Chapter - 7

Conclusion
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What differentiates Dattani from other Indian playwrights is his perception. Unlike the pre-independence dramatists he does not seek to interpret life for or contrary to the colonial master’s comprehension. He does not use myth for the understanding of contemporary socio-political and cultural subjects, like Karnard, the acclaimed master. Again unlike Tagore and Aurobindo he does not revel in the abundant use of imagery and ornamental language. Being a trained dancer and an adept theatre artist, drama for him is not limited to the written word with ornamental and poetic language. Dattani sees drama primarily as performance where the printed word becomes a meaningful utterance, a verbal expression, that subordinates the action and enhances the overall effect on stage. It is
an established fact that themes in literature rarely change, for literature endeavours to portray and reflect the universal and the permanent emotions. What gives originality to a work of art is the artist’s perspective. Mahesh Dattani’s plays fuse the physical and spatial awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It’s a potent combination, which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy, and its ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives.¹

Through his works and workshops Dattani emerges to be a thinker, a craftsman and above all a humanist. His plays deal with contemporary issues that are tough to turn away from. He is a conscious artist aware of his trajectory:

I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of a production. I write the play for the sheer pleasure of communicating through the dynamic medium.²
Dattani is mindful of the rich tradition of Indian drama. But the paucity of engaging English plays, by Indian dramatists, until recently induce him to brood and ask significant questions:

... what is it that we see through our theatre in this country? Do we really see ourselves? Do we see what we have made of ourselves? Do we see our hopes, values, aspirations and struggles? ... What happens when you don't see yourself or any part of your awareness reflected in the theatre that you choose to patronize? More often than not you stop believing in the theatre. Whether you are an artist or part of an audience, there is the constant danger of disillusionment. ... So, it becomes important to do the kind of theatre that means something to you personally and also to go to the kind of theatre which engages you enough for you to relate to ... Only then is there the true synergy between the artist and the audience.
This synergy is better described in our traditional theatre as Rasa.\(^3\)

Dattani firmly believes that the golden era of Indian drama can return. English plays by Indian dramatists can revive our interest in theatre and artistic representation of contemporary life on stage if the dramatists choose to "draw from the[se] roots and to create works that are largely inspired from where we come from" (JIWE:3). Dattani endeavours to reconfigure the theatrical space in his plays in order to create the synergy between the artist and the audience. Dattani writes his plays with the awareness that the modern Indian stage is:

a British legacy, ... where the action is sort of removed from the audience by way of a formal stage and a curtain. It is not that I'm doing anything new. If you look at our folk theatre and even especially in the south, Kathakali, they were done in the fields and the torches would demarcate the boundaries of performance space and the audiences would sit around that and so in that sense it is not new to our tradition but it
is definitely new to our generation
which have now developed.⁴

As Dattani is able to perceive clearly he is able to conceive clearly. The themes examined in his plays include contemporary issues and experiences that haunt, primarily, the urban middle class Indians. Issues related to communal disharmony, gender and class discrimination, familial affiliations and discords, child abuse, empathy towards the marginalised, for example, women, gay, lesbian and transgender, individuals infected with HIV and the like. Dattani weaves very convincing tales around themes analysing the questions of individual freedom, social oppression, the element of guilt, and prejudice, passion and its effect on individual action and collective psyche. He shows how characters under pressure use camouflage as a mode of self defence. Nearly all his plays depict the convergence and influence of past over the present and the inevitable future. Violence, murder, hatred, mystery and suspense all find an apt treatment in his plays. As a dramatist Dattani does not shy away from depicting the harsh realities of contemporary socio-political conflicts and its forged compromises. In an interview with Ranu Uniyal, Dattani accepts:

I do see myself as very contemporary
and I do see the clashes of the old and
the new in our society and especially on
a familial level, on a societal level. . . . We are talking about communal complex, we're talking about gender battles maybe and the male-female equation have been re-examined, at least in the cities. And I think all this has to reflect in the theatre we do, and its absolutely vital and necessary for this to happen.  

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian dramatist to show courage and conviction of providing centrality to the issues and experiences of the marginalised communities. He discusses the issues concerning eunuchs and gay in Seven Steps Around the Fire. His perception towards these invisible communities is very objective and analytical. In On a Muggy Night in Mumbai he treats the theme of individual choices and social compulsions. The play clearly brings out that marriage ceases to be a union of two hearts and individuals when social compulsions in the name of tradition force individuals to feign commingling through heterosexual union in marriage. Contrived marriages and infidelity also result from such compulsions as seen in Do the Needful and Bravely Fought the Queen. Dattani through these plays very subtly questions the narrow and limited view of defining human relationship and at the same time joins
issues with the protest demanding the abolition of section 377. Just as Seven Steps Around the Fire makes us realise the presence of the eunuchs in our midst, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful, Bravely Fought the Queen, Night Queen, etc. create awareness regarding the presence of individuals with different sexual preferences. Dattani’s participation in such social debates, through his plays, extends to issues related with child abuse and AIDS. In Thirty Days In September he chooses to uncover the trauma and distress faced by victims of incest and familial violence. But Dattani does not criticise or oppose the social institution of marriage. In fact, he portrays marriage between two HIV infected individuals, in Ek Alag Mausam, as a possible answer to their suffering in isolation. In the same play he also emphasises the possibility of adoption for a meaningful and happy interdependence of individuals. Ek Alag Mausam ends very symbolically with George, Aparna and Paro huddled together as a family smiling in front of an automated camera on a hill in the backdrop of the setting sun. These plays also imply that individual guilt and suffering due to social apathy can be overcome through sharing and support.

Dattani does not interrogate women’s issues in relation to feminism and its theoretical jargons. In stead, he chooses to portray a genuine concern about the position of women, mainly in India, their status in relation to the contemporary changing realities and the inherent rigid
social structure. He detests from portraying the radical binary opposition of categories like man versus woman or the patriarchal versus the matriarchal structure. Women in his plays present the here and now of the social reality:

Dattani's women suffer as a traditional commodity as Tara, in the play Tara and, Old Baa, Dolly and Alka in Bravely Fought the Queen. On the contrary, we have Kiran and Ratna, emerging as emphatic post-colonial women. The chasm between the two categories of women presents the rift between colonial consciousness and the post-colonial dichotomy and perhaps Dattani unconsciously hints at the plight of women, torn between being and becoming.6

Women appear to be at war with themselves or their kind, in Dattani's plays. Mother daughter relationship involving Aruna and Smita in Final Solutions, Shanta and Mala in Thirty Days in September, Ratna and Lata in Dance Like a Man Mrs. Kapoor and Pinkie in Morning Raga and Prema Gowda and Lata Gowda in Do the Needful display a sense of
distrust for each other. But with the passage of time they learn to accept each other and acknowledge individual motives. The bond in the mother daughter relationship is more accommodating when compared to the clash of ego experienced in the father son relationship. Even otherwise Sonal Mehta, and Kiran Jhaveri, one wife and the other mistress to Hasmukh Mehta in Where There's a Will and the character of Jaman’s wife and Anna Gosweb, Jaman’s paramour, after initial hostility, get along very well with each other. They accept each other as individuals. Psychologically, his women are always at war with themselves. Hardika in Final Solutions is unable to free herself from the cage of self imposed beliefs. Aruna thinks that she is a liberal until she meets Javed, a Muslim fundamentalist. She is grieved to learn that her own daughter Smita does not acknowledge her upbringing and the religious virtues. But Dattani does not attempt to control the situation with accrediting or discrediting any one view. He allows individual views and perceptions to be discussed and countered by the women characters, amongst themselves, in his plays. This allows the reader/audience to acquire a mature understanding through the evaluation of diverse views affected by individual guilt, prejudice and social adaptations.

Bravely Fought the Queen discusses the stunted growth of women in a man’s world. Alka, Dolly, Baa and Lalitha all have a desire, an inner urge, metaphorically, to grow and flourish like a fruit bearing,
fully grown-up tree. But their male counterparts Nitin, Jiten, their father and Sridhar do not allow them to grow and flourish. Metaphorically, their growth is stunted due to constant clipping. These women are controlled as a bonsai. Dattani very appropriately uses the metaphor of bonsai to show the stunted growth of women in the play. But at the same time it would be false to assume that women are rendered powerless in Dattani’s plays. Uma in *Uma and the Fairy Queen*, *The Swami and Winston* and *Sven Steps Around the Fire* while Ratna in *Dance Like a Man* and Kiran in *Where There’s a Will* reveal the self possessed Indian woman who is also aware of the feminine methods of controlling their male counterparts. Dattani hints at the different attitudes of Indian and Western women in some of his plays. In *Clearing the Rubble* Jeffrey thinks: “First Nora left me. . . . Then Jennifer” (CR:65) and in *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* Anna Gosweb confesses the feeling of estrangement she and her daughter, Jennifer share: “I hope somebody will save my Jennifer. By making her accept my help” (MFC:572).

Western feminism separated man from woman, and mother from child. It results in divorces, estrangement, and a feeling of vacuum in life.7
Dattani emphasises compromise over conflict while discussing the theme of man woman relationship. Women, in his plays, bestow the traditional Indian ethos of family.

Dattani probes the familial dynamics of Indian middle class milieu in his plays. All his plays are deeply rooted in the familiar Indian family structure comprising two and at times three generations. *Where There's a Will, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen,* are some of the plays that probe the themes of patriarchal authority in the family. *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Where There's a Will* also portray the compulsions of succeeding generations to replicate their predecessors in order inherit the property. Though in *Final Solutions* Ramnik Gandhi wishes to return the shop, his father had cunningly acquired from a Muslim family to overcome his feeling of guilt. The pattern discernable in his plays suggests that every generation is influenced by the thoughts and deeds of the previous generation and in its turn influences the following generation. Thus he portrays Indian family as the vehicle of authority and tradition. Family, it may be said, serves as a microcosm of India, its culture, tradition, problems, and strategies adopted to counter or accept change in matters that are ignored in the name of value system and norms. He very effectively uses time and space to examine contemporary reality vis-à-vis traditional viewpoints. Generally different generations are accorded separate space at different levels on stage to indicate variations.
in time periods or perception. But Dattani does not intend to polarise the issues. He says:

These are more of ideological spaces
and the whole purpose of making them
is to come closer to our identities rather
than create further hostile divisions
(JIWE:2).

Dattani is a conscious dramatist aware not only of the rich traditions and forms of Indian drama and theatre but also the good and not so good influences of the West. He entered the arena of writing plays to fill the void and paucity of Indian plays in English, suitable for the stage. It was a deliberate attempt and a rebellion not achieved before in the entire history of Indian Drama in English, spanning more than hundred and fifty years. In an interview with S. Mohanty, Dattani very candidly confesses:

... I too grew up with missionary or convent education. Of course, I was told that our art and culture were inferior to European culture. And there was a rebel in me, you know. I stopped reading Yeats and Shakespeare for a long time because I felt that I had enough of such
stuff during my school days. I made an attempt to understand myself better and I guess this prompted me to do Indian plays.⁸

He does not compromise in his portrayal of the Indian ethos and sensibility or the sordid and thus ignored reality, themes and perceptions neglected by the mainstream Indian English drama. Being a creative artist and craftsman Dattani endeavours to be true to his art and refrains from appeasing his audience at home or abroad. When asked by Anitha Santhanam about the difficulty his international audience might face in comprehending Indian English and its subtle variations used by characters in his plays, Dattani very confidently responds:

But they also need to make the effort. If we can learn and look up French and English words thrown at us. They should also look it up.⁹

He is the only contemporary Indian dramatist who has the ability to take the world in his stride with a distinct and recognisable Indian poise. His plays have been performed and appreciated on the international stage. Dattani has taken Indian drama to the world and brought world drama, through its technique and presentation, at our doorsteps. Commenting on the dearth of Indian English Drama M. K. Naik compared Indian Drama
with Cinderella waiting for some prince, who will come to rescue her. Looking at the range of Dattani’s plays and the consistent response they have received, around the world, over the past twenty years, it might well be said that the prince has arrived.
NOTES


3 Mahesh Dattani, “Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance” in The Journal of Indian writing in English Vol. 30 No. 1 ed. G.S. Balarama Gupta (Gulbarga: January 2002), p. 2. All subsequent citations from this article are from this edition and henceforth referred to as JIWE in parentheses.


5 Ibid. p. 179.


Anitha Santhanam, “On Chaucer, child abuse and radio plays”