PREFACE

As the adage goes “Literature holds up a mirror to society” and it holds truer for drama. Drama as a genre projects a closer semblance to life than any other art form, simultaneously being the most peculiar, the most appealing and the most delightful of all types of literary pursuits. It is so deeply rooted in our inner consciousness that it has rightly been regarded as the best means for the exploration of human nature in all its varieties and manifestations. Whenever we think of the origin, growth and dimension of Indian English drama, the contribution of Mahesh Dattani immediately strikes our mind. He is the first Indian English playwright to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection *Final Solutions and other Plays* published in 1994 by Affiliated East-West Press, Chennai. It goes to his credit that he set up his own theatre known as *Playpen* in 1984 in Bangalore (now Bengaluru) which is the first of its type in India. He conducts workshops regularly at his studio and elsewhere. His theatre has now become a renowned centre for innovations, experimentations as well as creative collaboration among playwrights, directors, actors and audience. Mahesh Dattani has been described as "one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English" by Alexandra Viets in *The International Herald Tribune.* (Chakraborty 18)

When we glance at the rich oeuvre of Dattani’s creativity, we find that he is a versatile genius. So far, he has penned down four collections of plays in English. In 2000, Penguin Books India brought out an anthology of Dattani’s eight plays – *Seven Steps around the Fire, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen, Tara, Dance like a Man* and *Where There's a Will* under the title of *Collected Plays.* Penguin Books India again published the second volume of his *Collected Plays* in 2005, which contains ten plays of Dattani—*Thirty Days in September, Clearing the Rubble, Dance
Like a Man, Mango Soufflé, Seven Steps Around the Fire (already published in first volume),
The Swami and Winston, Morning Raga, Uma and the Fairy Queen, Ek Alag Mausam, and
The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her child. In 2010 Penguin Books India published his third
volume entitled Brief Candle: Three Plays which include three plays of Dattani—Thirty days
in September (already published), The Girl who Touched the Stars, and Brief Candle.

In the year 2014, Penguin Books India published the fourth volume under the title of
Me and My Plays which contains his two most recent plays Where Did I Leave My Purdah?
and The Big Fat City. These plays extend Dattani’s concerns about the invisible issues. Thus,
the play Where Did I Leave My Purdah? explores the life and travails of Nazia, a feisty
actress now in her eighties, who has to confront her past demons when she attempts to come
back on the stage again. The other play, The Big Fat City is a black comedy about the
residents of an apartment complex in Mumbai who unknowingly become accomplices to a
murder. Through this Dattani again intends to worn his audience/ readers to beware of the
mob mentality which often destroys the healthy mental make-up of the individual. The
volume gains more weight because of Dattani’s detailed account of his growth as a
playwright. One may easily notice the mellowed tone of reverence and gratitude to all those
who helped him in achieving great milestones in his life.

In the contemporary era that is flooded with ‘isms’ like postmodernism,
postcolonialism and poststructuralism, the themes and concepts like gender discrimination,
sexual identity (LGBT i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgenders), communalism, individual
freedom, social realism, casteism, isolated survivors on the fringes have been subjected to the
prismatic glance through innumerable discussions and explorations with varying
perspectives. Since there can be no monolithic or homogenous interpretation, the arguments
for and against were given and debated upon from different perspectives by different social
and literary scientists and thinkers. Due to these multiple dimensions, these issues are still
open for perennial debates and discussions.
Over the past twenty-five years, exploring sensitive and forbidden themes like homosexuality, religious fanaticism, child sexual abuse and gender bias while also setting new benchmarks for theatrical innovation, Dattani has enriched and reformed the theatre and drama in India. Being an iconoclastic playwright, he critiques the unending clash between tradition and modernity and exposes the fanatical rubrics of the society that underlie all such discriminations. His art of presentation has been compared to that of Henrik Ibsen on the ground that the ghosts of the past, the dark secrets of the human consciousness that torment the present are explored in his plays in a very subtle and convincing manner. In order to make a systematic and meaningful study of Dattani’s plays I have divided my dissertation into the following chapters:

Chapter – I : Introduction

Chapter – II : Gender Discrimination and the Child Sexual abuse: Tara and Thirty Days in September

Chapter – III : Social Communalism and Tragic Vision: Final Solutions and Brief Candle

Chapter – IV : Individual Freedom and Patriarchal Code of Conduct: Where There’s a Will and Dance Like a Man

Chapter – V : Voicing the Unvoiced and Marginalized in Indian Society: Do the Needful and Other Plays

Chapter – VI : Conclusion

The present study makes a modest but meaningful attempt to analyze and examine these complex issues in Indian context as reflected in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. Chapter I is introductory in nature and traces the genealogy of Indian English Drama. In the first section, I have given a brief account of the origin and growth of Indian English drama beginning from Natyashashtra, Ramayana and Mahabharata through Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T. P. Kailasam to the major contemporary Indian playwrights, like, Asif Currimbhoy, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Gurcharan Das, Manjula
Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta. The second section deals with the journey of Mahesh Dattani as a playwright and traces a brief history of his life and works in the context of his thematic concerns, and theatrical craftsmanship.

