the real me?” (WTW 511). Mehta questions himself in the same way as Ajit had questioned him. He is a part of a society, which is conditioned to think that domination is their
prerogative and that the others must follow them silently. He, like his ancestors, believes in what society sets as norms, which in turn makes him a loner among his people. The happy family sitting with Jhaveri at the end of the play is proof enough for all 'Hasmukh Mehtas' that ultimately it is human values and relationships that are triumphant. When Mehta sees this scene, the only reaction he can give is:

No. I don’t think I can enter this house. It isn’t mine anymore. They are not my family anymore. I wish I had never interfered with their lives. They look quite happy together. With Kiran sitting in my place. Oh, I wish I had been more... I wish I had lived. (WTW 515)

Hasmukh Mehta regrets the warmth that his family could have provided him, had he given them a chance. But he merely tried to dominate them with his power and so was distanced from them. While, with the same power Kiran Jhaveri works towards establishing better relationship with the Mehta family. Thus, Dattani points the truth that power, of any kind, depends on the way it is used – to protect or to destroy. Sita Raina points out that:

... What interested me particularly was its philosophical twist. To be the watcher of one’s self is to make intelligent changes in this life. In *Where There’s A Will*, Mehta has control over his family through his money and forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationships. As do most of us. Consequently, when he became the watcher of his actions, he perceives that his desire for control has led him to be the victim of his own machinations unlike Kiran who uses power play to essentially improve her relationships. (451)

Thus, at a surface level the play is concerned with gender bias and patriarchy, but at a deeper level it is beyond such issues; it delves into issues of humanity and interpersonal relations. The universality of these issues is such that this play can become relevant to any place or time.

Dattani’s second play *Dance Like A Man* also deals with the same issues of patriarchal society and an autocratic father figure. As the title suggests the play is about dance and adopting it as a career. This was believed to be difficult, especially in the olden days, and that too for men. A man dancing with bells tied around his feet and growing his hair long, could never be ‘masculine’. Bhayani observes that:
Certain artistic and immature thoughts about ‘masculinity’ have been expounded by our writers, among which one is of choosing dance as a career by a male. Even today some people believe that a man who fancies long hair, wears bells on his feet and dances, is always ‘feminine’; thirty to forty years back, this belief was very common. (41)

Amritlal Parekh, the father in this play, is also of the same opinion. His son Jairaj is interested in pursuing Bharatnatyam as his career and is adamant about it, but Amritlal thinks it as a hobby to be pursued by women; he would rather his son play cricket. Thus ensues a battle of egos between father and son. Amritlal thinks that dance cannot be a career and can give nothing to any man. He feels ashamed of his son’s desire to dance. In his opinion, his obsession to fight for the freedom of the country was far superior compared to Jairaj’s obsession to learn dance. Amritlal feels that dance would lead Jairaj nowhere: “... You can’t see far, that is your trouble. Where is your dance going to lead you?” (DLM 415). Amritlal sees dance as a mere profession of the devdasis and the whores, and is unable to decipher the fine nuances of the art. He belongs to the older generation, which believes in doing work assigned for ‘men’ by the patriarchal society. Amritlal neither approves of the guruji who teaches dance, nor of the aged Chenni Amma, the only exponent of the old school of dance. When Ratna, his daughter-in-law, goes to learn some old pieces of the art from the old woman, the father-in-law finds it humiliating for his family because people can see her dancing in the courtyard of a ‘prostitute’. He forbids her from going to Chenni Amma’s house and sends the latter some money thinking that the old woman teaches dance only for monetary gain. What he is unable to comprehend is (the dancer/artist) Chenni Amma’s need to pass on her art to somebody who can carry it on to the next generation. Enraged by Amritlal’s attitude, Jairaj leaves the house along with Ratna, only to return after a few days. Jairaj has two reasons that make him come back – one is the economical problem and another is that of self-esteem; Ratna’s uncle (with whom they had been living) wants to sleep with her and Jairaj cannot tolerate this proposal.

Ratna, Jairaj’s wife, is a strong-willed woman. She is a South-Indian dancer and they have married against the wishes of their parents. She supports Jairaj in pursuing his career as a dancer. Through her character, Dattani shows the image of a woman who is neither absolutely selfless nor sacrificing, but is motivated in supporting the
morally wronged in order to achieve her goal of becoming well-known. At first, Ratna is at war with Amritlal. She does not fear him or hesitate in telling him the truth. When confronted, she tells the truth of her going to Chenni Amma to learn the art of dance. Ratna understands the need of an artist to share such subtle knowledge before it is forgotten by people. She shares Chenni Amma’s pain and passion as she realises that in spite of being poor and lonely, the old woman had asked her to learn some old compositions without charging any fees. But Ratna is also clever enough to grasp the opportunity of gaining that knowledge which is rare. When Ratna and Jairaj come back to Amritlal’s house, she tells her father-in-law that they are happy – an ironic remark, which meant nothing to her. Amritlal comes across as a father who discourages his own children from pursuing their goals in life merely because he thinks those goals to be embarrassing. Amritlal promises Jairaj that he would not remind him of his coming back under his care and would be happy if dance could earn them their livelihood. But he warns them that he would not approve of them asking for monetary help even after pursuing dance as a career. Jairaj has to seek refuge from the same person whom he despised, and this becomes the irony of his life. Jairaj is unable to fulfil the needs to survive for himself and Ratna.

Soon enough Ratna realises the fact that the decision to let her dance is in the hands of her father-in-law. Ratna decides to support Amritlal to make a ‘man’ out of Jairaj, as Amritlal believes: “A woman in a man’s world may be considered progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic” (DLM 427). Amritlal feels that a man’s happiness lies: “In being a man” (DLM 426). Dattani exposes the narrow-mindedness of people like Amritlal who divide happiness according to the sex of a person. Ratna, too, is one of them, for she gradually starts believing Amritlal’s views and helps him to ruin Jairaj’s dance career. She would not allow Jairaj to dance in the centre, would give him wrong clues and make him seem clumsy. This also helps Ratna to get the critics’ attention and become more famous than Jairaj. Soon enough, Jairaj’s talent is restricted to composing dance pieces for Ratna’s shows. This infuriates Jairaj and he takes to drinking heavily. His angst is expressed thus:

Do anything except be a dancer. Do something useful like choreographing items for you, or playing the flute.... I want you to give me back my self-esteem!... You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you
arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting. (DLM 443)

Jairaj feels absolutely disillusioned and deceived not only by his father but also by his wife who helped to ruin his self-esteem and make him a weak, helpless person. He realises that Ratna can do anything to be famous – even if it meant letting down her husband or giving opium to her son. Ratna gives a dose of opium to Shankar, her one-year old son on the nights she has to perform, so that he does not disturb her. But what she learns from Jairaj is that the ayah too, gives Shankar opium so that she can sleep peacefully. Both of them are shocked to realise this fact – Ratna because she realises that she has done something wrong by giving a ‘double’ dose of opium to Shankar, and Jairaj because he thinks this to be the limit of Ratna’s selfishness. The consequence is Shankar's death due to Ratna’s carelessness, and she lives with a guilty conscience all her life.

Even years later, the relationship between Ratna and Jairaj is strained. Both disagree with each other on all matters, and try to live their lives through their only daughter Lata who is also trained to be a dancer. Ratna has not been able to accept the fact that she has grown old and cannot dance. She tries to compensate for this inability through Lata’s talent by trying to get the best musicians for Lata’s performance; she is frustrated when she cannot get the best that she is used to having. After many years she remembers Amritlal’s belief:

I did not go through all that to see our daughter’s career finish overnight! Just like me. Yes, your father was right. Dance has brought us nowhere. It’s his curse on us. Nothing seems worth it anymore.... I’m worrying about nothing, because nothing is what we are! (DLM 402)

Lata is very sensible and knows her parents’ attitude well. Through the years she has learned to cope with their internal differences and with Ratna’s constant complaints of failures. She promises them that she would dance. Her boyfriend Vishwas, though he has nothing to do with dancing, supports Lata’s talent. He, very patiently, listens to Jairaj and Ratna, and is even eager to have Amritlal’s shawl which Jairaj readily gives him. When Lata gets reviews praising her for her performance, Vishwas brings the news and along with Jairaj celebrates it. Ratna assumes that these praises are for her
because she feels that they are the result of her pleading and sweet talk to the critics. But Jairaj tells her that Lata’s success is her own and no one can share it; their daughter must have her own individuality and not be in the shadow of her mother. Perhaps, Jairaj is trying to keep Lata away from that shadow in which he had lost his self-esteem. Lata’s performance gives them an opportunity to talk frankly about their relationship. Ratna reveals to Jairaj that she never considered him a ‘man’, especially since he returned to his father’s house. But Jairaj retorts that he would have never considered himself a ‘man’ if they had continued living with Ratna’s uncle who had proposed to her to sleep with him. He feels Ratna is clever enough to hide her real thoughts about him for so many years:

Jairaj: If that’s how you felt about me, I must congratulate you for hiding it so well for all these years. Don’t feel bad about it. It was bound to spring up some time.

Ratna: I’m human and so are you! So what if you couldn’t support your family on your own? You were interested in... higher things. Something better than just working for money alone... That was an impulsive decision – to leave. We were both to blame.

Jairaj: That is very kind of you. Not to blame me alone. Or maybe it’s not kindness. Something deeper than that. Like... guilt? You forgive me and I forgive you. Forgive what you did to Shankar. (DLM 411)

Dattani points out that ultimately it is human values and relationships that are important rather than petty, personal egos and needs. Ratna and Jairaj gradually seem to cope up with their failures and shortcomings in life, and learn to accept each other as they are. He seems to suggest that it is more important to accept the other person’s shortcomings than to expect improvements from them. Though Ratna is a thorough professional and knows how to make the most of power politics, she comes to discern after years that it cannot work at the inter-personal level. Lata and Vishwas understand this aspect of life well; they turn into individuals and do not remain a continuation of Lata’s ancestors.

The last stroke of revolt comes when Jairaj sells off Amritlal’s old house and moves to a flat. The play, at this point, loses the unity of time, and the technique of past intermingling with the present is no more found. The younger Ratna and Jairaj
dance in the background and the older Jairaj comments on their unison in dance, and both these actions take place simultaneously. Both, past and present become one and merge within each other, for time is never stagnant. Ratna is dead and Jairaj lives on, waiting for death. Towards the end, Jairaj’s only wish is to live happily with Ratna and dance with her in harmony even after death:

... And we embrace. We smile. And we dance.... We dance perfectly. In unison. Not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes we made in our previous dances.... We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God. (DLM 447)

The playwright points out that it is difficult to know what life would offer, yet one can always strive to achieve better things. To dance like God is something humans can never do. The perfect dance in unison is the divine dance of Lord Shiva and Parvati. But humans cannot achieve that perfection. They have to live with their limitations and try to improve upon the values that make them human – the best of all the species on this earth. This play exposes the fact of human struggle against family and society in order to achieve an individual identity at inter-personal level. It also points out the significance of human values, which are vital for a society to progress at an ethical level. Catherine Thankamma observes:

In *Dance Like A Man* and *Where There’s A Will* Dattani draws attention to two inevitable after-effects of the patriarchal mindset. In both plays he presents powerful pictures of dominating fathers destroying their sons for not rising up to their expectations. In *Dance Like A Man* the father-in-law joins hands with his daughter-in-law to destroy his son’s career as a dancer. In *Where There’s A Will* Hasmukh Mehta tries to get even with his son by making his mistress the executor of his will. The flip side of such a state of affairs is that women – who are oriented towards accepting male supremacy from birth – are not able to cope with any different manifestations of this norm. A weak husband like Ajit or a sensitive husband like Jairaj... are taunted by their wives for their lack of ‘maleness’. (46)
The observation about father figures is negated totally in the next play Tara. This play delves more into the inter-personal relations between the members of a family – parents and their two children. The play throws light on the old belief about the superiority of a male child over a female child. The play, again, oscillates between past and present. When the play opens, Chandan, the male child of the twins born to the Patel family, is in London. He is trying to escape from his past – the past that is full of deaths and guilt. The play works at three levels – one is when the older Chandan is in London, second is the past of Chandan and his sister Tara and the third is the medical report of Dr. Thakkar. The striking element of the play is that the Siamese twins are of the opposite sex; the issue of gender bias can be thus explored easily. Chandan and Tara are born conjoined below their waists. They are born with three legs, and if the third leg is given to Tara, she can survive and the leg would grow well on her. Yet, their mother Bharati and her influential father bribe the doctor to give the third leg to the boy because they believe in male superiority. The leg does not last long on Chandan and it has to be amputated. Ironically, the leg would have enabled Tara to live a full life and walk normally, as their father explains:

... Chandan had two legs – for two days. It didn’t take them too long to realise what a grave mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have – might have – been Tara. Because of the unusual nature of the operation, it was easy to pass it off as a natural rejection. (TR 378)

Tara and Chandan love each other very much and cannot remain apart for a long time. When they reach college, Patel, their father, gets transferred from Bangalore to Mumbai and they all come to live there. Due to her deformity, Tara has to undergo various operations and treatment. But Chandan is not ready to go to college without her; during his spare time Patel wants Chandan to come to his office and learn ‘manly’ things. Though Patel is liberal-minded, he seems to believe in certain differences between man and woman, and blames Bharati, his wife, for not teaching such work to their son: “But you can think of turning him into a sissy – teaching him to knit!” (TR 351).

Bharati smothers Tara with a lot of affection and makes her believe that Patel does not love her as much as he loves Chandan. In this way she tries to cover up her own guilt. Bharati tries to show her love for the weak Tara in various ways – stuffing
her with food, caring constantly for her or even getting friends for her by bribing an unintelligent girl like Roopa. She allows Roopa to come and watch video movies at her house and also gives her coffee, which is forbidden by Roopa’s mother: “If you promise to be her best friend – what I mean is if you would like to be her friend – I will be most grateful to you and I will show it… in whatever way you want me to…. You can watch whatever you want!… Just be my Tara’s friend” (TR 341). Bharati tries to hide Tara’s physical deformity through Tara’s wit and intelligence. Tara and Chandan start believing that their father is being unfair to their mother and think of him as an ‘autocrat’. Patel understands this very well; his personal relation with Bharati is strained. Bharati tries to put all the blame on Patel, but he does not allow her to escape from her guilt by doing that. He rebukes her for smothering Tara with too much love and for making her totally dependent on her mother. He does not want Bharati to reveal the truth to the children, as he explains: “… Because I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it” (TR 344). He even forbids her to donate one of her kidneys to Tara. Gradually Bharati starts suffering from some kind of psychological illness and has to be hospitalised.

Patel reveals the truth about the third leg to his children only when Tara tries to meet Bharati forcefully. He tells them that it was their mother and grandfather who had preferred the boy to the girl. Due to this fault, both the children have to go through physiotherapy for a long time and Tara had to undergo many surgeries. The regret that Patel has is that he was unable to object to Bharati and her father’s decision strongly because he loved his wife too much. He confesses his weakness and Bharati’s fault:

I suppose we were both to blame. Your mother and I. And your grandfather…. he had power….Ours was a happy marriage….We didn’t expect you to survive. But you did….There were three legs…. a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl…. The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive… on the girl…. That same evening your mother told me of her decision….I couldn’t believe what she told me – that they would risk giving both the legs to the boy… Maybe if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn’t right … (TR 377-378)
This revelation comes as a shock to the twins, especially for Tara who is disillusioned about her mother’s love. The playwright tries to break the conventions of a patriarchal society where it is assumed that a mother can never be unfair or wrong. He proves, through the character of Bharati, that a mother is foremost a human being with preconditions instilled in her by society. The age-old conditioning about the superiority of the male child is so deep-rooted in Bharati that she (deliberately) does injustice to her own daughter. Moreover, she makes Tara’s life dependent on her and hinders the girl’s normal growth. It becomes difficult for both the children to face their mother, who, too, is affected by her own guilt. The playwright brings to light the issue of gender bias in a patriarchal society. A society cannot justify itself ethically when it teaches its members to hold back others’ growth (be it in any manner) and to differentiate between genders. Roopa’s questioning about drowning girls in milk is a question to the age-old belief of girls being a burden for the family. Chandan’s question to Roopa while discussing a film is relevant to the crime that Bharati has committed. It also points out at all those who belong to such a tradition-ridden society:

Chandan: ...What would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl? Who would you choose?
Roopa: A boy definitely!
Chandan: I meant a son and a daughter.... In the film, the Nazis only allow her to keep one child. The other one would be taken away to a concentration camp or something. ... Would you send your girl child to the concentration camp? (TR 364-365)

Such a guilty conscience is not restricted to Bharati or Patel, but even affects Chandan. He feels that somehow, he too, is responsible for Tara’s deterioration and death. He escapes to London where he can be physically away from the house and the milieu that reminds him of Tara. He is trying to drown his sorrow by writing a play about Tara whom he had forgotten for sometime at a conscious level: “I had even forgotten I had a twin sister.... Until I thought of her as subject matter for my next literary attempt. Or maybe I didn’t forget her. She was lying deep inside, out of reach...” (TR 324). Tara symbolises the other side of Chandan, a half-part of his. They are not only physically but also psychologically and spiritually inseparable. In searching for Tara, Chandan is searching for his own, incomplete, and half-self.
Chandan cannot come to terms with the fact that Tara is dead and refuses to go to India even after Bharati’s death: “... No. I don’t think I can come. I’m sorry.... It’s just that I don’t think I can face life there anymore... Why don’t you come here?” (TR 372). He tells Patel to come to London, but would never go to India himself; it is a place, which reminds him of his ‘guilt’. What upsets Chandan all the more are the reports given by Dr. Thakkar who had operated on them for separation. In his greed for selfish needs, Dr. Thakkar forgets his ethical codes of medicine and performs a surgery, which is against Nature. Above all these, he tries to conceal his fault on the pretext of the unusual kind of surgery, justifying his act by thinking that the surgery had been a complex one, but they had succeeded in performing it. He gets all the credit and also money for his work. Chandan seems to intensely dislike Dr. Thakkar, for he is also one of the reasons for Tara’s death. Chandan feels that Dr. Thakkar is equally responsible for separating him from his other ‘female’ side. To agree with Erin Mee, is to sum up a single issue of the play in these words: “Dattani sees Tara as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is ‘male’ (320).

Towards the end of the play Chandan feels that he needs to ‘take out’ Tara and the anguish about her out of himself. He tapes his own voice, which is a proof that an individual entity, whether it is Chandan or Tara, does not exist for a long time. Whatever remains is the voice and he wishes that Tara would forgive him for being a part of her tragic life (even though it is indirectly):

... The voice is all that will remain.... Only a voice – that once belonged to an object. An object like other objects in a cosmos... I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move. Without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget that I had a sister – with whom I had shared a body. In one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... and separated.... Forgive me, Tara.... for making it my tragedy. (TR 379-380)

Tara is quite similar to the play The Long Goodbye by Tennessee Williams, a playwright whose influence can be seen in the plays of Dattani. Williams’ s play also centres around the inter-personal relations between a brother, a sister and their mother. The sister has to take up prostitution because of financial problems, while the brother Joe cannot accept this fact even though he loves his sister dearly. He is a creative writer and tries to write his own story along with that of his mother and
sister. He sells off his old house to escape from his tragic memories and says 'goodbye' to everything: "... You're saying goodbye all the time, every minute you live. Because that's what life is, just a long, long goodbye!... To one thing after another! Till you get to the last one... and that's – goodbye to yourself!" (1308). Joe's words reflect what Chandan says of being only a voice in the end. The angst that Chandan and Joe suffer is somewhat of a similar nature.

Dattani also deals with one more issue in this play – the situation of a foreigner in an unknown land. In London, Chandan is a stranger. He calls himself Dan, an attempt to forget his original self. He has to live according to the norms of that country and pretend as if he were a part of its society. But as he writes Tara's story, he realises it is also his story and he would have to drop off all his pretensions and be himself: "Tonight I drop everything.... The handicapped intellectual's mask.... The desperate immigrant.... The mysterious brown with the phoney accent" (TR 324). Dattani exposes the fact of how a foreigner has to hide his real self and adapt to some other culture only to make himself accepted in a foreign society. He brings out the point of how human beings have to drop their individuality and merge with others in order to be approved as a part of the other culture.

The next play Bravely Fought the Queen also explores the inter-personal relationships between sisters, husband-wife, brothers, lovers, mother-son etc. It brings to light various shades of human values and behaviour. The women in this play are 'trapped' in the house and cannot move freely. They are frustrated due to the indifferent behaviour of their husbands towards them. Dolly and Alka are sisters married to Jiten and Nitin who are brothers. These men (especially Jiten) think that a wife is no more than a showpiece. Both Dolly and Alka are stifled in the house, looking after old Baa, their mother-in-law. Baa does not like the sisters because they are the daughters of a mistress. Moreover, their brother lies about their parents' relationship and gets the sisters married to his friend and his brother. Baa does not forgive them for these lies and instigates her sons to beat their wives. Thus, Jiten beats and kicks the pregnant Dolly on her stomach, which results in the birth of a spastic child Daksha. Baa has a paralytic stroke and becomes bed-ridden, but she cannot forget the past. The reason for Baa's attitude is that she herself has suffered badly at the hands of her husband. She always tries to keep the sons on her side as a sure sign of security, and even in her sub-conscious mind, she keeps on muttering the same: "Go away! You are not my son! You are bad, like him!... Nitin! You don't like
your father, no? He's not nice!... Good! You are my wonderful baby! You are my
prince!... Nitin. You hate your father. Tell me” (BFQ 302). The shadow of an
autocratic husband and father is felt throughout the play. Due to her own sufferings,
Baa turns hostile towards Dolly and Alka. But she feels repentant about Daksha’s
condition and (in her will) leaves her house to the disabled grandchild. She discovers
that Daksha is happy being with Praful and keeps on asking for him even in the state
of illness. But Baa fails to understand that such an attitude of hers has taught her sons
to take their wives for granted.

Dattani portrays the sad state of women in patriarchal society through this play.
Dolly has created an imaginary young cook who seems to allure her towards sexual
pleasure. This is probably due to Jiten’s rude attitude, while Alka is bereft of Nitin’s
love and care because he is a homosexual. Alka is not aware of her husband’s
homosexuality; her brother Praful has got her married to Nitin so that there are no
problems in Nitin and Praful’s relationship. It does not matter to them at all as to what
Alka desires. She tries to drown her sorrows in alcohol. The first act takes place in
front of Lalitha, a stranger to Dolly and Alka. Shridhar works for Jiten and Nitin, and
Lalitha is his wife; she comes to discuss the organizing of a ball with Dolly and Alka
who are dressed and ready to go out with their husbands. But the husbands cancel the
outing without consulting or informing their wives. An argument ensues between
Dolly and Alka, who blame each other as the cause of their misery, instead of
accusing their husbands:

Dolly: I didn’t. It was only... (Angrily)... You are always
implying that you have a better deal than me!

