Experiment and Innovations in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian drama has been enriched by dramatists like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Mahesh Dattani. Mahesh Dattani is the only Indian dramatist who writes in English. Mc Rae acknowledged Dattani as, “the voice of India”. By focusing on the problems of contemporary Indian society Dattani has given new direction to Indian theatre. His plays explore the themes such as gender issues, child abuse, radical images of women, the conflict between tradition and modernity, homosexuality HIV positives and above all the feeling of void in the lives of middle class people in metro cities, He considers drama as the “total art”. In one of his interviews he says: I think of all arts and of all writing genres, theatre perhaps is the most dynamic because no other art form is as vibrant as drama. (Dhavan, 2005)

Dattani has used theatre to bring social awareness. His plays are unconventional, radical and realistic. The play Bravely Fought the Queen deals with women’s subjugation. Where There is a will deals with patriarchal pressure, Dance like a Man explores the conflict between tradition and modernity and the play Seven steps Around Fire focusses on the issue of transgender. He has expanded the horizon of Indian drama by introducing radical themes of contemporary Indian society. The award citation at Sahitya Akademi says, “Dattani’s works probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal difference, consumerism and gender… a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English”.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the experiment and innovations made by Dattani in terms of theme and techniques with reference to Seven steps Against Fire and Ek Alag Mausam.

Keywords: New Direction, Social Awareness, Radical Themes, Consumerism, Gender.
When I’m directing a play, I feel like I’m a complete human being. That makes me happy. And also when I meet people with a passion. It reaffirms all that I do.

Mahesh Dattani

Contemporary Indian drama has been enriched by dramatists like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar Badal sircar and Mahesh Dattani. Dattani is India’s first play wright in English to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akadami Award. The award citation at Sahitya Akadami says, “Dattani’s works probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal difference, consumerism and gender….. a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.” Mc Rae acknowledged Dattani as, “the voice of India.” By focussing on the problems of contemporary Indian society Dattani has given new direction to Indian theatre. His plays explore the themes such as gender discrimination, child abuse, women’s oppression, conflict between tradition and modernity, homosexuality, HIV positives, the plight of the cancer patients, subtle role of patriarchy and above all the feeling of void in the lives of middle class people in metro cities. He considers drama as the, “total art”. In one of his interviews he says:

I think of all arts and of all writing genres theatre perhaps is the most dynamic because no other art form is as vibrant as drama.

(Dhavan . 150)

His plays principally deal with humanism in general and justice to marginalized sections of society in particulars. In all his plays he provokes our thinking, compels us to think a fresh about the problems he presents and appeals to us indirectly like an artist to change our conventional attitudes and assumptions about what is right and what is wrong what is good and what is evil. Yet he is not a preacher and has no new doctrine to propound. In Dattani’s dramatic world drama instead of being an expression of life, it is a preface to the tradition of unconventional popular Indian theatre.

Dattani’s recent play Brief Candle artistically portrays the plight of cancer patients. By using the play within the play technique he explores the pains and sufferings of cancer patients in a subtle manner. The Hotel stay Longer a comedy written by Vikash a cancer patient in which Doctor Divika Dave plays a role of the hotel manager. Like hotel guests our time in this life is limited and all of them are going to die soon. The play provides a possibility to use the theatre as a weapon to bring the change in society. The play also discusses the plight of a woman in Indian Society. Woman are expected to be “chaste” and family oriented and men because of their bio-logical and social advantage can go around all the affairs they want. Women are treated as commodities and sex objects in any society. Dattani’s critique is not limited to Indian society but is a universal phenomenon. Brief Candle is a complex meditation about death, morality and female oppression.
Dattani’s most popular play *Tara* deals with every girl child born in Indian Family whether urban or rural. Mahesh Dattani observes:

> I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and female self. The male self being preferred (if one is to subscribe to conventional categories of masculine traits and feminine traits) in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst.
> CP. 129

The burning problem of communal riot is the main theme of *Final Solutions*. The theme of the play is put in a nutshell in the first sentence by Padamsee, “The demons of communal hatred are not out on the street… they are lurking inside ourselves.” (Padamsee. 161)

The roots of Hindu Muslim animosity are explored in this play which is set in an atmosphere of communal- violence. Religious beliefs are put under microscope and popular myths are exploded. The unstated comment seems to be: every religion is inherently oppressive. The play raises serious questions about violence and hatred due to religion:

> Is life a forward journey or do we travel round a circle returning to our starting point? Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever locked in a combat …. Arabs against Jews, white against blacks, Hindu against Muslims. Are there any final solution? 
> CP.161

Social exclusion is a very important theme in Dattani’s Seven *Steps Around the Fire and Ek Alag Mausam*. Social exclusion is a worldwide phenomenon. In a multi-lingual and multi cultural country like India, it is a major problem that threatens the very fabric of our society. Factors like caste, religion, community gender and dreaded diseases give rise to social exclusion. Social exclusion as a concept emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, though Indian society witnessed this right from the time immemorial when it was divided on the basis of caste. The upper caste hegemony was instrumental in causing the exclusion of the lower caste people from the rank of the society. Neuter sexuality and disease with social stigma like Aids cause social exclusion in our country. This is a cause of concern in the plays of Dattani.

Theatre for Dattani is not a mute and mechanical representation of social dynamics, but it is a lively representation of the voices resounding in context to totality of human experiences that consciously or unconsciously affect the existing dynamics of human sensibility. Dattani portrays real life experience and tries to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society. He within the frame work of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identity of those who occupies no space in social order.
Seven Steps Around the Fire deals with the voice of ‘subalterns’. The subalterns according to Gayatri spivak are forced to maintain silence against oppression and injustice. In this play the hijra community being of “oppressed” has to undergo oppression and injustice meted out to them by the people who are of a “superior rank.” Like most voices of resistance emerging from Third World Post coloniality Spivak’s interest lies on the issue of margins or what she termed as “the silent, silenced centre.” In her essay Spivak highlights the problems and politics of representations. In all claims to represent the most marginal/oppressed group, the subject is further rendered voiceless. This is because within the structural domination characterized by the international division of labour all forms of representation must necessarily come from a privileged position or of power. This is the reality that Spivak referred as “epistemic violence.” According to Spivak the subalterns are forced to maintain silence against oppression and injustice. Spivak’s essay is very much related to Dattani’s Seven Steps Around Fire. Here Uma tries to stir confidence in her to raise voice against injustice done to hijaras Uma in order to poke at her conscience accused Champa for the murder of kamala. For her it was difficult to tolerate and she burst out, “She was only my daughter.” (CP II 262) Through the relationship between Champa and Kamala Dattani asserts that bonds of human relationship are universal beyond the restrictions of myths and conventions. In fact the socially acceptable relationship of Uma with Suresh seems to be mockery in contrast to irresistible warmth of relationship of Champa and Kamala.

In Ek Alag Mausam  Dattani uses stage as an instrument for social protest. Aids is a physical problem and should not always be associated with moral aberration. It is absurd to deprive an individual of his/her power position essential humanity for an incurable physical deficiency. The daring spirit of George is a challenge to the entire society where human values are collapsing fast. In this play Dattani projects the “idea” through the process of documentation. After making an elaborate exposition of social apathy, Dattani highlights the death of legal provisions to settle the issue. The life of Aparna and several children depends on the survival of Jeevan Jyoti. However in absence of appropriate arrangements of funds, George decides to leave Jeevan Jyoti. He leaves with a comment.

And Aparna…. Don’t feel ashamed of being positive. It’s not your fault. It is your duty to make the world understand that.
CP II . 545.

In fact ‘to make the world understand’ is the real mission of the play Ek Alag Mausam.

Dattani’s experience both as a writer and director provides him the vast scope for innovations in dramatic technique. To make the inner thought in the minds of his characters, he introduced the
technique of ‘thought’ instead of ‘aside’ in his plays. There is a lot of code-mixing in his plays. In the preface to Collected plays (2000), Dattani states:

I know that I am an artist. I don’t need to underline it in my works. I write for my plays to be performed and appreciated by as wide a section of the society that my plays seek to and are about. I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my times, places and socio-economic background. (CP 13.15)

So far as the technique is concerned, Dattani lays emphasis on four words: ‘silence’, ‘stillness’, ‘sound’ and ‘movement’. Characters in intricate situation remain ‘silent’ and continue in ‘stillness’ for a moment and then speak out that is ‘sound’ and finally make the ‘movement’. This varies from play to play. The technique of ‘thought’ followed by ