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Mahesh Dattani: The Forerunner of Indian English Theatre's Changing Dynamics

¹Dr. Shivaji Balasaheb Methe, ²Dr. Abhijeet Pralhadrao Dawle

¹ Assistant Professor, Smt. P. N. Doshi Women's College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

² Assistant Professor, SVKM's NMIMS, MPSTME, Shirpur, Dist Dhule, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract: This research paper thoroughly examines Mahesh Dattani's usage of English in his plays as well as his contribution to the development of Indian English Theatre. The dynamics of Indian English theatre have changed significantly as a result of Mahesh Dattani's use of English in his plays. He has used English in a way that reflects the diverse linguistic and cultural influences of India and has incorporated elements of Indian vernacular languages and dialects into his writing. One of the ways in which Dattani has used English is to challenge the traditional British-centric model of English theatre that was prevalent in India during the colonial era. Dattani has also used English to give a voice to the marginalised communities in India. His plays often explore themes related to gender, sexuality, and identity, and he has used English to subvert traditional Indian social norms and expose the hypocrisies and prejudices that exist in Indian society. By doing so, he has provided a platform for these communities to be heard and has challenged the dominant narrative in Indian theatre. Ultimately, the dynamics of Indian English theatre have changed as a result of Mahesh Dattani's use of English language in his plays. He has used the language to reflect the multicultural and multilingual nature of Indian society, to give voice to the marginalised communities, and to introduce new forms of storytelling that have expanded the possibilities of Indian theatre.

Keywords: English, language, Indian theatre, marginalised communities, storytelling, changing dynamic.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most prominent figures in Indian English theatre, having written over twenty plays for television, radio, and stage. His plays have been performed across the world for more than three decades. Dattani's plays are known for their naturalistic dialogue and for the way he uses language to reflect the complexities of Indian society. He often incorporates Indian words and phrases into his dialogue, creating a hybrid language that is both English and Indian. This use of language is not only authentic to the Indian experience but also challenges the notion of what constitutes "proper" English.

Dattani's plays deal with issues such as sexuality, gender, class, and religion, and his use of language helps to highlight the cultural and linguistic diversity of India. By incorporating Indian words and phrases into his dialogue, he shows that Indian English is a valid and rich form of expression. The Indian audience couldn't relate themselves to the foreign plays' socio-cultural background, thus they weren't captivated. He wrote English plays because the existing, substandard translated plays couldn't appeal to the Indian urban audience. In 1986, during the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival, Dattani wrote his first play, *Where there is a Will*, in English. The festival applauded the play with "... laughter, laughter, and laughter. The laughter of identification that I had craved for." (Dattani, 2014, p.19) The popularity of *Where There Is A Will* led him to choose English as his primary writing style for the remainder of his career.

Dattani firmly believes that English, in the post-colonial era of the 20th and 21st centuries, has become a widely acknowledged language in India. Despite the fact that many people still prefer to speak in their native or regional languages, especially in the main cities where immigrants from all over the country gather, all of India's states currently utilise it as a unifying language. As a result, communication in English becomes commonplace, and it is accepted in all walks of life. In response to this, Dattani states:

Like many urban people in India, you're in a situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you're more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English (but...) I wanted to do more Indian plays, (and that) became a challenge, because there weren't many good translations, but they didn't do anything for me. (Mee, 2002, p.14)

Dattani also views English's acceptance favourably since it is an example of how Indian culture is fundamentally adaptable and can acquire, incorporate, and embrace many influences while yet staying distinctive. One of the largest English-speaking countries in the world is India. The English language has been incorporated into Indian culture, particularly the urban culture. Its acceptance on a global scale makes it more acceptable in the local setting. Dattani affirms:

I really feel that people have come to terms with the fact that English is an Indian language! Just as it is American or Canadian or Australian. We should celebrate the fact that India has this enormous capacity to absorb from all sources. This is exactly how we have survived colonization, unlike the poor Native Americans. We may claim to be rigid and pure, but we are the most flexible and impure of all the races! The sooner we come to terms with that; we can get on with the rest. (Ayyar, 2004, p.24)

Dattani's education at Baldwin High School in Bangalore and his experiences as a child influenced his decision to write in English. He claimed that he would learn "good English" at his school, which made his parents happy. He was an average student overall but excelled in English, and it was at school that his brain was decontaminated of Gujarati roots and linguistically moved to English.

His engagement to English writers at that location provided the groundwork for his in-depth knowledge of English literature, particularly play. Because of his education, he is fluent in English, it results in English as his "personal language" and he started reading and enjoying English plays. (Chatterjee, 2005, p.9)

Dattani acknowledges that English has become the language in which he feels most comfortable expressing himself over the course of his schooling, both in high school and college. In the preface to his play, *Final Solutions and other plays* (1994), John McRae described an intriguing incident that occurred during a question-and-answer session at a seminar in Bangalore. This moment explains the reason that Dattani chose English as the language to write in, and McRae argues:

When challenged [for writing in English] at a recent seminar at the University of Bangalore [with the question], "why don't you write in your own language?" [Dattani's] reply, with a gentle disarming smile, was "I do". (p.9)

In an interview, he also acknowledges, "You've got to be true to your expressions. English is for me a sort of given. It's my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad." (Dattani, 2003, p.2) He has taken the most daring step by writing his plays in English because of his proficiency in the language. While writing in English, which is viewed as a foreign language, Dattani has been successful in capturing the essence of the Indian cultural milieu in the characters, dialogues, themes, and subject matter of his plays. His characters are people he interacts with on a daily basis, whether they be coworkers, neighbours, or people he meets at the housing society. They are regular people. The characters have taken centre stage thanks to Dattani's theatrical understanding. Despite being shown and played in an Indian setting, they are popular all across the world. These characters can be understood by everybody around the globe because he created them in English, which does not require translation. It is stated of him that:

His plays speak across linguistic and cultural divides; they will work equally effectively in England or Italy, India or Brazil. Yet they need never be transposed out of their clearly Indian settings. As Chekhov remains resolutely Russian while his plays speak universally, so Dattani has created images, characters, and plots which reverberate with the reality of India today. They use Indian mythology, Indian traditions, Indian dance, Indian English, and Indian social problems ... (McRae, 2000, p.56)

Despite his international success, Dattani's plays and characters remain as Indian as one might imagine. To give them an Indian tint, he incorporates Indian symbols of religion, mythology, culture, dance, gestures, attire, scenery, and so on. The talks, despite being in English, do not appear contrived and have a local flavour to them. Dattani does not speak English since it is a new trend. When questioned in an interview, he stated,

I think it's more of a need than a trend. It is not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture, so it has to be given its respect in India and in the world. (Multani, 2007, p.164)

Dattani focuses on urban topics because English is the language of urban India. His dramatic background consists of an urban middle class that is at odds with itself and with society. That is why, when the characters speak English on stage, they do not appear or sound unreal. Typically, an urban backdrop serves as the setting, and the divided stage stands in for the divided ego, family, connections, and society. On stage, the inner self is brought to life by Dattani through a variety of dramatic techniques that she has mastered. He has taken a lot from western theatre, but via his own creations, he has adjusted it for the context of Indian culture. His approach to problem-solving has been influenced by Western theatre, particularly the works of John Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, and Tennessee Williams. He distinguishes himself from these Western authors by incorporating Western realism into an Indian context. Michael Walling reported in 'A Note on the Play' of *Bravely Fought the Queen*:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It is a potent combination, which shocks and disturbs, through its accuracy, and its ability to approach a subject from multi perspectives. Postcolonial India and multicultural Britain both have an urgent need for cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through this fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. (Dattani, 2000, p.229)

And, of all the popular creative forms of art, only theatre can create this place. Only in theatre can poetry, music, dance, and performance be combined. However, such a multifaceted union requires the ability of playwrights like Dattani. He has a strong background in performing, direction, music, and art. In his speech at the Krishi Festival Plays to mark the 50th Anniversary of Bengali Theatre in Bangalore, Dattani made this argument:

Man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical. Through this language of theatre he has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be. (Dattani, 2002, p.1)

Theater, in Dattani's opinion, is the most dynamic form of art that can push authors' aesthetic boundaries to their absolute limit. He has remained one step ahead because of his relationships with foreign theatre companies. When questioned about his formula for success as a writer, actor, and director, he replies:

I have learnt to embrace change as the only way to survive in the world. Today the world is filled with new ideas and new art forms emerging from the use of technology. Theatre too is moving out of the proscenium and speaking more intimately with the audience. (Dattani, 2014, p.43)

Dattani innovates both on and off the stage by experimenting with writing and directing. He uses a lot of tools, technology, and information. He develops novel avenues for topics and theatre. Dattani's work is notable in that he explores novel topics for his plays that the majority of authors avoid. He approaches taboo topics that other authors avoid, and he does so in a unique way. He brings to life the subjects that people avoid talking about in public but that must be addressed because they have an impact on society as a whole. He is recognised as a dramatist who "... probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism, and gender ... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English." (Agrawal, 2011, p.184-85)

His presentation of themes on stage has a sense of realism about it. Because of this, he never makes an effort to moralise or preach. He raises awareness of the problem among the audience, and then he steps back and gives them the opportunity to think about it on their own. Such is the reason why it mentioned that about Dattani: "He aims not at changing society but only seeks to offer some scope for reflection in the hope that his plays will give the audience some kind of insight into their lives." (Nair, 2001, p.2)

Dattani is not concerned about philosophical or spiritual matters in any way. He writes about the common man of metropolitan Indian society, belonging to the middle class, who is in search of a space with wide acceptability. It is the struggle that arises between the wants of one's inner self and the suppression of those desires by the society that surrounds them. This contradiction results in issues, and Dattani's attempts to find solutions to these problems comprise the topics of his work "... to supply an interpretation of his (man's) anguish and aspirations." (Collins, 1964, p.1)

The themes he often selects are regarding the common man caught up in uncommon situation of daily life. His ability to make the audience identify with the characters and the situation has given his plays the power and ability that they stand apart from the mundane theatre and that is what makes his theatre alive. (Mohanty, 2005, p.171)

He gives the Indian English Theatre new dimensions allowing the theatre reviewers to comment:

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 in a completely new direction. (Multani, 2007, p.60)

He has expanded the aesthetics of writing, which will serve the Indian English Theatre well as it strives to reach new heights. His contribution to Indian English theatre and English language will be recognised by posterity as having expanded the spectrum of language, concepts, characterization, locations, circumstances, and themes. Alyque Padamsee congratulates him on his accomplishment, saying, "At least, we have a playwright that gives sixty million English-speaking Indians an identity. Thank you, Mahesh Dattani!" (Dattani, 2000, Cover Page)

His works have been performed and adapted for the stage, filmed, and broadcast on radio all around the world. Dattani's unquenchable curiosity, which is always on the hunt for everything new and fascinating, sets him apart from other writers. His perspective on the theatre is illuminated by a line spoken by Nazia in the play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, which he uses to frame his thinking, "I want more dances. Dances that nobody can take from me. Oh! This van is too small! It can't take my dancing. Your cinema is too small for me. My life is BIG and GENEROUS. Only the theatre deserves me!" (Dattani, 2014, p.44)

Dattani has always been able to explore new potential possibilities because of his fervour, passion, and obsession with theatre, which has made both theatre and the world a richer place. Dattani's obsession with theatre has allowed him to accomplish this.

Conclusion:

Dattani vehemently and meticulously articulates the use of English in his literary creations. With the growing number of English-speaking people in India, he has paved the way for emerging English writers in Indian theatre. English is the language that comes to him naturally. So far as Indian languages are considered, he cannot be claimed as a writer of any particular language for that matter, as his plays come to him in English. He has been writing the very Indian essence of socio-economic-cultural facets of Indian society, especially the urban. His plays represent Indianess to the core through his thematic deliberation and representation of the characters. Moreover, Dattani's plays have been successful not only in India but also internationally, which has helped to showcase the diversity of Indian English to a global audience. His work has also influenced other Indian playwrights to incorporate the Indian language and culture into their plays.

Thus, it can be said that Mahesh Dattani's use of English in his plays has significantly altered the nature of Indian English theatre.

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