Alka: But that’s true. There’s no need to imply anything, it’s a
fact! At parties you just sit in a corner... and speak when
spoken to....You are just not an interested party. That’s
why they don’t take us out more often. (BFQ 247)

Dolly and Alka are so lost in their own lives that they forget the real cause of their
discontentment – their husbands. They are angry at the cancellation of their outing for
which they had been waiting for a long time. In her anger, Dolly blames Alka as the
reason of their brother’s not coming to see them:

Alka: Because of me? He is dying to meet you but he won’t
come because of me.

Dolly: Yes! Yes, that’s right! (BFQ 255)
Blinded by frustration, Dolly does not even realise that all the men in their lives have been unjust to them, to the extent of even 'punishing' them for what their father had done. Dolly and Alka argue in the presence of Lalitha because they think they have too many secrets between themselves and it should be shared with a third person. Together they make up the story of the young cook, which also works as a soothing balm for Dolly’s broken heart. Lalitha, too, is not very different from the sisters. Her husband is always concerned with his work and talks about the same at home. So she has only two choices — either to take interest in his work or to do something on her own to keep herself occupied. She makes bonsais and is preoccupied with them. She knows she cannot change her situation and has accepted it: “That’s all he talks about at home. Even my bonsais know… But I don’t really mind, it gives me… something… to… do” (BFQ 251). The bonsais that Lalitha talks of symbolize the lives of these women, whose natural growth has been stunted and hampered to give them an artificial beauty. All the three women are facing the same situation. Their husbands cannot spare time for them and are interested only in work. Being idle and unloved, these women have only loneliness as companion.

The play also throws light on how women turn against their own kind for selfish needs. Baa dislikes Alka for being unable to bear children and also because she is an alcoholic; she blames it on Alka’s ‘bad’ deeds. But the truth is that Baa does not want Nitin to have a closer relationship with Alka, and so there is no sexual relationship between them. Thus, Alka cannot have children; she knows this and tells Baa: “You know why I can’t have children. You won’t let me. That’s why! … He needs your permission to have children and by God, you won’t give it to him!” (BFQ 284). The surprising element about social conditioning is the ways the older woman resorts to in order to keep the sons in her control, which would help her to maintain her own security. Yet Dolly and Alka are ready to do anything to have their husbands’ attention turned fully towards them. When the outing is cancelled, Dolly and Alka show interest in the ball that Lalitha has come to discuss. While discussing this, they decide that Alka would dress up as the Rani of Jhansi because the Rani was very brave. What they try to point out is that bravery and valour are qualities associated with manhood; only a man can be brave, man being referred to the ‘male’ species of human beings:

Dolly: Bravely fought the manly queen?… Why manly?

Alka: Because she was brave.
Lalitha: I guess it just means that she was brave.

Alka: Brave enough to qualify as a man. (BFQ 296)

The title of the play is also derived from the poem ‘Bravely fought the manly queen’ — a poem about the Queen of Jhansi. Men, as patriarchal society would condition people to believe, usually put up a brave fight. When a woman does the same, it is merely concluded that she is a ‘manly’ woman.

The men in the play are all selfish and do not care about their wives’ needs or desires. Jiten thinks his wife (or any woman) as a mere object and has no consideration for her. He beats her during her pregnancy without even thinking once about the consequences. He thinks that women have a habit of raising a hue and cry about themselves, so in business, the marketing aim should be the men who have the buying power:

... Men would want to buy it for their women! That’s our market.... Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power.... So there’s no point in asking a group of screwed-up women what they think of it. They’ll pretend to feel offended and say, ‘Oh, we are always being treated like sex objects’. (BFQ 276)

Jiten’s mentality is to think of women as nothing, while Nitin is more tolerant in these matters. Maybe the reason for this is his hidden homosexuality, which does not create in him interest in matters of women, not even his own wife. Nitin feels helpless due to his closet homosexuality. He appreciates the bonsai that Lalitha has made because it reminds him of his father who had loved huge trees, and also of himself whose personal growth has been almost stunted like the plant. But when it comes to extracting money from Praful, both Jiten and Nitin together, try to get as much as they can and decide to ask him for more money than is needed. They think it as their prerogative to take monetary help from Praful because he was their wives’ brother who had lied about their parents’ lack of morality. They feel that fooling Praful is not wrong for he must pay for the untruth he had said. They do not let him meet his sisters as that can ruin their business and personal lives:

When it comes to his sisters, he can’t think straight.... this is Praful’s way of showing that he is a better human being than us. We insult him and treat him like a piece of shit but he, when his turn comes, actually helps us out.... Sentimental
Jiten and Nitin do not care about Praful’s genuine feelings or desire to help them. They (especially Jiten) are so hard-hearted that they think they are obliging Praful by taking his help.

Jiten thinks that money can buy anything — even employees, and so whoever works for him is his slave. He behaves rudely with Shridhar because the latter fails to make his commercial appealing to the clients. Jiten blames Shridhar for the failure and humiliates him by ordering him to go and pimp for him: “I want you to go and pick one up for me....You call yourself an advertising professional and you don’t want to pimp?” (BFQ 287). Jiten believes that professionalism is buying people and making them do whatever one wants. Jiten has no consideration for others’ self-esteem or is not at all concerned with their sentiments. Indirectly, Shridhar avenges Jiten for humiliating him. When he brings the whore, he shouts to Jiten: “She’s young and fresh! (Under his breath) And she is great. I had her on the back seat. You can have my leftovers” (BFQ 291). Shridhar is, thus, very similar to Jiten when it comes to matters of women or his wife. Jiten even instigates Nitin to throw Alka out of the house, which would make Baa happy and she would leave them her money: “Get rid of Alka.... Throw her out of the house.... Damn Praful’s money! The property is more important” (BFQ 290).

But it is Dolly who gives Jiten the real dose of his own medicine by reminding him of Daksha. Though he is trying to get Alka out of the house, Nitin does not agree with him and Alka traps them in blurring out the truth that Praful did want to come to meet them but they had prevented him. All these events instigate Dolly and she reminds Jiten that whatever is Daksha’s condition is because of his wrong doings. His mother had made him beat Dolly during her pregnancy and that is why Daksha was born a spastic child. This is the same reason that they all love her more than is natural, especially Jiten: “Your mother loved her more than was natural. You love her. You love her more than Baa or Praful! Because you feel the most guilt!” (BFQ 312). Dolly reminds him that Daksha goes to a ‘special’ school and her dance is actually her physiotherapy. The most touching moment is when she acts out what Daksha’s un-co-ordinated dance is like. Jiten cannot bear this due to his guilt and
cries out that he had not done anything out of his own will, but Baa had made him do so. Dolly does not let him get away with such an excuse; she blames him saying that they were his hands and feet beating her and had nothing to do with Baa. It was Jiten who had ruined Daksha’s life: “I will not let you get away so easily! They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It’s in your blood! It’s in your blood to do bad” (BFQ 312). This upsets Jiten and he rushes out, running the car over a beggar-woman. Dolly embraces Alka as a gesture of acceptance and reveals to Lalitha that there was no young cook, her lover. The cook is imaginary, just as their lives are. They all live a life full of pretences; their internal relationships are strained and mere hearsay. All the men and women in this play are frustrated about something in life. The play shows how hypocrisy and selfishness are dominant aspects of an urban family. The wives have nothing good in life; they make up stories to have excitement and psychological contentment. Everyone disguises his/her own real self – for people, money or life. And when they voice their anger, they do not hesitate to do so even in the presence of strangers. Husbands cheat wives, lovers cheat each other and even a brother deceives his own sisters.

Praful may seem caring and loving, but he is no less guilty than Jiten or Nitin. He is Nitin’s lover, and fearing rejection by society, asks Nitin to marry Alka. He lies to Nitin that Alka knows about their relationship and tricks him into a marriage, which is unsatisfactory for all. Praful even tells a lie about their parents so that Dolly and Alka can get married easily. But he does not think of what the consequences will be once the truth comes out. His help and over-affection for Daksha are all due to his guilty conscience. In a way, he, too, is responsible for Daksha’s condition. Alka has realised this truth and knows her brother very well; she remembers how once, when she was unmarried, Praful had beaten her up and burnt her hair for coming home with a man. She describes his hypocrisy with great dislike:

Our saint of a brother used to warn us against men like you. (Points to Jiten) And what does he do? The saint gives his sister to the sinner and disappears!... Finished.... Or is it? The saint who is (slaps her own face) bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better.... The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. (BFQ 300)
Praful is not only being unfair to his sisters but also to his lover Nitin. He makes Nitin repent for his sexual act and deceives him. When no one else is around, Nitin reveals this truth to the sleeping Alka:

He tricked you too, didn’t he? How can you still love your brother after what he did to you?... I loved him too.... And he responded. Oh! But how ashamed he made me feel after. He made me cry each time! That was a game he played.... He told me that you knew. That he had told you... about me.... But you didn’t know! He tricked you! (BFQ 314-315)

The play also delves into another issue that Dattani brings to the fore – homosexuality. Traditional society thinks of homosexuality as taboo, and one who admits to it, is an outcaste. Homosexuality is still not spoken about openly in Indian society, but has been in the open in Western society. According to Jeffrey Weeks: “The problem is not so much homosexual as the fear of homosexuality: why does the mere mention of the word trigger off reactions of recoil and hate?... The great majority of “homosexuals” are not even conscious of being such” (694). But Dattani ensures that consciously or sub-consciously, his characters are aware of their sexual leanings. In Bravely Fought the Queen, Nitin’s mere description of an auto-rickshaw driver speaks about his attraction to the man: “There was this auto rickshaw driver. A powerful man.... he was a powerful man. I can still remember that strong black arm.... I was fascinated. That arm didn’t lose its grip” (BFQ 281). The reason that Nitin does not agree with Jiten’s idea of throwing Alka out of the house is that (to a certain extent) he also feels responsible for ruining her life by marrying her. Perhaps, in this arrangement, he is safe about his physical relationships, as Alka does not know his real self. He, unlike Jiten, does not enjoy the pleasures of physical love in the office, but continues it in the outhouse, which is safer: “... I mustn’t keep him waiting... The office is not a good idea... too many people passing by... but here – the outhouse. Perfect.... You mustn’t watch... those powerful arms...” (BFQ 315). Such questions as to why one should not watch or know, what is to be hidden and why, are not clearly answered. Perhaps, Dattani’s plays maybe an attempt to provide a reply in some way.

On A Muggy Night in Mumbai is an extension of the same issue. It is a play that explores the hypocrisies of a liberal society. All the characters of the play are homosexuals except Kiran, a divorcee. The play opens at Kamlesh’s house where he
is holding a party for a few friends. All the friends are homosexuals representing a certain class of society. Kamlesh is heart-broken in love, Sharad is a happy-go-lucky man, but hurt due to Kamlesh’s rejection in love; Bunny, a typical closet homosexual, is ‘happily’ married to a woman for social acceptance and Ranjit has settled in England so that he can be ‘free’ about his sexuality. Deepali is the only person who is completely satisfied being a homosexual. These people are considered ‘perverse’ by society, which tries to curb their liberty. The on-going wedding music in the neighbouring house of Kamlesh is a constant reminder of and a contrast to the accepted social norms. Bunny Singh, an actor, finds it difficult to confess to his being gay. He prefers to remain the same ‘ideal’ man and husband that he plays in a T.V. serial, because he thinks that it would make him easily acceptable in society:

Sharad: And pretend to be straight like you!

Bunny: What’s wrong with that? Huh? Do you think I will be accepted by millions if I screamed from the rooftops that I am a gay.

Ranjit: Yes, but you do scream from the rooftops that you are straight.

Bunny: Camouflage even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can’t find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage.

(OMN 70)

Bunny suggests that in order to be accepted by society one should follow the animal instinct of camouflage. He fails to realise that one does not have to adopt animal ways of survival to live in a human society. Camouflage is necessary to protect oneself from some kind of danger, but being a homosexual is neither dangerous nor criminal.

Ranjit thinks that a fact like alternative sexuality will never be accepted openly by the narrow-minded mentality of Indian society. So, he escapes to England where he can freely be ‘himself’: “Well, this is the price one pays for living in India…. Call me what you will. My English lover and I have been together for twelve years now. You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country!” (OMN 70-71) Ranjit is trying to escape from the facts of life. Instead of facing the reality and finding solutions for it, he shuts his eyes to it. Dattam draws attention to the fact that one must be aware about the reality, and in unison strive to bring about a change in the thinking process of an age-old society. Shutting one’s eyes to a problem does not help
to solve it; Ranjit may go to England, but it will make no difference to society. Ranjit’s attitude also shows the psychological and social picture of a society and a nation – that which is not liberal enough to welcome natural instincts and instead labels it as immoral. Deepali and Sharad are quite comfortable about their homosexuality; Deepali is more stable and contented. She has a lover with whom the relationship is constant and without any hazards, as she tells her friends: “Tina and I can tell all of you to go jump!” (OMN 71) Sharad is more of a show-off; he believes in exhibiting his emotions and is always affected by a melodramatic streak. What hurts him is that Kamlesh never reciprocates his love truly. He feels slightly irritated by Kamlesh who pretends as if they were never lovers. Though he is well aware of Kamlesh’s former affair with Edwin Prakash Matthew and his feelings for him, Sharad is angry that Kamlesh never really tried to forget his deceiving lover. When Kamlesh tries to be nice to him by saying that he did try to love Sharad for a year, the latter is enraged: “Oh! Spare me the lies! You could never love anyone because you are still in love with Prakash!” (OMN 56). Sharad disapproves of Kamlesh when he uses the guard as a sexual object.

Kamlesh reveals that he still has one photograph of Prakash, which he cannot bring himself to tear. Sharad explains to him that he must get rid of the photograph so as to get rid of Prakash’s memories forever. It will not help Kamlesh to cry over the past all the time. When Prakash and Kamlesh meet for the first time, Prakash is depressed and wants to commit suicide but Kamlesh’s love stops him. Though Prakash loves him, he cannot come to terms with his alternative sexuality because society considers it a taboo. Kamlesh is very happy with Prakash and loves him deeply, but Prakash wants to keep the relationship a secret in order to be accepted by others: “No, I am not denying anything. It is just that I am not happy with the situation…. I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest” (OMN 92). ‘The rest’ probably points to the heterosexuals because they are considered to be ‘normal’ by traditional society. Prakash wants to follow such norms and fails to understand that blindly following something that has been set as a norm is what even animals can do. Prakash wants to marry Kiran, Kamlesh’s sister, so that he can continue his relationship with Kamlesh without anyone doubting them. The relationship between Kamlesh and Prakash is a symbol of something beautiful and loving in life; the relationship between Ed and Kiran is a symbol of deceit and cowardice.
Kamlesh admits his innermost feelings for Prakash to his friends. He speaks out his heartfelt emotions of how sad and cheated he feels when Prakash leaves him, and that too for a woman. It is all the more hurting for Kamlesh when Prakash declares that their relationship embarrasses him and he has been trying to turn heterosexual. Even though Prakash pays no attention, Kamlesh tries to explain to him that this act is like "... turning your back on yourself... wrenching your soul from your body!" (OMN 93). To escape from the tragedy of a broken relationship, Kamlesh moves to Mumbai. But he cannot forget Prakash even after three years, cannot forget his old love even by loving Sharad:

... I am afraid!... I felt this void. The same feeling when three years ago, Prakash left me. I would have understood it if he had left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship.... For the first time in my life, I wished I wasn’t gay. (OMN 68-69)

The psychiatrist whom Kamlesh consults also advises him to try to be straight, just as Bunny who suggests to him to marry a woman and then carry on a relationship with a man. Both these points expose the hypocrisy and cowardice of a society and an individual, which leads them to resort to ways of deceit. C.K. Meena aptly questions these characters’ honesty:

... Closet homosexuals seek to hide their true nature by entering into marriages of convenience – convenience for the men, that is, and not for the unsuspecting women.... they manage to fool the society, but are they cheating their own selves as well? (9)

People like Sharad or Deepali do not care about what others say; they are genuinely concerned about Kamlesh. They ask him to tear off the photograph of Prakash and throw it out of the window with his own hands. They assure him that such an act will help him to recover from the pain of the past and also promise him never to mention Prakash’s name and behave as if he does not exist:

... As far as we are concerned, Prakash doesn’t even exist. It is the opposite of a marriage – the whole world acknowledges two people who enter a union pact, so they have to stick by that. Now all of us refuse to acknowledge the existence of
your relationship with Prakash, so you have to abide by that.

He does not exist for you. (OMN 72)

This dialogue is an example of breaking away from the institution of marriage. It is an ironic comment on typical marriage rules, which exist only in name. Sharad’s insistence on having music as a ritual is also another ironic comment on the heterosexual society guided by its ‘sacred rites’: “... The whole heterosexual world is run by rituals!” (OMN 72). But these rituals cannot promise everlasting bliss even for the heterosexuals. They are mere excuses for the acceptance of an individual in a society. The basic difference between a ‘straight’ and a ‘gay’ is the choice of gender, but there cannot be a difference in the emotional intensity of love. Kamlesh and Deepali laugh as they make an ironic comment on the world of ‘straights’:

Deepali: If you were a woman, we would be in love.
Kamlesh: If you were a man, we would be in love.
Deepali: If we were heterosexual, we would be married.
Both of them do a mock ‘Aaaagh’! (OMN 65)

The institution of marriage is reserved for heterosexuals, and homosexuals are not allowed to think of entering into it. Though it is becoming common in Western countries, Indian society does not acknowledge the pact. But what is important is an individual’s choice and happiness. A strong emotional bond is something that only humans are capable of having. That is what affects Kamlesh when he finds himself unable to tear Prakash’s photograph. And at this moment, Kiran enters the scene.

Kiran is naïve and thinks that Ed (Prakash) actually loves her. She has gone through a lot of domestic violence at the hands of her husband, has had a divorce and is also blamed for being dumped by her spouse. With Ed, she finds love and happiness and feels grateful to Kamlesh for introducing her to him. She likes the way Ed pampers her or fights for her, and accepts his proposal of marriage. They come to Mumbai to arrange the wedding. Here, just when Kamlesh is admitting his innermost feelings for Prakash, Kiran turns up at her brother’s house. Kiran is unaware of Kamlesh’s feelings for Ed. Kamlesh knows that Kiran is happy with Ed because she is under the illusion that Ed loves her truly, no matter what the world says. He cannot bear to see Kiran losing love and care once again. She has been through a lot of trauma and has managed to come out of its memories only due to Kamlesh’s emotional support. It is only when Kiran announces her marriage to Edwin Prakash Matthew that the others come to know that Ed and Prakash are the same person. They
all try to explain to Kamlesh that he should tell Kiran the truth and not let her suffer after marriage; she must know that Ed is cheating her and using her for selfish reasons. But Kamlesh refuses to do so, sounding like the helpless, sacrificing lover and a caring brother who is ready to do anything for his sister. Sharad tries to show him the reality by being blunt: “You are selfish. You want to rid yourself of his memories, but you are ruining her life!” (OMN 83). Sharad’s concern is for both, Kamlesh and Kiran. Kamlesh assures them that Kiran is quite contented with Ed and wants her to be happy like Bunny’s wife. He tries to justify Prakash’s dishonesty towards him by saying that the latter’s mind is filled with such ideas as a man must love a woman. He is ready to give up Prakash’s love for Kiran, but Deepali explains to him that just as Bunny’s wife’s bliss, Kiran’s bliss can never be genuine:

Deepali: Can you love your wife?... With the same intensity with which you love a man?

Bunny: You know I would be lying if I said I could. But I give her so much more. More than any heterosexual man. I do look after her well. She is content.... She boasts about my work to all her neighbours. Our children are popular in school. And they all love me....

Deepali: We were talking about your wife, not you. We are talking about Kiran, not Kamlesh. (OMN 84)

Bunny is absorbed in justifying himself through his achievements, the same way as Kamlesh is trying to justify his sacrifice as Kiran’s happiness. Both these men decide on behalf of the concerned women, failing to understand that qualities like truth and honesty are far superior to material gains. Bunny cannot know what his wife feels or wants without entering into a genuine relationship with her.

Dattani brings up a point about basic human nature when Ranjit argues that Kiran will never believe the truth about Ed because no one believes anything, which one does not want to believe or accept. Deepali thinks that to be accepted or to be at the centre, one has to sometimes compromise with life: “It’s not shame, is it? With us?... It’s fear... Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don’t want to be.... I too was once afraid of being a woman” (OMN 89). Whether one is a man or a woman, gay or straight, there is always the fear of rejection, of being pushed aside or labelled as ‘different’. The only way to avoid this fear is to stop labelling people as ‘types’, as Bunny comments: “All I am saying is that we should all forget about categorizing
people as gay or straight or bi or whatever and let them do what they want to do!” (OMN 88). Kiran is the voice through which Dattani asks questions such as why can gay people not live happily together or why can they not marry each other. The reply comes through Ranjit – a harsh, ironical comment on the narrow-mindedness of a democratic society:

Kiran: I really wish they would allow gay people to marry.
Ranjit: Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex. (OMN 98)

Ed does not understand the deeper meaning of the institution of marriage. He is misusing it for his own needs, to exploit Kiran’s trust and Kamlesh’s feelings. His intention is to get married to Kiran and then continue his relationship with Kamlesh: “Once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any... suspicion” (OMN 104). Ed fails to realize that an extra-marital affair, be it with a man or a woman, is equally deceiving not only for the spouse but also for one’s own self. He lacks sensitivity while playing with Kiran’s hurt feelings, for he thinks that Kiran is meek and fooling her is not a great art. Deepali, Ranjit, Bunny and Sharad attack Ed verbally through a made-up story about Sharad wanting to be straight. They expect Ed to blurt out the truth about him. Ed supports Sharad’s stand and defends it saying that being ‘straight’ is being “real men and women” (OMN 99). He further says that the gays living in a shell of their own must accept the fact that they are not an acceptable part of society. Ed tries to justify himself in this way, and is doing something that society wants him to do and not what he chooses to do. He wants Sharad to do the same because he thinks that there is somebody like him who wants to be considered amongst the ‘normal’ community: “… I think it is better he comes to terms with it now that Sharad wants to be a man…. I mean he wants to be a real man” (OMN 99). Ed thinks that being straight is being normal and only normal men can enjoy all the power in the world. Sharad remarks sarcastically that any man who marries, has an adoring wife and admiring children, is acceptable to society. Such a man would be the ‘king’ who can thrust power on the world. Sharad taunts Ed saying that to achieve such power one has to unlearn many things, and relearn some ‘masculine’ notions such as occupying space, using a heavy hand or voice modulations. Perhaps with practice one may learn these physical characteristics, but one cannot hide the ‘real’ self for a long time. It is difficult to explain such simple matters to Ed who is pre-conditioned by the set roles of gender upheld by society. Sharad’s act is highly admired by Kamlesh, who realises that his true love is actually
Sharad and not Ed. He comes to understand that what he has been yearning for is merely an illusion; Sharad is the real being, one like him, with whom he can easily connect: "... It took me this moment to realize it. (Looks at Ed) I know now that I have been chasing an illusion. Perhaps the man I loved does not exist. (To Sharad) But you do. And I love you" (OMN 102). This is the moment of realization for Kamlesh, a point from where he can easily forget his old love. In the same way Bunny comes to realize his mistake of marrying someone whom he does not really love:

... Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things.... you all hate me for being such a hypocrite. The people who know me are the people who hate me.... I have tried to survive in both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either.... I deny them in public, but I want their love in private.... I am a gay man.... I lied – to myself first....

There’s no such person. (OMN 102-103)

Bunny accepts his ‘real’ self, what he actually is. He cannot lie to himself any longer. He hopes that his wife will forgive him for deceiving her because it is too late for him to apologize.

Yet, Ed is not ready to accept his homosexuality. He still tries to defend himself in front of Kiran by blaming Kamlesh for making a pass at him. He asks Kiran to come away with him, so that the actual truth will not be revealed to her. But it is too late, for Kiran sees the photograph of Ed and Kamlesh that the guard brings. Kiran is hurt not only by Ed’s selfish motives but also because Kamlesh did not let her know the truth. She questions them both as to why they lied to her. Kamlesh has an explanation – he did not want her to be sad, but Ed has none. Kiran tells Ed that now when the neighbours have seen the photograph, they will surely recognize him somewhere. Then he will feel all the more humiliated because the ‘self’ that he is hiding from everyone, is no longer a secret. Kiran also tells him that when he will meet her some day in the future, he will be left with nothing to say to her. Kiran refuses to marry him and asks him to leave. She explains to him that it is actually people like her and Ed who have to ‘pretend’ to be different because society has pre-conditioned them:

... I continued being the same... woman.... you continue being the same... man... Typical, you said. You are right. If there are
any stereotypes around here, they are you and me. Because, we don’t know any better, do we? We just don’t know what else to be! (OMN 107).

In this play, the playwright has tried to explore the pre-conceived notions of gender roles and socio-cultural roles. He shows how these roles can also ruin a person’s individuality, hamper one’s identity or compel one to live a life of pretensions. Dattani is of the opinion that all of us try to be a part of the mainstream society but this is a forced harmony. Human beings follow this forced harmony so that it can help them to survive in a society. Megha, in her study of Dattani’s plays, further explains:

... Those who survive are those who won’t ‘defy the gravity of others’. You can’t survive until you fit into a special stereotype like homosexuals for instance. So, it’s all about keeping the rebel in oneself alive and at the same time more in that forced harmony. That’s where the struggle lies.

And that is what precisely Ed does – to survive, to live. He even tries committing suicide, but is stopped by Kamlesh, Sharad etc. They all tell him to face the reality, to walk in the world courageously as he is. They explain that everyone has to make a start from somewhere and denying the truth does not help. One has to learn to live in the conditions given and adapt the oddities of life. The play ends on the point where Ed feels like a man who has lost a winning game, a helpless fellow who is unable to accept his own image. He apologizes to Kiran: “I am… sorry. I didn’t mean to harm you. I only wanted to live” (OMN 110), and asks Kamlesh: “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?” (OMN 111). But no one can answer Ed, as he has to find his own way and survive on his own. The last straw of Ed’s helplessness is seen when he asks the guard if he will help him (to live). The character of Ed draws sympathy due to the fact that he has been over-powered by society and any human being can be caught in the same situation. Dattani speaks of Ed’s character as: “… tough character… who wants to have the upper hand by marrying Kiran, yet continues to love her brother” (Femina 110).

The same theme is dealt with in other plays too. Dattani’s radio play Do the Needful also deals with the theme of alternative sexuality and arranged marriages. It explores hypocrisies in the institution of marriage. Alpesh is gay and cannot reveal this to his parents who insist that he get married. He agrees to marry Lata, who is in love with Salim, a rogue. Lata’s parents know about Salim and are desperate to get
her married to whoever comes first; Alpesh is a good choice for them. Alpesh and Lata belong to different communities, but the desperation of the parents is so much that they forget such differences. Alpesh and Lata make a deal wherein after marriage they would continue meeting their respective lovers – an arrangement, which no one will know, as Lata suggests: “You… wouldn’t want to sleep with me, would you?… My Salim lives in Bombay.… Think about it… if we do the needful…” (DN 155). It is the parents – the elders and society that are forcing Alpesh and Lata to use the means of hypocrisy. Hence, there remains no ‘sacredness’ about their marital relationship. After marriage they put up a public appearance of being together, but actually they are not. They go out to meet their lovers and even continue their physical relationship with them. They become the ‘real’ selves that they are:

Alpesh (thought): Trilok I don’t know how much I am actually going to say to you. I assume you will understand some of it…. One more lie, I guess. I am used to it.

Lata (thought): Salim, I will be meeting you soon. I hope you understand. You had better. At least with you, I can be more honest. And demanding. (DN 156)

Though their parents repeatedly say that they are doing all this for their children’s happiness, they do not let the children be happy in their own way. They overpower them by making important decisions for them, running their lives and taking away their independence.

The same issue is also explored in Dattani’s other radio play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, where Subbu is not allowed to marry Kamala because she is a *hijra*. His father, a minister, gets Kamala murdered and the blame is put on Anarkali, another *hijra*. Uma Rao, the wife of the Superintendent of Police, is working on a thesis on the gender-politics of society and finds this case interesting for her paper. But soon enough, she gets involved emotionally, for she begins relating herself to Kamala’s situation. In searching for Kamala’s truth, she comes across her own truth – that she has no actual freedom in her marriage and is being constantly taken to the doctor for not bearing children, even though there is no biological fault with her. Her husband, Suresh Rao, is a typical male egotist who ‘rightly’ thinks that there can be no problem with him because he is a man. He refuses to go for the check-up:

Uma: I went to the doctor again. Your mother insisted she take me.
Suresh: What did they say?
Uma: Nothing... They want to see you.
Suresh: I don’t think so. (SAF 32)

Suresh’s male ego is such that he cannot accept the fact of having a biological problem. Like most others, he considers eunuchs as the outcaste and cursed class of society. For him they are only objects of fun. But Uma does not feel so; she gives them equal consideration and sympathizes with their conditions. This is the reason why Champa, a *hijra*, could tell Uma: “... You see us also as society, no?” (SAF 23).

Anarkali explains to Uma that she had to damage Kamala’s face because it was very beautiful and she feared that her beauty might become dangerous for her. It does happen so, for Kamala meets a tragic death by being burnt and thrown into a pond. The play raises a question that if society shuns *hijras*, then why does it allow them to be used for sexual pleasure. Meena points out that this play is: “… a sharp comment on hypocrisy and prejudice in society. Society scorns eunuchs and treats them as less than humans, but is not averse to using them for sex” (9). Usually the community of eunuchs is not seen living freely in society. They live in a den of their own and move out in groups. They are allowed to sing and dance ‘rightfully’ at weddings and births, which ironically they themselves are denied a chance to participate in otherwise by society. Anarkali’s sympathy for Uma is a sharp comment on the nature of human society: “… If you were a *hijra*, I would have made you my sister” (SAF 13). The third gender is still treated as ‘evil’ in Indian society, even though eunuchs have been a part of its legends and myths and have been there since centuries. In the epic *Mahabharata*, Arjun accepts the curse of being a eunuch for one year, which helps him to conceal his real identity and in the same epic Princess Amba asks for a boon to be born a eunuch in order to take her revenge on Bhishma.

The next play *Final Solutions* is the only play, which is not limited to family or social issue, but deals with issues of religion, culture and politics also. The play revolves around incidents of one night that change life for all the characters. This is a night when communal violence is at its peak because of the breaking of a chariot and the murder of a priest during *rathyatra* (chariot-procession). The mob is enraged and starts killing haphazardly, aware only of the fact whether they are killing a Hindu or a Muslim. In this chaos, two young Muslim boys, Javed and Bobby, seek shelter in the house of Ramnik Gandhi, a Hindu. Daksha, Ramnik’s old mother, has suffered the tortures of Partition in 1947. She has been conditioned not to trust Muslims any
longer. As a young girl, Daksha also suffers due to social norms. Her in-laws are very staunch Hindus who believe that a daughter-in-law must follow their rules and religious rituals. She does not like the name Hardika given to her by her in-laws, but she cannot protest against it. Above all these, she is forbidden from continuing her friendship with a Muslim girl Zarine. Daksha does not love her husband Hari because she thinks he has the brains of a goat and is happy only in keeping his parents pleased. Her father gets killed in communal riots, which leaves a painful memory in her mind. Suddenly she realises how blind her faith in religion is as it cannot save the lives of innocent people. Yet, she cannot shut her eyes to it because she is conditioned with ideas of being ‘punished’ by God:

I looked at the idol and suddenly I had the most horrible thought.... I felt that the idol I had grown up seeing my mother worship was just a painted doll.... And then I knew it was Krishna slapping me in the face, punishing me for being a non-believer. A stone hit our gramophone table breaking it. Krishna chose to destroy what I loved most. (FS 167)

Even though Daksha understands that her religious rituals emerge from her blind beliefs, her cultural conditioning is such that she cannot escape from them. In most parts of Indian society, religion is intermingled with culture to form an important element of the social environment.

Daksha shares a common love for Noor Jehan, the singer, with Zarine. She manages to go and meet Zarine where she can listen to Noor Jehan’s records, sing along with her and be entirely lost in some other world. These are the moments of happiness when Daksha and Zarine forget all the differences and enjoy themselves without bothering about the outside world. When Zarine’s family is in trouble because her father’s shop is burnt down, Daksha wishes that Zarine’s father would accept the job-offer or the loan that Hari and his father have offered. This will enable her to be Zarine’s sethani and then she can order Zarine to play Noor Jehan’s songs whenever she desires. Even if such a reason seems child-like, it sounds better than the thoughts of Daksha’s in-laws. She senses that Hari and his parents are withholding some secret from her, which she longs to know. When she asks Hari about it, he is angry with her. To please him, she wears her brocade dupatta, but her feelings are quite contrary: “He beckoned me to lie beside him on the bed. And I did. And my cheeks went red again. Not with shame but with anger at myself” (FS 216). She feels
like a ‘nautch-girl’ (FS 216) whose duty is to keep her man in a good mood. Though she likes Zarine, she cannot forget that she is a ‘Hindu’ and Zarine a ‘Muslim’; she cannot think of sitting or eating with Zarine, nor can she imagine that Zarine will choose not to talk to her. When Daksha goes to see Zarine again, she cannot bear the smell of meat and retches in Zarine’s house, to which the latter screams: “Are you happy?” (221). She is beaten up by Hari for going to a ‘Muslim’s’ house. In addition to all this, Hari tells Daksha that after Partition “all the bad people have left for Pakistan.” (FS 196). By ‘bad people’ Hari means Muslims and this statement leaves an impact on Daksha’s mind who starts believing that Muslims are ‘bad’ and their only ‘home’ is Pakistan.

Such tortures and conditioning make Daksha prejudiced towards the Muslim community. She cannot bear the presence of Javed and Bobby in her house as they remind her of her past. She thinks that years earlier her family had tortured her because of ‘them’. She blames a whole community for her own personal experience, something similar to what Javed does. Daksha transfers the misdeeds of someone else on Javed and Bobby and blames them for her father’s death. She tells them vehemently that whatever happened to her father has to be entirely their concern, but refuses to be responsible for anything that would happen to Javed’s sister. She cries out: “She deserves it! Your sister deserves it! Zarine deserves...” (FS 222). In her blind hatred, she forgets that Zarine is not Javed’s sister. Her past still haunts her and she tells Ramnik that no one can understand how she feels about it. She asks Javed and Bobby to go and live in Pakistan, which is their ‘home’ and where they can live the way they want to. Throughout the play Daksha and Hardika – past and present – intermingle, which shows that even after years Daksha has neither forgiven nor forgotten the pains of her past. Perhaps Daksha cannot be blamed, for she learns what she is taught. She is neither allowed to know family secrets nor is she informed of any important event. What she writes in her diary is quite surprising: “... last year in August, a most terrible thing happened to our country. We... gained independence.... And their rushing out and screaming and shouting and fighting” (FS 166). Daksha thinks of independence as something terrible because Partition took place and with it the seeds of communal riots were sown. Even after years the same violence has been continuing in the name of religion and community. The riots of Mumbai in 1993 and of Gujarat in 2002 are sufficient to prove this point. Daksha wonders about the reason for Ramnik’s allowing the two Muslim boys to stay in their house in spite of the on-
going riots in the city. It is only after they leave that she learns the truth from Ramnik: “It’s their shop. It’s the same burnt-up shop we bought from them, at half its value.... And we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had it burnt in the name of communal hatred. Because we wanted a shop” (FS 226). It is too late for Daksha to mend the misdeeds of the past done by her husband and his father. She learns the truth after years and realises that actually it is her own family, which is the cause for troubles of Zarine’s family; she is the one who is guilty and not Zarine. Gradually, her hatred seems to diminish in the light of the truth.

All this while Ramnik has been suffering from a feeling of guilt because he knows the truth and feels ashamed about it. This guilt feeling is the reason for his protecting Javed and Bobby even against his community’s wish. He says he is liberal-minded, does not believe in differences of caste or religion and has a practical and humanitarian approach to life. When Javed and Bobby are in his house, he talks to them in a friendly manner, making them feel comfortable and equal. He offers them water and milk and arranges beds for them to sleep on. Ramnik is too courteous, and it becomes obvious when Bobby refuses to have anything, he retorts angrily: “Don’t get so defensive” (FS 184). Ramnik talks politely to them, assuring them that he understands their situation. He finds out that Javed has been looking for a job and offers him one in his own shop, almost pleading with him to accept it: “Please. I would be happy if you say yes.... it will be my pleasure to give you that job.... Take the job, please” (FS 194). There seems to be some kind of helplessness hidden behind Ramnik’s warmth, which makes him exhibit so much of care and understanding towards Javed and Bobby. Ramnik goes out of the way to help these boys. It is only when Smita cries out that Javed was among the hired men brought to break the chariot and start the riots, that Ramnik knows the truth about him. Yet, he is not very angry with Javed, for he claims to understand the mental agony that compelled Javed to take up such work. This understanding is mostly on the external level so as to keep up with his image of a liberal-minded person. Soon a slight provocation from Javed’s side enrages Ramnik immediately:

... How dare you blame your violence on other people? It is in you. You have violence in your mind. Your life is based on violence. Your faith is based... Why must I defend myself to you? You are the criminal... no matter how much you attack me... you scum. (FS 198)
These angry words that Ramnik speaks are because of his social and cultural conditioning, which is registered somewhere in his sub-conscious mind. Ramnik is not superstitious, unlike his wife Aruna, but he is not absolutely free from his cultural beliefs. He realises his mistake only after Bobby narrates the bitter incident of hatred and prejudice that Javed has experienced as a small boy. He genuinely understands the effects of such negative attitudes on a young mind. This understanding comes to Ramnik because he himself has grown-up with a guilt feeling since his younger days. He tells Bobby: “We are not very different, are we…. We both feel shame” (FS 201-202).

But in trying to be liberal-minded, Ramnik forgets to be tolerant towards Aruna. He opposes her religious beliefs very strongly and feels happy to know that Smita, too, feels the same as he does. For years, he has not been able to tell Aruna that he is against her beliefs and rituals. When Smita tells the same to her mother, Ramnik feels triumphant yet hurt that Smita never revealed it to him. Once Smita clears the point, it gives a chance to Ramnik and Aruna to talk about their differences. Ramnik tells her that he is not fighting against her but is trying to show her some logic. He explains to her that he does not hate her: “You remind me of them” (FS 215). By ‘them’ Ramnik may be referring to his own family. He is reminded of how Zarine’s father’s shop had been burnt. He finds the same staunch beliefs of religion in Aruna’s faith as were in his family, which were responsible for the misdeed. All through the play, Dattani creates suspense about Ramnik’s behaviour and only at the end is the truth known. Ramnik feels guilty even to step into the shop, which was bought by unfair means. He feels guilty for the misdeeds of his father and grandfather:

... I can’t take it any longer. I don’t think I will be able to step into that shop again.... When those boys came here... I hoped I would be able to... set things right. I – I wanted to tell them that they are not the only ones who have destroyed.... I don’t think I have the face to tell anyone. (FS 226)

It is this truth that is worrying Ramnik. He feels guilty for destroying something, which he had actually not destroyed. He does not think of himself as any better than Javed and is unable to face the truth. Ramnik knows that unlike Daksha, he has to live with the shame of this truth for many more years. He is a non-believer in religion or God, so has nothing to provide him with peace in contrast to Aruna who is clear about what she believes in.
Aruna believes absolutely in religion and culture as established by society. She is superstitious to the extent that if a lizard falls somewhere near the milk-vessel, she readily throws away the milk. She is very regular and strict about her religious rituals and does not allow a non-Hindu to touch her gods. She feels proud of the *sanskars* that she has imbibed in herself through years: "... I have always taken pride in my religion.... I was so happy knowing that I was protected.... I was thankful to my mother for showing me the path of truth. I was happy" (FS 211). Aruna has no confusions regarding her faith because she has been brought up on it and has accepted it readily as a part of her life. She wants Smita to learn and follow the same faith that she has learned. Aruna asks Smita to spend some time with Daksha so that she can learn some values of life from an elder. When Javed and Bobby are given shelter in the house by Ramnik, Aruna is totally against it. She feels heart-broken when she learns that Smita does not agree with her views and does not believe in her religious faith: "Does being a Hindu stifle you?... I never knew I stifled you" (FS 211). Aruna is too much of a believer in the religious rituals handed down by her ancestors. Since she is so deeply involved in them, it is all the more difficult for her to reject them. She questions whether Smita’s ideas about progress are clear or not:

It’s all very well to have progressive ideas. But are you progressing or are you drifting? God knows, I don’t want all this violence.... But to throw everything away just like that? Doesn’t it mean anything to you? For so many generations we have preserved our sanskar because we believe it is the truth!...

I shall uphold what I believe is the truth. (FS 210)

Though Aruna cannot make Smita or Ramnik agree to her beliefs, she cannot unlearn what she has learnt from her childhood. What hurts her more is that Smita’s opposition makes Ramnik triumphant, for the daughter has expressed honestly what the father could not: "... So it’s true. You would have felt... triumphant if you knew she was... more like you?... I didn’t even know I was fighting against you" (FS 214). Aruna fails to understand that she is fighting against no one, and Ramnik and Smita oppose her faith because they have a practical approach to life which needs logic and reasoning and that is what she lacks.

Smita does not believe in the rigid norms of caste, creed or religion. Ramnik has a reason to reject these beliefs, but Smita does so out of her own will. She is liberal-minded and has Muslim friends too. She believes in what she thinks is right; believes
in treating people at a humanitarian level. She is a contrast to Aruna and feels stifled by the latter’s faith and religious fervour:

How can you expect me to be proud of something which stifles everything else around it? It stifles me!... Maybe I am prejudiced because I do not belong. But not belonging makes things so clear.... You accuse me of running away from my religion. Maybe I am... embarrassed. (FS 211)

Smita feels that Aruna’s beliefs overpower others’ individuality. She feels glad about Bobby and Javed’s presence in her house, which helped her to speak out her mind to Aruna. She lives a life, which is a compromise with her mother’s faith. Smita thinks that Bobby and Javed’s sudden arrival makes Aruna insecure because they do not believe in the same faith as her. She tells Aruna that such insecurity is not a good sign because it makes her beliefs weaker. Smita belongs to the liberated younger generation who cannot relate themselves to the faith and rituals of their ancestors. But this does not make her indifferent towards Aruna, for she loves her mother equally, and that is why she has followed her faith (though unbelievingly) and tolerated her prejudices. She cannot bear to see Aruna being left alone, while she supports Ramnik. Smita is equally critical about Ramnik’s strong antagonism against Aruna’s beliefs:

... because it would have been a triumph for you – over mummy. And I couldn’t do that to her. How easy it would have been for us to join forces and make her feel she was wrong. How easy to just push her over because you will have me telling her exactly what you wanted to tell her yourself. (FS 213)

Smita is sensible not to unite with Ramnik and make Aruna feel like an ‘outsider’. Even though Smita is a believer in equality of all religions, she cannot bring herself to continue her relationship with Bobby; she realises that the social environment in which she has grown-up will not easily give her courage to marry him and this is her drawback. She holds back her relationship with Bobby as she feels that it will not be successful at the personal level also. But her confession of love for Bobby proves that there are no differences of caste, creed or religion in love, especially if one has the freedom of choice: “I am sure that if we wanted to we could have made it happen, despite all odds. It is wonderful to know that the choice is yours to make” (FS 218). And to prove her point, she asks Javed to fill the pot of God with water.
Smita does have certain limitations in her thinking. She recognises Bobby and Javed when they enter her house; she knows the real reason of Javed's leaving his house, yet she cries out with anger that Javed has been thrown out of his house because he works as a 'hired man' who is used in aggravating communal riots: "Those... parties! They hire him! That's how he makes a living. They bring him and many more to the city to create riots. To... throw the first stone!" (FS 219). Smita tells the truth even when she has promised Javed's sister to keep it a secret. She seems to be caught between her concern for communal harmony and her personal preference for not letting Javed work with her father. At this point, Smita sounds a little hypocritical, just as in the case of her relationship with Bobby. Bhayani's opinion about Smita's attitude is:

She can make fun of the religious rituals and behave logically.
She can also oppose her mother and along with her Muslim friends make fun of her mother's religious faith. But she does not let her relationship with the Muslim boy develop into marriage. (44)

While Smita is not courageous enough to reject her cultural upbringing completely, Bobby and Javed are totally different. Bobby is calmer than Javed and is not easily excited. He can handle situations well and does not feel ashamed to apologize. He is Javed's childhood friend and his sister's fiancé. He tries to bring Javed back to the normal world, where there is no violence. He believes in communal harmony yet is ashamed of his religion: "... because I was ashamed of being myself" (FS 201). Bobby is ashamed of being a Muslim because he thinks that his religion is the root of all his sufferings. What he forgets is that being a 'Muslim' is the identity that he is born with, just as being a man or a woman, a straight or a gay. Bobby sounds similar to Ed and Bunny in On A Muggy Night in Mumbai, who too, are embarrassed of being what they are. Bobby does not realise that one's religion or caste is one's own self; King Bijjala in Karnad's Tale-Danda also expresses the same: "One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again..." (TD 14-15). Bobby is not bold enough to give an honest opinion, for such an opportunity has never been given to him. When Smita expresses her dislike for Aruna's staunch beliefs, he tells Smita: "I never could express my feelings as well as you do. Maybe my religion oppressed me far more" (FS 213). He confesses that his love for Smita may have diminished, but he has not forgotten her completely.
Throughout the play he is calm and does not retort angrily like Javed; he accepts the norms laid down by Aruna regarding religion, to the extent that when he is asked if he is hungry, he has tears in his eyes: “Please! Don’t! Don’t do this!” (FS 186). Bobby knows that their presence is not approved in the Gandhi family, and he is not used to such a welcome from an ‘opposite’ group, so decides not to demand anything at all.