Chapter II is centred on the issues like gender discrimination and child sexual abuse explored in the plays, *Tara* (1990) and *Thirty Days in September* (2001). The play *Tara*, written in 1990, exposes the hollowness and the hypocritical nature of the patriarchal society wherein Tara, the daughter, is sacrificed at the altar of her parents' desire for the male child in the family. Born in an educated family, she loses her life because of the conservative mindset of his parents and grandparents who prefer Chandan’s life over Tara’s and ultimately she has no option but to embrace death. Dattani’s another great play *Thirty Days in September* (2001) deals with the very delicate issue of sexual abuse of children which has extremely traumatic effects on the psyche of children. Child sexual abuse adversely affects the psyche of the child and may lead to several complications like depression, physical injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, poor self-esteem and propensity to further victimisation in adulthood.

In chapter III, I have focused on the theme of bitter communalism emerging from the self-interests of handful of people who politically maneuver the mindset of the masses leading to the doom of the communal harmony of the nation and the humanity at large. In this chapter I have explicated Dattani’s two major plays - *Final Solutions* (1993) and *Brief Candle* (2010). Dattani’s *Final Solutions* is spun around the communal divisions which gulp down humanity under the guise of religion. Dattani very subtly delineates how religion is misused by the religious extremists to deviate the thought process of the individual and shape his subjectivity. The question that naturally arises in our minds is: Can we ever shake off our prejudices or they are lying in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be able to liberate ourselves from dichotomous and conflicting binaries? Will we ever be able to reach final solutions to these problems? Dattani’s *Brief Candle* (2010) is a very powerful and thought
provoking play expressing the predicament of people on the verge of death. It tells us how people suffering from fatal and incurable diseases are vacillating between life and death. The play is farcical in tone and presents some extremely funny situations revolving around a hotel room near the airport. The characters resort to surreptitious dalliances and complicated love affairs in their endeavor to lessen their sufferings. Dattani has used the metaphor of arrival and departure for life and death which allows the characters to reflect on their own struggle for survival.

Chapter IV dwells on the conflict between individual's freedom and patriarchal hegemony. In Where There's a Will (1988), Dattani, like Ibsen and Shaw, exposes the evils of the patriarchal norms of society and presents his narrative around the intrigues and maneuverings of a dysfunctional Indian family. Dattani describes it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. It also reflects on the excesses of patriarchy that are subverted after it crosses a certain limit. The play is spun on in the fabric of human emotions of hatred, intolerance, guilt, insecurity, dominance and subjugation. Dance Like a Man (1989) presents the emptiness in the lives of cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous men whose relationship stand on the brink of terrible secrets, deceptions and hypocrisies. The play tries to show the rapidly shifting values and structuring of the self in a locale where traditional and contemporary values clash and fail to generate a new social order.

Chapter V discusses the problems of the subaltern muted voices of homosexuals, gays, transgenders and the patients of fatal diseases like AIDS in the plays such as Do the Needful (1996), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991) as well as the screen play Ek Alag Mausam (2005). These plays deal with the indifferent attitude of the mass against the marginalized and the invisible existence rendered to the beings living on the fringes in the society. On a Muggy Night in Mumbai explores the problems of gay relationship and tries to highlight the basic requirement of their true identity in society. It presents a group of well-to-do homosexuals in Bombay, their changing mutual relationship,
their revelations, their self delusions and self-discoveries. Dattani has made a bold attempt to expose the hypocrisies of social life which permit stereotypical heterosexual relationship and impart normativity to them. And those who have a homosexual orientation are considered as the deviants. The segments of LGBT are victims of social ostracism living in perpetual fear and psychological pressures and their life becomes suffocation for them. Through this play Dattani has tried to soften the society towards the gay and subtly aroused the compassion for this class.

*Do the Needful* (1996) is a heart wrenching saga on the tabooed subject of gays and their marginalisation in Indian society. With a keen sense of the sensitive issue, Dattani attempts to project the never-told agonies of the subalterns called gay in our society. *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) speaks on the restricted growth of women in the patriarchal social matrix like the bonsais. Through the women characters, he exposes the pathetic plight of women whose natural endowments are trampled under the feet of patriarchy and are not allowed to mature. *Ek Alag Mausam* (2005) again is a saga of the most marginalized segment of society which passes unnoticed even by the creative coterie of artists. The play gives an insight into the life of the HIV patients who live on the fringes of the society as it doesn’t allow them a free space to survive imposing a forced exile on them.

The last chapter is the Conclusion which is an attempt to tease out the ultimate salient features of the multifarious issues in the contemporary Indian society explored by Dattani’s lens through his plays. It also attempts to unleash and unravel the discrepancies, and inconsistencies reflected in his plays. In the textual analysis of Dattani’s plays I have tried my best to be as lucid and comprehensive as possible and taken into account the discrepancies and inconsistencies discovered in his plays.