CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
Drama in India has had a rich and glorious tradition as it was hailed as the “Fifth Veda”. It begins its journey with the Sanskrit plays. “Indian tradition, preserved in the Natyasastra, the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama divine origin, and a close connection with sacred Vedas themselves.”¹ The prominent historians, expresses similar views in this own manner that the origin of the Indian theatre is still obscure. It is certain, however, that even in the Vedic period dramatic performances of some kind were given, and passing references in early sources point to an action at festivals of religious legends, only in dance and mime.

The one genre of Indian writing in English that lags behind the others is the drama. Indian Drama in English saw the first light of the day when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote The Persecuted in 1831. But the real Indian Drama in English begins with Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s Is This Called Civilization? which appeared on the literary horizon in 1871.
Indian Drama in English has been in existence for over a hundred years – from the end of the 19th century to the 1950s. The only contribution to Indian Drama in English and worth considering are, Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, the two sage poets of India. While their plays were rooted in Indian myths and legends the English clothing ill fitted them. Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali but almost all his plays are available in English renderings. These plays are firmly rooted in the Indian ethos and myths in their themes, characters and treatment. The careful knotting of the plays, consisted in the use of music and the symbol is the soul of the play.

Sri Aurobindo's plays were written between 1890 and 1920. His dramatic work includes five verse plays. *Perseus the Deliverer* and *Savitri* are among his better known works. Little attention has been paid to Sri Aurobindo's plays as theatre, as his plays are meant to be read rather staged. Sri Aurobindo closely followed Shakespeare and the Elizabethans both in the verse and in the dramatic form. *Persues the Deliverer*, for instance, with its romantic theme, its spirit of high adventure and genial emotions bears a very strong resemblance to *The Tempest*. It was closely modeled on the Elizabethan blank verse with more than a touch of high Miltonic manner.
Sri Aurobindo does not deviate from the track of poetic dramas and his plays have a wholly artificial language without roots in the idiom and rhythms of current speech. Eliot has said: "The dependence of verse upon speech is much more direct in dramatic poetry than in any other" 2 Sri Aurobindo seems to ignore the truth of handling the verse and his dialogues lack spontaneity and dramatic quality. Hence he fails in establishing a ready rapport with the audience. The full-length studies of Indian Drama in English by Naik and Mokashi-Punekar discuss some important issues such as the fact that "drama is a composite art involving the playwright, the actor and the audience in a commonly shared and even created, artistic experience." 3 They offer the traditional criticism of drama, discussing plots, themes and characters in the classic Aristotelian format.

S. Kulkarni praises Sri Aurobindo’s plays for following the general principles of dramatic design. C. R. Venugopal is convinced that Larins Sahib will be a great success on the stage. The most striking feature of Sri Aurobindo’s plays is that they deal with the different epoch ringing with a variety of characters, moods and sentiments. His use of English blank verse is flawless. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar observes: “But all five plays are steeped in poetry and romance, recalling the spirit and flavour of the
distinctive dramatic type exemplified in different ways by Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti though, of course, all have Aurobindonian undertones."  4

In the English 'Transcreation' of these plays the original appeal to the audience is diminished. Tagore took great delight in translating his plays. As Sujit Mukherjee points out: "Frequently the plays emerge from his translations shorn of sub-plots and superfluous characters making a distinct advance in dramatic structure even if they fail to gain in any other aspect."  5 No playwrights, writing in English has succeeded in making his dialogue speakable and graceful, dialogue in their hands is not an intensification of human language, but a distortion. They fail to make dramatic verse help the play. Harindranath Chatopadhyaya wrote over 15 plays and they were published between 1918 and 1950. But his plays were not much encouraged because of the predominance of poetry over action. Another writer of substantial output is A.S Panchapakesa Ayyar, who wrote about half a dozen plays published between 1913 and 1942. In A.S.P Ayyar's The Slave of Ideas and other Plays the dramatist tries 'to portray modern Indian life in this time of transition when old ideas are being gradually displaced by new. Ayyar makes his characters discuss problems concerning life in India-enforced widowhood,
vegetarianism, and total abstinence from drink, orthodoxy and modernity. The main drawback of these plays is an absence of conflicting situations. The dialogues are dull and drab. Another writer T. P. Kailasam's wrote six plays and performed them between 1930 and 1940. Kailasam drew his plots from Hindu mythology and legends, and did not become popular. Kailasam seems to have tried to turn the disadvantage of writing in a language "not near to us" into a deliberate dramatic device. His English plays lack spontaneity and drag with the weight of a heavy style. They are confined only to the urban society. The readers acceptance of the style cannot be the acceptance of the audience.

Naik appears not to have taken into account either the importance of using the spoken language on the stage or the politics of the English language in India. In fact Naik appears eager to take Indian Drama in English in a different direction altogether: he compares the position of Indian Drama in English in Indian society to that of ancient Sanskrit drama which had a limited appeal and used this fact for stimulation and to refinement and elaboration. As English is not a normal living language, Naik, gives "ultimate scope for experimentation with words". Naik advises the playwright in English to similarly turn "professional limitations into artistic assets" 6 suggesting that Indian Drama in English
move further away from spoken language—strange advice for any mainstream theatre. These plays were written to be read rather than to be performed. The Indian playwrights in English write, says Naik “as if he belonged to a race which had no dramatic traditions worth the name, and must therefore solely ape the west” The exceptions are Asif Currimbhoy, Patel, Das and Ezekiel. The most prolific and talented writer among these is Asif Currimbhoy.