The only act of rebellion that Bobby does at the end of the play is that of taking Aruna’s Lord Krishna in his hands. He proves that God does not shrink from any human touch because the touch signifies love for Him:

Your God! My flesh is holding Him!... And he does not mind!... He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated!... Look how He rests in my hands! He knows I cannot harm Him. He knows His strength! I don’t believe in Him but He believes in me. He smiles! He smiles at our trivial pride and our trivial shame. (FS 224)

Bobby feels that the Lord neither humiliates anyone, nor cringes from anyone’s touch. He thinks that the Lord seems to feel and welcome the warmth of his hand. Once the act is done, no one can remove Bobby’s touch or smell from the idol, as he says: “... because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world” (FS 225). The only smell or touch that God knows is of His faithful devotees; He is not concerned with Hindus or Muslims, Jews or Germans. Dattani advocates the philosophy that the most important beliefs in the world are of equality, tolerance and humanity towards fellow beings, regardless of caste, creed or religion. If one expects equality and tolerance from others, one has to also give the same in return, as Bobby tells Aruna and Daksha: “The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed.... And if you are willing to forget, I am willing to tolerate” (FS 225). The playwright is of the opinion that if a community wants to live in peace, there has to be an equal give and take of tolerance on both the sides.

Javed, too, is ready to tolerate and respect other religions, only if others are ready to show the same attitude towards his. Javed is aggressive and short-tempered. His childhood experience of being labelled as a ‘minority’ or treated as an ‘untouchable’ has left its bitter memory even after years. As a child Javed is a ‘neighbourhood hero’
and other children are in awe of him. But a minor incident changes his whole personality. When he tries to deliver a letter to a Hindu, a man’s voice orders him to leave the letter on the wall. Later on, the man picks it up with a cloth, wipes it and also wipes the wall and the gate. Javed is shocked and angry at such a biased attitude; he throws pieces of meat in the backyard of that Hindu neighbour in order to take revenge. But the man’s screams make the incident public and Javed is no longer a hero, even in his own eyes. Bobby describes how the ringing of the prayer bell suddenly becomes obvious and also makes them notice many unnoticed things:

We all heard a prayer bell ringing continuously. Not loud. But distinct. The neighbour had been praying for quite a while, but none of us had noticed the bell before. We’d heard the bell so often everyday of our lives that it didn’t mean anything. It was a part of the sounds of the wind and the birds and the tongas. It didn’t mean anything. You don’t single out such things and hear them, isolated from the rest of the din. But at that moment ...

... we all heard only the bell. (FS 200-201)

The unnoticed sound of the bell is a sign of harmony and when the sound becomes obvious, it signifies disruption of harmony. In everyday routine, minor details go unnoticed unless some strange event takes place. The painful memory of such an incident stays with Javed, which provokes him to join the hired hoodlums used to start communal riots. In this manner he is trying to avenge not only the ‘Hindus’ but also the experience of being labelled as an ‘outsider’.

Javed does not like Bobby being defensive about their religion and apologizing on his behalf to everyone. He confesses that though he does not live with his parents, he can still love his sister, unlike those who treat their kith and kin as scum. He tells this to Ramnik, pointing out the Hindus who distinguish between castes and ill-treat the lower castes: “I can still love my sister. (Sarcastically) We do love our brothers and sisters... (with malice) We do love our own blood. Unlike you who treat your own like shit which can’t be touched” (FS 190). Javed is crude in his speech and attitude because the world around him has made him so. He feels that it is the Hindus like Ramnik who have provoked him to throw stones. Javed feels that Ramnik hates him not because he is a Muslim, but because he shows Ramnik that the latter is not as liberal-minded as he thinks himself to be. When Daksha asks him to go to Pakistan, he comments sarcastically: “I prefer Dubai” (FS 211).
For Javed, going away from India means leaving one’s roots – be it Pakistan or Dubai, no one can leave ‘home’ without a valid reason. And when Daksha blames them for her father’s death fifty years ago, Javed responds: “You blame us for what happened fifty years ago. Today, if something happens to my sister, can I blame you?” (FS 222). Javed’s question is justified because any single person cannot be responsible for communal violence. He says the same that Bobby did – that forgiveness and tolerance have to be equal on both sides.

Dattani has portrayed Javed as a person who has not been conditioned, but has been victimized by the rigid attitudes of society. He realises that the violence he has participated in is wrong. He describes his experience as a ride on a giant wheel, where the initial rounds are of child-like joy, but gradually they start becoming nightmarish, and then even if one wants to get off, one cannot:

... The first screams are of pleasure. Of sensing an unusual freedom. And then... it becomes nightmarish as your world is way below you and you are moving away from it... and you want to get off. But you can’t. You don’t want it anymore. It is the same feeling... Everyone is alone in their own cycles of joy and terror. (FS 204-205).

Javed is sad about his condition. He has known the real world, which is full of hatred and hypocrisy created by others in the name of religion. He does not like the kind of work he does, and is trying to break away from it. He realises that the cause for which he has been working is nothing great: “It is a terrible feeling. Being disillusioned.... Don’t we all have anger and frustration? Am I so unique? Now that I am alone.... I hate myself.... I was swayed by what now appears to me as cheap sentiment” (FS 205). At first, Javed thinks that his act of violence is the real ‘heroism’, ‘jehad – the holy war’. He thinks that his act has reverberated in his image of a ‘hero’. In the crowd he is almost possessed by revenge; when he sees people pulling the chariots, he shouts at them and abuses them, even throws stones at them. But when a knife is pushed into his hands, he cannot bring himself to kill the harmless priest. He drops the knife, someone else picks it up and stabs the priest. Javed is merely a part of the crowd, one that sways people at its own will for its selfish motives.

The Mob/Chorus plays a significant role in the play. The Mob/Chorus represents neither religion nor caste, but a blind, selfish society. The Mob/Chorus is neither Hindu nor Muslim; it takes on the mask of each community as required by the
situation. The mob psychology remains the same at every turn. Both, the Hindu and
the Muslim Mob/Chorus, shout so as to prove their beliefs. They use the means of
distrust, injustice and violence only to provoke the fanatics. The Mob/Chorus shouts
at Javed and Bobby: “You pray to a god you do not know! You pray to a nothing.
You do not know his form. And you seek to destroy our gods! Drive them out!” (FS
178). But they fail to realise that no god has a fixed form; the form known to human
beings is created by them as no one has seen god. The Mob/Chorus does not realise
this fact when in a frenzy. Both the Mob/Chorus experience similar traumas, fears
and emotions. Javed comments sarcastically that even if Ramnik threw him to the
Mob, it will make no difference because he too, is a part of it:

Maybe they (the Mob/Chorus) aren’t being paid overtime....
They aren’t systematic.... they should have a round of
introductions so that we don’t end up killing each other.... You
want to throw me to the mob? I am a part of it. You have been
protecting me from people like me. I’m no different from
them!... I do what they are doing – only on a different street!
(FS 204)
The Mob/Chorus has enough potential to affect every single individual’s thinking.
And when one is a part of a group, one cannot escape being, at least, a witness to its
actions. The Mob/Chorus takes total control over the reasoning power of Javed and
teaches him right and wrong the way it believes. Thus, Javed blindly accepts what is
taught and fails to know justice from injustice, as he himself points out later on: “...Exept someone as blind as me.... Anyone could tell. Not when he has his delusions
as well. Delusions of valour and heroism. Of finding a cause to give purpose to his
existence” (FS 205).

When the Chorus shouts in anger it refers to the other religion as ‘they’; it does
not mention a specific religion. The dialogues of each Chorus is applicable to both the
religions. Just because Ramnik has protected two Muslim boys on humanitarian
grounds, he is labelled as a traitor by the Chorus. This decision is taken on the
assumption: “We, who are right... They who are wrong. Since we are right. And they
oppose us” (FS 181). Being blinded by religious fervour, no one can think what is
right or wrong. This is because political intrigues overpower the reasoning power of a
person. In the name of God, religion and culture, politicians create fights for selfish
gains. Karnad’s Tughlaq also deals with the same issue of religion and politics. The
Chorus with Hindu masks constantly repeats: "Send...them...back.../
Drive...them...out.../
Kill the sons of swine!" (FS 169). The Chorus with Muslim masks is equally adamant on avenging themselves: "They hunt us down! / They’re afraid of us! / They beat us up! / We are few! / But we are strong!" (FS 179). The Mob/Chorus is interested only in personal gain. Javed realises that the violence is "...politically motivated" (FS 205), but this does not occur to him when he is in a crowd, possessed by it. When the chariot-procession comes nearer, Javed too, is swayed into a trance of mob hysteria, which makes him throw the stones. And those who do not throw stones, suffer from another kind of pain – that of establishing their identity:

What must we do? To become more acceptable? Must we lose our identity? Is that what they want? Must we tolerate more? Does our future lie in their hands? Is there anyone more unsure more insecure than us? Oh what a curse it is to be less in number! (FS 208)

Being labelled as Minority, this Mob/Chorus feels diffident to take any action. They become the self-proclaimed custodians of the glorious past. They feel that those who refuse to believe are a threat to the secular history of a nation. This is the root cause of the Ayodhya-Babri Masjid feud too, because both claim their inheritance in the same spot, and hence the result is bloodshed. Dattani, in an interview with The Times of India, expresses his feelings on the same issue. He feels that some people have claimed lotus, saffron colour, the ‘Om’, Hindutava etc. in their own name. Hence, the tradition in which he grew up has suddenly become alien to him: “My views have changed today. From a complete non-believer, I feel I must keep vigil on all that is being taken away. We don’t have to look for outsiders to invade us culturally” (11).

This is true for a nation like India. One has to be aware of the devils lurking ‘inside’ rather than ‘outside’. Final Solutions reminds us of the communal riots of the past and of the similar kind of Mob/Chorus working to achieve the desired effects. Padamsee explains the basic concept of this play in a nutshell:

The mob in the play is symbolic of our own hatred and paranoia. Each member of the mob is an individual yet they meld into one seething whole as soon as politicians play on their fears and anxieties.... Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like in our genes? Will we ever be free or ever locked in combat... Arabs against Jews, whites against
blacks, Hindus against Muslims? Are there any final solutions?