Asif Currimbhoy is rightly hailed as “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre.” says Faubion Bowers, in his introduction to Asif Currimbhoy’s Plays. His plays are essentially pieces of theatre. By fusing the elements of pantomime, dance and song, he succeeds brilliantly in creating powerful auditory and visual images that go a long way in making his plays vitally theatrical. He waited several years before he could find a producer for his plays in India, has written 25 plays in less then 20 years, achieved a certain degree of success in his plays. But in handling dialogue he too betrays certain weaknesses.

Naik concedes that the absence of a living theatre in India Drama in English hampers a playwright seriously, denying him a chance of working with actors who would breathe flesh and blood into his lines, giving him an opportunity to revise or rework his scripts. Thus the poor performance of Indian Drama in English is
usually attributed to the absence of a living theatre with the infrastructure to support new dramatic writing, and the failure on the part of the playwright to tap the resources of the Indian dramatic tradition, themes and situations from Indian myth, history and legend.

Another playwright, Fyzee Rahman also has not achieved any success. Most other playwrights of the early twentieth century are primarily poets who tried their hand at drama and gave up due to the hurdles in that Indian Drama in English of the time faced. Another playwright and a good craftsman like Asif Currimbhoy is Pratap Sharma, whose plays *A Touch of Brightness* and *The Professor Has a War Cry* are quite actable. In his plays Pratap Sharma uses local setting but tends to represent what easily catches the eye of the Western reader or audience. In his plays Sharma makes no effort to exploit the resources of English as a spoken language. The only way he tries to make the dialogue sound Indian is through the use of some familiar expressions. This device however does not enable the dramatist to make the language acquire a tang of the local idiom.

Bharati Sarabhai is the maiden woman playwright during the colonial era of Indian English drama. She has written two plays: *The Well of the People* (1943) *Two Women* with considerable
measure of success. J.M. Lobo Prabhu is the last great name in pre-independence Indian English drama. Though his situation creation is admirable his characters do not appear life-like.

Playwrights like G V Desani and Utpal Dutt wrote one or two plays between 1950 and 1960. Gieve Patel’s important feature is modified English. He uses this to give a Parsi tang for the dialogue. Gieve Patel modified his English speech to suit his purpose. For example, one of the characters in his play Princes says: “Mamma, it’s all a closed book.” To which Mamma replies: “No closed books with me! Open all books!” And a third character says: “She wants open books: Glut her books open!”

In this sequence the first line is only true English line. The rest make strange use to convey both weight and violence in the context changing the syntax of sentences, even an occasional literal translation from Gujarat, if it works in the totality. Thus it is not merely as a Parsi play realistically portraying Parsi life, but as one in which the playwright in the history of Indian Drama in English.

For the Indian dramatists the problem of adapting language is not difficult if the characters are drawn from that cross-section of society where they use English for ordinary conversation. Then
Nissim Ezekiel uses rambling naturalistic dialogues in his plays *Nalini* and *Marriage Poem*. In his third play *The Sleepwalkers* the dialogue is right and effective in its own very limited dramatic situation. It was only after the British set up in India the English Drama received new strength and witnessed a revival. With the influence of western civilization, a new renaissance dawned in Indian drama. English education gave an impetus and a momentum to the critical study of not only Western drama, but also classical Indian drama. English and Italian dramatic troupes toured India and performed many English plays, mainly in the cities like Bombay and Madras. Thus the western impact awakened the dormant, critical impulse in the country and also quickened the drying roots of Indian native tradition with the sap of a new life.

The Indian dramatist in English seems to ignore the well-known truism that dialogue in the drama should reveal character and conflict, and in its turn drama should grow from character and carry the action forward. Santha Rama Rau's success shows that proper dialogue and carefully selected situations count most in a play. The playwright Shanta Rama Rau's *A Passage to India* is a good example for this. She has lifted verbatim sentence after sentence from the novel, *A Passage to India*. But she adds
dialogues of her own for connectedness expertly. According to Srinivasa Iyengar: “unless the characters and situations are carefully chosen, it would be difficult to make a dialogue between Indians in English seem convincing.”

Without audience participation no drama can be a success on the stage. Indians’ dialogue in English is not convincing except when the characters are drawn from the urban, sophisticated milieu. The Indian playwrights showed a greater interest in staging their plays during this period though they have faced so many problems.

Playwriting and performances received a fillip in the 1970s with the announcement of the Sultan Padamsee Playwriting Competition in 1968. The award carried with it the promise of a production, and some of the award-winning playwrights- Give Patel (Princes) and Gurucharan Das (Larin Sahib) went on to write other plays that were well received by audiences. Nissim Ezekiel, Dina Mehta, Pratap Sharma and Cyrus Mistry are some of the other names that have survived from the 1970s. Although hardly any of their plays are performed today, critics consider the plays of this period to be superior to the earlier plays on terms of stagecraft and the use of the spoken idiom. With the increased importance given to staging, the 1970s also saw the rise of the director as an important figure in Indian Drama in English. Audiences also began
to influence the selection of plays by directors, with the result the profile of the playwrights changed considerably in the 1980s.

Indian English drama has registered a remarkable growth through English translations of Hindi, Marathi and Bengali plays in the 1980s and 1990s. A study of Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sarcar and Girish Karnad, reveals that they have added a new dimension to Indian drama through their substantial contributions. The contemporary Indian Drama in English translation has made bold innovations in both thematic concerns and technical virtuosities. Some of the English plays have been and are being staged in the European countries. English plays are occasionally staged in metro cities like Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and Mumbai. Yatrik group in Delhi is rendering utmost service by staging plays in English.

Girish Karnad, the recipient of the Jnanpith Award, is a living legend in the arena of contemporary Indian English drama. For nearly four decades his plays, from Yayati to The Fire and the Rain holds a mirror to the Indian theatre. "The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is such a thing as a truly "Indian" theatre which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns." 9 Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Tale-Danda and Naga-Mandala are some of his
masterpieces. Another major dramatist Vijay Tendulkar, writes in Marathi on contemporary issues and his plays have been translated and performed in many of the other Indian languages. *Kamala, Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* are some of his best plays. Mohan Rakesh is much influenced by Marxism waged a relentless fight against the traditional stranglehold of Hindi drama and tried to project something new. His plays are of the sufferings of men and women who are victimized by the socio-economic hierarchy and cultural hegemony. In his plays like *One Day in Ashadha* and *The Great Swans of the Waves*, Rakesh makes use of history and legend to throw light on the contemporary problems. Badal Sarcar, 'bare foot playwright,' stands in the forefront of a new theatrical movement in India. He has created the Third Theatre a theatre supported and created by the people and not merely performed by the people. The Third Theatre is “a composite of a four way flow of influences—actor to actor, audience to actor, actor to audience and audience to audience.” 10 This inexpensive theatre is essentially a flexible and portable aiming at enlightening the people on socio-economical and political problems and to bring about a social change.
While Indian Drama in English performance continues to depend on a written script, there are several instances especially in the 1990s, of directors and playwrights going into rehearsal with a rough draft. During these years of his writings there is a change in the socio cultural contexts so the audience began to develop interest in the English Language Theatre. According to Radha Ramaswamy:

What emerges from our survey of these critical writings is a clear picture of the problem that Indian Drama in English (IDE) was facing: the double bind that it found itself in. It was not Indian enough and it was not western enough – either way it could not please. IDE appears to have failed to elicit the “right” expectations from its audiences and critics in these early years. For those looking for the emergence of a drama distinct from the English plays they were used to seeing. IDE was like those plays in form. It did not use indigenous dramatic forms and conventions, and seemed to be imitative. When compared with the plays from the west, however, with the same borrowed criteria for dramatic excellence, it was found wanting. It’s efforts to use English to create an authentic
spoken idiom seemed clumsy, and its characters unreal. The audience for IDE in the 1960s and the 1970s had expectations IDE did not satisfy.\textsuperscript{11}

The description Modernist Drama, initially may be understood negatively by what it is not. It is a distinct form totally unlike the classical drama of the Greeks, of the Romantic Drama of the Renaissance England and the various forms until the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Therefore Modernist Drama signifies a change from the representational drama which flourished for several centuries, the new drama began with the Norwegian playwright Ibsen, in the mid 19\textsuperscript{th} century and continued by Bernard Shaw in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Further changes affected drama in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century in terms of theme, most of which had working class themes. The plays of Wesker and Osborne, for example introduced progressive ideas and life- like characters. The great landmark, however, was Beckett's, \textit{Waiting for Godot}, which was the culmination of the Modernist Drama. The themes of identity, anxiety, alienation, loneliness, a sense of loss, the absurdity of living have all been suggested in the plays of Beckett, Harold Pinter, Ionesco, Adamove and a few other playwrights. The novelty, it may be noted has not manifested in themes alone. The dramatic technique is a striking contrast to the traditional
elements of exposition, plot construction, characterization, discursive dialogues, which are absent. Everything is in the form of an image, a symbol and therefore the plays have become lyrical and poetic. The form of the play itself suggested the theme of the play.

An interesting development is the replacement of illusion by intellect. If Aristotle and his successors stressed the concept of imitation, of empathy, of audience’s participation in the action of the audience’s sympathy for the characters so that there is Catharsis leading to purgation of base emotions. Modernist Drama, the Brecht wanted the theatre to be an intellectual site, the place to think and judge actions. This un Aristotelian form with the social, moral and spiritual function has been a major advance in the theatrical development.

Although the west considered drama as an important literary form, Indians had always put a higher premium on poetry. It was only later that drama came into being the themes of which were largely drawn from the myths and legends of India.

Mahesh Dattani is the foremost Indian English playwright in English today. He is much more than one of India’s best known playwrights. A brief sketch of Dattani’s exposure to the customs
and norms of the society and how they shaped his carrier may be useful. He was born on 7th August 1958 in Bangalore where his parents moved to Bangalore from Gujarat. At Baldwins, Dattani recalls his experiences at his Christian institution. Young Dattani was struck by the aura of the Gujarathi stage and the illusory world of the theatre that would stay with him. Later, watching Gujarati and Kanada plays in his late teens he realized:

I didn't know the world at my doorstep. I got involved in theatre and for a long time continued to do European plays in translation. [....Seeing] Gujarati theatre in Mumbai, I realized I had to unlearn a lot that I learnt in school. That is when my true education really began.12

Dattani was a student of St. Joseph’s college. He neither shows any interest in literature nor any sign of literary imagination. In the year 1980 he joined in Bangalore Little Theatre and participated in workshops acting and directing plays. In the year 1984 he founded Playpen, his own company and began to look for Indian plays in English. He chooses English language as his medium as one that is home grown and Indian—a hybrid language that is spoken fluently by his Indian Characters.

"...You've got to be true to your expression also. English is for me a
sort of elixir given. Its my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad." In an interview, Dattani says: "The love of my life is drama and I want to write more plays." The charismatic quality of Dattani is the wide range of themes that he deals with in his writing. Each of his plays tackles a different important social issues. He explores the modern subjects like homosexuality, gender identity, human relationships and communalism. He gives expression to the longings and aspirations of the middle class Indians. He carved out a place as one of India's premier English language writer. Each of his plays tackles a different important social issue. His contribution is impressive and his plays have defined the English theatre movement.

With Dattani's foray into the scene for Indian Drama changed the entire situation, homogenizing the audience with his theatre, and his theater with the taste of his audience. Like his repeated assertion that despite the fact that he is himself rooted in the Gujarati milieu, where his own familial context is concerned, because the family itself was displaced and resettled in Bangalore. There he searched for his sense of identity in a place where the linguistic community was alien to his own. As English is the window language and vehicle of communication, then somehow he made it an integral part of his own identity. With natural ease
Dattani uses his chosen language. He finds it as the most comfortable language. With the emergence of Mahesh Dattani as a major playwright the year 1985 is declared as the time for serious writing. The chief distinguishing features of Dattani's drama is his unselfconscious use of the English language besides his strong sense of family and social history and unforced wit. Language is the major area of challenge, and so this achievement of Dattani is significant. The playwrights emerged in 1990's seem to use English for the stage with a high degree of facility. As the urban middle class speak English today, there is as an increasing confidence with the English language, shared by audiences and playwrights. Almost all the plays depict the life of urban society where Indian Drama in English never was before. According to Radha Ramaswamy:

The large scale acceptance of Indian Drama in English among the English-speaking urban middle class in the 1990s, signals a change not only in the plays but also in the entire socio-cultural context for this drama. Changing attitudes to English, to Indian English, to theatre as cultural product, and changing definitions of urban identities have contributed to the development of IDE as a new genre of Indian theatre.15
Indian Drama became more visible in 1990s. Some of the plays of Mahesh Dattani have been included in the curriculum by university departments in India and abroad (e.g. Calicut University, Sri Krishna Devaraya University and New York University). Dattani continues to be the only playwright to have won both critical acclaim and popularity. His Sahitya Academi Award for English literature for his play *Final solutions*, the first for drama in English, must serve as a morale booster for other playwrights of Indian Drama in English. With the coming of the Sahitya Akadimi Award, Dattani is now considered an officially recognized part of the Indian literary establishment. His work is hardly ‘Indian’ because of his medium and his use of the proscenium stage, Erin Mee quotes Dattani:

Does [Indian theatre] mean traditional theatrical forms? Yes, they’re wonderful, they’re very sophisticated, they’re impressive, but are they really India?.....Are they really reflecting life as it is now?.....What we need to do now is look at those forms and say we’re approaching the twenty first century, this is who we agree and this is our legacy, so where do we take that. That’s not happening, and that’s a matter of serious concern.16
Dattani in an interview with Sachidananda Mohanty, argues: “Well, I think this is a wrong perception prevailing among the academics, especially the view that writing for the stage is inferior to writing a novel or writing poetry. I think it is important to keep in mind that the playwright is actually a craftsman. He is a ‘wright’ and not ‘write’. His is not a conventional subject. He unmasks the reality of the urban middle class society. He is not afraid to work within a relatively conventional dramatic structure to tell a story that was bold and powerful without ever being melodramatic. This unassuming author at the theatre also comes up with a radio idea to be produced as part of a season marking fifty years of Indian independence in 1997.

The BBC Radio frequently commissions Dattani’s plays, and he was one of the two Indians asked to contribute for the celebrations on Chaucer’s six hundredth anniversary. In the year 1996 Dattani was commissioned to write his first radio play for the BBC, an unconventional ‘romantic comedy’ Do the Needful. He has successfully managed to garner a very supportive worldwide audience. It was first broadcast on 14 August 1997. Following the successful broadcast of Do the Needful, Mahesh was invited to submit another idea, and so it was that Uma Rao, the scholastic sleuth, was introduced to the British listening audience in the play.
Seven Steps Around the Fire. The listener's response to this play is extremely positive. This play was first performed on stage at the Museum Theatre Chennai, by MTC production, on 6th August 1999. The theme of the play On a Muggy Night in Mumbai deserves to touch the society and to be touched by it. In this play he openly handles in Indian theatre the gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how a society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates. This play was first performed at the Tara Theatre, Mumbai, on 23 November 1998. The play Final Solutions is about transferred resentments. This play was first performed at Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore, on 10 July 1993.

Final Solutions has a powerful contemporary resonance as it addresses as issue of utmost concern to our society, i.e. the issue of communalism. The play presents different shades of the communalist attitude prevalent among Hindus and Muslims in its attempt to underline the stereotypes and clichés influencing the collective sensibility of one community against another. This play is neither sentimental in its appeal nor simplified in its approach.

To direct a play is a process of making the word flesh. When the words are Mahesh Dattani's, the flesh is already contained within the word: the written texts are fully realized through the
process of performance. Dattani loves traditional art forms especially Bharatanatyam, which is integral to *Dance Like a Man*. Dattani is a canny and facile writer. Behind all this is the dance itself. Except for a few suggestive movements, the actors do not dance in the play. But the dance Lata and her parents try to perform perfectly rises from the Natyasastra, the fifth Veda, or last of the great religious texts. He places a family drama in such a context to lift it out of time into a region somewhere between myth and philosophy.

This is a powerful drama providing a raw insight into the contemporary social scene of Indian culture. The story is based around the lives of Jairaj and Ratna (two dancers past their prime) juxtaposed with that of their daughter Lata revealing the darker secrets of this family. This production toured India to sell-out audiences and was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Kala Parishad Award for Best Play in 1995. It also toured to the Bloomsbury Theatre, London in June 1999, New York in July 2000 and, later on, to Dubai and Colombo. Though it has Indian spirit it has universal appeal. It is said that this piece therefore marks a turning point for English language theatre in India. The form of dance at the centre of the characters' lives, although it is never demonstrated on stage is *bharatanatyam*. 
No other dance form has had such a fascinating history of oppression and renaissance. The dance was earlier preserved by the Devadasis who were the professional dancers in temples. They were however, exploited by the priests, and, eventually out of economic necessity, turned to prostitution. Hence a stigma came to be attached to the dance form itself. Even as late as the 1930s and 1940s, the dance was ignored. The prudish Victorian values of the British could not accept bharatanatyam's erotic elements. There were social reformers who whipped up public opinion against bharatanatyam. A few young dancers from 'respectable' families shocked the public by learning to dance from the Devadasis.

This play was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 22 September 1989 as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. Through the fusion of Post-Colonial India and multi-cultural Britain, Dattani creates such a space of political and social statement of astonishing force. Mahesh Dattani is a rare creature and a theatre practitioner who loves art and not himself in art. Dattani worked with the actors to recreate his text in a form, which suited their approach to performance: a sub
textual approach characteristic of actors with a western training. Watching this was an object lesson in openness, responsiveness, and cross-cultural collaboration. To Mahesh Dattani a play is never really finished. Plays only really happen in the theatre, as ephemeral events. The apparently permanent printed text is just one approximation to what might occur when the piece is performed. The constantly shifting nature of Dattani's stage space became the starting point for a kaleidoscopic approach to the text.

Mahesh Dattani frequently takes the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family as his subject. Under the weight of cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire, his characters struggle for freedom and happiness. His dramas are played on multi-level where interior and exterior become one, and geographical locations are collapsed-in short, his settings are as fragmented as the families who inhabit them. In the play Tara the issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values are woven into. Tara is about the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their al separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the boy over the girl. Dattani sees Tara as a play about the gendered self. It was first performed as Twinkle Tara at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall,
Bangalore, on 23 October 1990. Where There’s a Will has several interesting aspects. Mahesh describes it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. This play was first performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23 September 1988. Thirty Days in September looks at incest and child abuse. Dattani has never fallen short of serious issues that need to be addressed.

It is difficult to situate Dattani as a part of a continuum in a given ‘tradition’ of Indian playwriting, within the framework of Indian dramaturgy. Dattani himself would locate as the ‘change’. He says:

........I do see myself as the change element of that thread. I’m not so sure even that I want to go back to my roots .....I don’t need to revisit it. I ‘m more interested in pushing it forward.....I am pushing, and I’m pushing the audience.18

The plays of Manjula padmanabhan brought widespread public attention to Indian Drama in English. Her pioneering play Harvest bagged Onassis Award and got tremendous popularity throughout the world. She portrays a mean and moribund world where mothers sell their children for ‘the price pf rice’ Harvest deals with a miserable family dwelling in a single room in a chawl
of Mumbai. Enormous growth in the population in the urban areas is responsible for poverty. Om Prakash a young man of twenty driven by hunger and unemployment makes up his mind to become an organ donor and ultimately mortgages his body to a white First World buyer.

The performance of a drama will be considered by its visibility. In recent years the performance of Indian Drama in English became more visible. It was revealed in the study of Krishna that nearly 400 plays were written between the nineteenth century and 1970s, but very few of them were performed due to lack of 'Indianness'. The audience of the present day Indian Drama in English comes from English speaking urban middle class society. They use English as a medium of expression. These plays should be studied as a cultural expression of some contemporary urban Indian realities rather than as a dramatic literature to be enjoyed for aesthetic pleasure as the earlier studies of Indian Drama in English did.

Dattani succeeded in raising concerns, which are familiar to most audiences in Delhi, Bangalore, or Bombay, not through literature or television, but through life and experience. The firm base of regional comfortability which is expressed in our jokes and
daily conversation is fully exploited. The scripts prompt us to snigger at the characters.

It is this ability of Dattani, to write in an ‘Indian’ idiom which is neither strained nor self-conscious most of the time that is his basic strength. Theatre is an important medium for culture and political expression, and theatre in English, in our urban centers particularly attracts both an audience and corporate sponsorship. Most plays performed in English in Delhi or Bombay are foreign texts (European or American), and ‘going to the theatre’ is fast becoming, if it isn’t a already, synonymous with a particular brand of elitism and with gaining access to a particular class, the successful ‘big’ shows in Delhi this season have been Evita, Driving Miss Dais etc. were sponsored by high-profile multi-nationals such as Lufthansa, East-West Airlines, Pepsi, Armani designer wear for men and so on.19

Indian theatre in English is speaking to us in its own distinctive voice, of traditions, of problems and situations, which we encounter in our daily lives, and it is speaking in our own accents, not borrowed or cultivated ones. There is still a long way to go and
much more needs to be done, but Mahesh Dattani is emerging as one of the foremost Indian contemporary playwrights, taking English theatre in this country towards a completely new direction. He explored horizons beyond theatre.

Dattani writes in English and he says like so many of us, he says he thinks in it. The problem there is the pervasive undertone that Indian theatre in English is not as honourable as doing it in vernacular. That is a criticism that indo-Anglian novelists have encountered in the past and only recently gained respectability and readership.

Dattani's plays would seem very grim indeed, were it not for the humour-humour that can be wild, wicked, doubled-edged or slapstick. He wields it with such confidence that he's not afraid to paint sober or even tragic moments with a shade of the comic. Then there is suspense, which he handles like a mystery writer, giving away little teasers, heightening the tension and jabbing you in the gut many times –fond as he is of multiple climaxes.
Just as time swings between past and present or simply stands still, space is stretched. Dattani is fond of distributing the action among different levels on stage, which not only makes his plays visually exciting but makes them move at a snappy pace.

The plays of Dattani present a stimulating and provoking platform for dissenting views, cultural tensions and relationships. They mirror in a very incisive manner, a lot of issues, which are common urban problems. No issue is sacrosanct or taboo—Dattani confronts all of them with a warmth, spontaneity and clarity tinged with a comic overview. The tone, ambience everything is Indian, characters and ideas - every thing is Indian – even the English is delightfully so. Presenting these plays will provide an exiting and rewarding challenge.

The perfect cuing into burning issues of social relevance, once we have stashed away in dusty closet niches for generations, sets Mahesh Dattani apart from other contemporary Indian playwrights. Ever since he first penned Where There's A Will in 1986, Dattani has treated each subject with a deep-seated identification rooted in everyday angst. Such charged emotions spare no one- neither the players and the director, nor the audience. Deep within platitude-
ridden Indian society, his characters seethe and reveal, probe and discern, scathing their families and neighbours, leaving each reader or watcher with a storm within as the aftermath. An essential storm for our evolution as socially sensitive individuals.\textsuperscript{21}

Performance is the predominant aspect of theatre, where as writing is the other aspect. These plays did not amount to anything substantial like a tradition of play writing, nor did their staging lead to their emergence of a tradition of Indian theatre in English. Indian theatre in English begins to emerge with a distinctive and vigorous identity, because people generally use English to read the text but not for performance. Only after the homogenization of the English language, Indian theatre in English begins to emerge with a distinctive and vigorous identity. Mahesh Dattani is in the vanguard of those who have made this happen; he is an actor and director with his own theatre group and has an innate sense of dialogue that is vital, stimulating, lucid and effective. Dattani's audiences have been large and responsive, both to the spectacle and the language. He has dispelled the perception about English theatre being 'gratuitous fizz'.

Mahesh Dattani, the \textit{avant garde} playwright, has turned a script writer with the film \textit{Ek Alag Mausam}. The film was screened
at the International Film Festival in Mumbai. Dattani has been working with films since 1992; having written screenplays for films like *Ek Alag Mausam* for which he was the creative consultant. As a stage director turned filmmaker he has to translate his vision and power in handling dramatic action, overtone, personal moments and emotional insight into cinematic technique. *Mango Soufflé* (2002), the celluloid version of *On Muggy Night in Mumbai* revises its narrative style, as the film is a visual component. Dattani discovered an entirely new language-being, he says, at that stage of life where he would like to explore cinema, the way he did theatre and dance. The distinctions between the media are obvious, with the story and screenplay being the springboard for both.

In theatre you can see how the script is coming through, but with film you have to plan it and postpone, and till the whole process is over...there is a concept of perfection [in cinema] while in theatre, there is no such thing as perfect-perfect theatre.22

Dattani received rave reviews and many awards for his films. He seems to achieve the shifts of his position easily, like a competent actor switching roles. “The actor, the playwright and the director are all complementary to each other in a production. It
is like gardening; where a whole is made of many parts. So many 
conditions determine a garden's lushness, its beauty. 23

Dattani here maps the context of his work. The 
settings for all of Dattani plays then, is necessarily 
embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class 
Indian family, and this is the context from which he 
operates. Working within his own time and place, and 
not an alien and distant westernized world, removed 
from the everyday ground realities with which the 
urban Indian audience could easily identify, Dattani 
was already set on a part very different from earlier 
attempts at staging Indian drama in English. In 
drama, one explores the distortions of everyday 
movement, and endeavours to bring to them a sense of 
music. And this reverberates in the everyday, normally 
spoken English idiom that comes so naturally to 
him. 24

Dattani makes use of the available stage space to reveal his 
settings as both constructed and deconstructed in two settings. He 
uses the theatre to demonstrate how in a hypocritical world, acting 
becomes a way of life. Paradoxically, it is only by the overt 
performance of the theatre that such acting can be exposed for
what it is. He unambiguously chooses his location within the dynamics of a pre-existing structure of the contemporary urban Indian family, which then turns into the sight of the ensuing conflict within his narrative. He achieves the sense of fractured reality by splitting up his performance spaces in practically all his plays into multilevel, multidimensional spaces. The characters move in these spaces to prove their real self. Only because of these stage settings Dattani could achieve successfully. He tries to bring out the deep-rooted issues, which are covered under the blanket. As most of his plays are constructed around social issues, Dattani maintains the stance of a non judgmental observer, and never intrude into the plays he writes nor attempt to sermonize. Dattani once said that theatre is a reflection of what you observe. "The function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly but funny."  

Dattani dispenses with the notion that the viewers treat the plays like a 'roller coaster ride' "It's only when you are left hanging in air you start to question your own personality, perceptions....the theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began" says Nair. Audience
will applaud and declare their appreciation of the important moment of the play. Regarding with theatre Dattani says:

I am practicing theatre in an extremely imperfect world where the politics of doing theatre in English looms large over anything else one does. Where writing about the middle class is seen as unfashionable..... I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background .... In a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially artistically and culturally.27

The survey of the literature available on earlier Indian drama in English, suggests that Indian Drama in English was generally perceived a being mediocre in output and quality. It lacked encouragement from theatre groups, audience and sponsors, with the result that the playwrights tended to write “literary” plays that were not stage worthy. Most of the plays failed to use convincing spoken English, because they had no real life models to work from. Dattani brings out the follies and the prejudices of Indian society as reflected within the microcosm of the family unit, the most tangible and dynamic realities of Indian society. Dattani’s contribution in constructing the characters of his theatre is “a way of decolonizing the theatre” refers Erin Mee, without resorting to “a
politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy.\textsuperscript{28}

Dattani uses the dramatic tools of the colonial era. They are like the proscenium stage and other paraphernalia along with English, the "hybrid" language itself. Dattani subverts the borrowed structures with his subconscious use of accents, clothes, music, cultural moorings and beliefs specific to the context of his plays.

Theatre is the place where the life of a society is shown in public to that society, where that society's assumptions are exhibited and tested, its values are scrutinized, its myths are validated and its traumas become emblems of its reality.\textsuperscript{29}

The dialogue will have a powerful impact on the audience. Recognition of the internal plurality of any culture is the first step towards cultural dialogue. Indian Drama in English has spawned a variety of theatre practices but also that these various theatre practices are the result of considered decisions made by groups, directors, actors, and audiences in order to practice, support and promote specific kinds of theatre. The existence of many, heterogeneous elements that remain discrete, each with its own
value is essential to multiculturalism goes beyond this, argues for a creative engaging with diversity, to move towards the "other." Indian Drama in English is self critical and willing and able to engage in a dialogue with itself.

Dattani carefully structures the play to fit in with the needs of the plot. He handles the spacing out of the performance rather admirably. The stage space was defined and redefined, aided by the lighting design and the actors charted out diverse terrains, lining up the boundaries even as the analogous narrative continued center stage. Dattani had to edit his script heavily for this particular performance, saying, "Western theatre has the sophistication of filling the sacred space with silence and stillness. That is the major contribution made by Western society to our theatre." 30

His dramas are played on multi-level sets where interior and exterior become one, and geographical locations are collapsed-in short, his settings are as fragmented as the families who inhabit them. The stage settings are contrived to amalgamate the multiple layers of the societal, the familial and the historical contours of such a location. The segmented realities in the play suggests by the split stage levels move constantly into an internalized reality, as it were. Dattani writes with a dexterously veiled acidity,
employing a language that uses both simplicity and serration, pressing the word to its limits, flanked by equally pungent, loaded silences. Dattani's drama technique is unique of its kind. It is beautifully crafted. One actor moving from one role to another and the incidents shifting from present to past and past to present, marks it as unique. The play travels back and forth between several generations.

As theatre has always been the mirror of the world, the reflection of the eternal conflicts that plague the world, through which man has experienced the gamut of human emotions. Dattani says that a man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement, that goes beyond the physical. Through this language theatre Dattani has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be. So we see our hopes, aspirations and struggles through the theatre. Then we may or may not believe in the theatre as an artist or as an audience, there is the constant danger of disillusionment. With this reason Dattani has created a theatre of its kind with the synergy of Rasa. Some spaces have to be defined for this synergy to happen. So there is a need for identities both for the artist and the audience. For these spaces Dattani goes beyond the region and
language, which are most useful. He uses three spaces in his theatre. 1. The traditional. 2. The continual and 3. The radical. These are not mutually exclusive.

The traditional. According to Dattani we need not go to the traditional aspects of our theatre. The traditionalists in the society can vouch for the permanence and completeness of our classical theatre and dance forms. In fact the word 'Natya' is used for both Dance and Drama. Abinayam in Bharata Natyam concert contains everything that a drama requires. A rasika is a true traditionalist as he is the one who can experience the joy of the grace, the power, the emotion and the dramatic tension that are embedded in the varnam.

The continual. People try to seek their identities in their roots and traditions. Hence Dattani says it may be important to draw themes to create work from these traditions as it creates inspiration to many. They need to be true to their times. This state of transition has created many great works in our country. Girish Karnad and Kamban have used the same Kannada folk tale to give us two gems Naga-mandala and Siri Sampige.

The radical. It is absolutely vital to have tradition and continuity but change is essential. The radical theatre of today is
the traditional theatre of tomorrow. The powerful works in the theatre today are from radicals like Tagore, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar. If traditional and continual theatre is linked to our roots, radical theatre is linked to our spirit. It soars like a bird exploring new horizons and offering us vantage points that we didn't know existed.

So it has become evident that we need all three, tradition, continuity and change to form our cultural identities. "It is when we accept the need for all three in our theatre that we can truly have a theatre movement that is inextricably linked to the development of cultural, social and individual identities." 31

Lillette Dubey has done more than 150 productions of the play with her group all over the world, making it an all time success. Her mostly acclaimed production evoked interesting comments on the variety of interpretative modes that make itself amenable to the play. Dubey's production was “slick and fast-paced, no lingering longer then necessary in dark ambiguous places...” 32 Dattani skillfully uses the device suitable to his medium. The magenta predominant lighting effect evokes a sense of nostalgia of 1960s Hindustani movies
Dattani handles the difficult contours of the play with a subtle dramatic mechanism of using the family to mirror the community, as also using the community to reveal the hidden ugliness within the family unit. While Dattani would never really offer easy resolutions, it is ails interesting to see how he negotiates the terrain and the search for the solution to the core issues of the play- individual/ familial/ communal/ national finally ends with the younger generation who carry much less of the historical burden than the scarred psyches of their predecessors.33

Dattani preoccupies with 'fringe' issues. He brings forth the 'invisible' issues of Indian society, which remain latent and suppressed. He talks about lives in a forced harmony. Due to the lack of choice and due to the lack of alternatives they conform to stereotypes like 'homosexuals'. He tries to unmask the realities. In an interview, Dattani says:

... you can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues, because that's not Indian, [that] doesn't happen here.... 'Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that's a
great advantage and a great disadvantage as well, because we're living in the present and there are so many challenges facing us.\(^{34}\)

Dattani deals with in terms of gender difference and rupture between the world of men and that of women. Dattani focus somewhat shifts its perspective: “…it has to do with my own comfort with both the feminine and the masculine self in me[...] the masculine self is very content; it doesn’t need to express itself. But the feminine self seems to seek expression[...].\(^{35}\) He takes up cudgels for women, in a sense he also seems to be “fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It's subsumed, yes, it's marginalized, but it fights back.”\(^{36}\) Dattani says men are shown to be victims suffering from conniving women’s machinations. Dattani’s perception of gendered strength is invariably that of a woman like Kiran Jhavari, in the play *Where There's A Will*.

It’s to do with my perceptions. I don’t mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry around in our minds are politically generated images and we accept them to be
as true. However I don’t think so and my characters are simply a personification of my perceptions.\textsuperscript{37}

Many of Dattani’s characters push forward this agenda, touching upon a host of taboo topics and placing it at the forefront for public discussion. But the writer himself declines the tag of as activist and chooses to top off even the contentious issues of the play with humour. Some characters are with exposition, exploration and refashioning of the self and the society in Darrani’s work. The plays of Dattani present a stimulating and provoking platform for dissenting views, cultural tensions and relationships. They mirror the societies common urban problems. No issues are sacrosanct or taboo- Dattani confronts all of them with a warmth, spontaneity and clarity tinged with a comic over view. It is a rewarding challenge to present these plays.

Dattani is a craftsman and a theatre person before being a writer. With this background Dattani became successful and could communicate to his audience his ideas in a right manner. Dattanni succeeds in raising concerns, which are familiar to most audiences in Delhi, Bangalore, or Bombay, not through literature or television, but through life and experience.
Mahesh Dattani is a man of multiple roles. He is an actor, director and also a dancer. He is responsible for rejuvenation of a nascent genre. According to Michael Walling the plays of Dattani really happen in the theatre as ephemeral events and a play is never really finished. His primary focus is on the performance rather than on the literary text. But literary accolades also have poured in as Dattani tries to communicate his concerns with the audience.

Every time audience (critics too!) have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silence in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me...critics 'hate' me...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.38

Indian plays on English of any quality are few and far between, numerous stage-struck groups keep up the quest, sometimes striking it rich more often do with rather unsatisfactory material. In the composite art of theatre, the playwright must depend on the actors, director, stage, audience and all the paraphernalia of a theatrical production. Only seldom does it all
come together, and uncommon perseverance is required of all involves in the enterprise. So all the more reading of Mahesh Dattni's work is welcome. In this rather mixed setting, he stands out. His is a serious and inquiring theatre.

The plays of Dattani have a great contemporary value and he is possessed with competence and prowess in expressing his ideas. They have universal appeal. His plays are significant for visual quality and dramatic effect. He unmask the realities of the urban middle class society. By peeling off the colourful masks of the men and women and by bringing into light the dark secrets of the hypocritic relationships of the family and how every one wears a fancy dress to disguise their real self. Dattani proves himself unique. He tries to bring out the ugly old truths covered under the "Water proof Tarpaulin." The earlier, idealized, Indian view of family, domestic comfort, supportive relationships or nurturing intimacy is somewhat jeopardized in Dattani's plays. 'At last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English-speaking Indians and identity. Thank you, Mahesh Dattani!' 39 says, Alyque Padamsee. The plays of Dattani widely varied in thematic and stylistic content, are a tribute to the dramatic vision and skill of a man who has transformed the face of urban theatre in India. Mahesh Dattani has worn many hats but he believes his best is
yet to come. Dattani, playwright, screenplay writer, theatre and film director, whose *Collected Plays* Penguin has just published in two volumes, has decided to get into retrospective mode. His creative days have not come to a standstill Dattani continues full throttle on his creative journey, which is taking an unexpected turn or two. Only drama can explores the distortions of everyday speech, the weight and flow of everyday movement.

It was after reading Edward Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, in his teens that Mahesh developed an urge to write. "It unleashed in me an ability to set up my male and female characters against each other". He felt the impact most from Madhu Rye’s *Kumarni Agash*, and says: "It taught me to work within my own time and place and not operate out of a projected world of sophistication and grandeur".

Dattani feels the English theatre scene is a product of the English-educated urban milieu, reflecting a certain rootless ness, unconnected from the richness of folk and classical arts of the country. The audiences and practitioners have retained an unbroken culture of aesthetics. We all have a lot of our rural cultures within us and an anxiety to get into the mall culture. This anxious urban milieu is indeed the milieu Dattani has explored in
many of his plays and screenplays so he is certainly mirroring one aspect of contemporary reality authentically.

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NOTES


15. Ramaswamy, 162.


28. Mee, 55.

29. Ramaswamy, 145.


33. Mee, 55.


39. Mahesh Dattani, Cover page,