After discussing the various themes of the plays, one more component needs to be discussed, and that is about the devices used by Dattani, which give a very striking and dramatic effect to his plays. As Dattani wrote his plays for performance and not for closet drama, stage effects such as sound, lighting etc. also have an important role in almost all his plays. These various devices are equally significant in developing the themes of the plays. They are mostly based on the audio-visual effect and lend a new technicality to the performance of these plays. These devices seem to reflect the contemporary theatre scenario. The father in Where There's A Will lingers on after death not only as an absent symbol of autocracy, but also as a ghost. It is a unique technique of keeping the character ‘alive’ in the play. This ghost speaks freely, like an aside, but is neither heard nor seen by other characters. The device of ghost reminds us of the ghosts in Shakespeare’s Macbeth and Hamlet. But Dattani uses the ghost for comic effect: “Sonal lies down on the bed beside ‘him’. Don’t go to sleep, you silly woman. Do I have to wait for Diwali before you find out I’m gone?” (WTW 477). Mehta does not just remain present through his will, but also as a ghost who is a witness to the changes in his family. When Mehta realises the truth at the end, he wishes that he had lived more to be the person that his family wants him to be. All through the play, Mehta talks directly to the audience, striking a chord of oneness with them. He acts as a narrator telling the audience whatever has happened, reminding us of the Bhagavata in Karnad’s plays: “(to the audience) Have you ever swung on a tamarind tree? Upside down?... You can see the world the way it really is” (WTW 496). The tamarind tree too, is the symbol of Mehta’s existence in some ways. At the end, his family agrees to get the tamarind tree chopped off, denoting the end of Mehta’s rule.

Dance Like A Man uses a new way to experiment with the flashback technique. The young actors playing the role of Lata and Vishwas (of the present) become the young Ratna and Jairaj (of the past) when the flashback scenes are depicted. The old Jairaj in the present becomes Amritlal (his father) in the past; to show this change of role, Jairaj (of the present) wraps a shawl around himself:

Jairaj wears the shawl. He is immediately fixed in a spotlight.... The living room changes into a lovely rose garden.... The characters have all changed. Jairaj becomes
the father, Amritlal Parekh. Vishwas becomes Jairaj. Lata is now Ratna. Their ages remain the same as those of the previous characters they played. It is now the 1940s. (DLM 413)

This kind of information is sufficient for the audience/readers to understand that when the shawl is wrapped, it represents Amritlal. The use of the same actors for different characters demands less number of total actors in the play, which is quite convenient from the point of view of performance. It is also a symbol of the cycle of Nature, which proves that even though generations change, certain attitudes do not change yet there remains a difference in the thought-process of every generation. These contrasting factors work parallel. This technique enables the playwright to narrate the past in an easier way through directions or through other characters. The past and the present intermingle with each other as required and complete the plot of the play.

Tara again is a play using flashbacks on three levels. The first is of the present, in London, where the older Chandan/Dan is working on the story of Tara. While working on it, he remembers the past — his childhood with Tara — the second level, which completes the plot. The third level is that of Dr. Thakkar narrating the reports of Tara and Chandan. Dr. Thakkar’s reports fill in the gaps in the play. The reports read more like medical journals, complementing and contradicting the details put forward by Patel or Chandan. The doctor’s reports and the incidents of the past take place at a parallel level, and they seem to blend with each other:

Tara: Will you come with me or do I have to go alone?

Pause.

Chandan: We’ll both go.

A very low light on Dr. Thakkar, which remains till the end.

Dr. Thakkar: Our greatest challenge would be to keep the girl alive. Nature wanted to kill her. We couldn’t allow it. (TR 376)

In Act I, Chandan and Tara come on stage with a limp in their leg. It symbolizes their harmony, each one as a part of the other. At the end also they seem to be enveloped in this harmony: “A spot on the stage level. Chandan and Tara walk into it. They both have a limp, but on different legs” (TR 324), “Tara walks into the spot without limping. Dan also appears without the limp” (TR 380). When in Act II, Dan briefly talks to Patel about Bharati’s death the audience/readers come to know of her death.
The events of the present are related to those of the past and vice versa. Generally, a performance-based play could readily experiment, and in this sense Dattani has successfully utilized this device.

The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* also works at three levels, i.e. the three Acts titled as ‘The Women’, ‘The Men’ and ‘Free for All’ respectively. Here, Dattani has employed a technique wherein conversations from Act I are picked up in Act II by the character on the other side of the telephone:

[Act I]

Dolly (on the phone): Hahn Jiten? Why aren’t we going?...
No, I swear you didn’t tell me!... Well I might have been around when you spoke to them on the phone.... Let’s just go out somewhere.... Don’t worry. Baa has eaten...What...When did he come?... Is he coming to see us? Oh. Why not?... (Emotionally) It’s too far! All of a sudden we’ve become ‘too far’ for him!... We are all here. Where would we go? (BFQ 249-250)

[Act II]

Jiten (barking into the phone): Ya!... I told you!... Don’t lie you were there when I called them... I called it off... You are staying at home tonight!... How is Baa?... Oh, by the way, Praful called... No. He said he won’t come home... He said its too far...! What do you want me to do?... Yes, stay at home. Do that. (BFQ 283-285)

By the end of Act II, all the conversations of Act I and II become clear. They also hint at the events of the past. This technique reminds us of Mahesh Elkunchwar’s play *Atmakatha*, where the characters pick up conversations (on telephone) from one Act and the other side of the conversation is known in the second Act. The room of Baa is at an upper level. She is known only through her shadow and babbling. She narrates the events of the past whose relevance is to the present. Baa’s dialogues, which are interspersed with those of the other characters, create a good deal of suspense about the past and the present.

In addition to the flashback technique, the playwright uses lighting very effectively. They are used in appropriate scenes to highlight an event or character. For
instance, in Bravely Fought the Queen when it is Baa's turn to talk, the area at the upper level is lit, and simultaneously at the lower level, other actions take place:

*Baa's area is suddenly lit. She presses a switch, but the bell cannot be heard.* (BFQ 271)

*On the higher level, Lalitha enters Baa's room very hesitantly.* (BFQ 271)

*Simultaneously, the spotlight in Baa's area goes off. Jiten enters from the toilet, wiping his face with his handkerchief.* (BFQ 272)

There are other lightings in the play such as the kitchen-light and the back door, which represent the hidden, deep-rooted (sexual) desires. Whenever Dolly moves to the kitchen and towards the back door, that area is lit up, referring to her illusory relationship with the young cook:

*Alka exits. The kitchen light comes on. The bell rings. The general lights start fading out slowly....*  
*Lalitha moves to her. Dolly looks at her for a moment, and then slowly walks towards the kitchen.* (BFQ 263)

These minor details of direction have to be understood, as they become symbols of the desires of the characters. At the performance level, these devices can make a play very effective.

*On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* is entirely about juxtaposing the past, the present and the thoughts of an individual like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Again, the play makes use of three levels – one side of the stage depicts the living room of Kamlesh, the other side of the stage is Kamlesh's bedroom that explores the relationship of Kamlesh and Ed; the most important area that connects these two sides is the central portion, which is a raised platform. This platform is used by characters to express their inner thoughts and feelings. Hence, the events seen from the viewpoint of the character who is speaking his/her thoughts on this raised level, is seen in the present context. Then, the whole play makes complete sense. In Act II, this technique is elaborately used, where Kamlesh, Ed and Kiran interact with each other in different times and situations:

*Kamlesh and Kiran move to another level of the empty area.  
Ed continues to address them as before.... Ed mimes dancing with Kiran... Kamlesh moves to the third level.* (OMN 90)
Kiran dances, while Ed moves to Kamlesh's level.

Ed (to Kamlesh): Look, I don’t know how to tell you this. But it just isn’t working out.

Kamlesh moves to the level where Kiran was earlier.

Kamlesh: Kiran, I want you to be happy....

Kiran: Oh! I feel a little dizzy. (Mimes dancing with her head resting on Ed’s shoulder).

Ed: Let’s not get too emotional. Think for yourself. There is no real future.

Kiran (mimes accepting a glass of water): Oh, thank you!...

Kamlesh: Well, yes there is someone special I am seeing. (OMN 91-92)

This device of two or three people talking at the same time may seem to create confusion. But the conversations are to be seen in the context of their situations and the audience/readers who have to relate the dialogues to the characters and situations and understand the emotions behind the dialogues. These conversations also provide a background to the events of the present. When each line is taken separately and put in the relevant situation, the plot becomes comprehensible easily. This kind of juxtaposition of events also helps to heighten the suspense about the past and the present. This device can be called a new kind of flashback technique on stage.

In Final Solutions the Mob/Chorus is not only a character but also a device, which works at multiple levels. This device exposes the attitudes of Hindus and Muslims towards each other. It acts as a narrator of the general public’s psyche. Instead of using narratives or stage directions in parenthesis, Dattani has used this device. The Mob/Chorus stamps the sticks to show aggression, shouts or chants to narrate a particular kind of situation:

Chorus 4 and 5 continue to question, 'Why should they?', 'Why would they?', 'It could have been an accident', while Chorus 1 mutters, 'no accident, no accident...', and Chorus 2 and 3 continue, 'The stone that hit our God was no accident, the knife that slit the poojari’s stomach was no accident.' Soon they overlap and say it together. Chorus 1, 2 and 3 build their parts to a crescendo. They all finish together on the word 'accident'. (FS 168)

They wear the masks of Hindus or Muslims to represent the concerned community. They wear both the masks turn by turn, which makes us realize that the Mob/Chorus
has no particular religion. It is only a crowd of frenzied people: “...The Mob/Chorus picks up the Hindu masks on a slow drumbeat” (FS 178). “Two of the Chorus now have Muslim masks” (FS 179). The use of masks has been in the folk theatre of India and the primitive theatre of the Greeks for ages. Masks help to hide the real identities, just as in Karnad’s Hayavadana. Indian dances like Kathakali also use various types of masks as symbols. Dattani has used masks in this play in a modern context, as a satire on politics, religion and people. He points out that these masks, which distinguish one community from another, can be dangerous if used negatively. But if they get mixed up, they can create harmony.

Another device in this play is the juxtaposing of the past and the present. Daksha and Hardika merge into each other’s time, and seem to be experiencing the same emotions at that particular moment. When dialogues of Daksha and Hardika (young and the old) are put together, they make complete sense. The past haunts the present:

Hardika: They hurt me so much.
Daksha: Oh God! Why do I have to suffer?
Hardika: My own family. Because of them.
Daksha: I just wanted them to be my friends.
Hardika: I would have been so happy if I hadn’t met them. (FS 223)

The devices of ‘flashback’, merging of the past and the present and heightening of the suspense is found in all the plays of Dattani. These devices seem to be included in the plays from the performance point of view. But as discussed earlier, Dattani writes plays firstly, to be performed. Hence, these innovative techniques lend a new perspective to the performances of modern plays. It can be a ‘new awakening’ in the scenario of contemporary theatre.

In the context of the above discussion, it can be concluded that Dattani occupies an important place in Indian drama in English. Combining literary and theatre expertise, the dramatist reveals the courage to experiment with both theme and technique.
NOTES

5. ----. “They Transformed My Utopia into a Disputed Site”. The Sunday Times of India 17 Mar. 2002.
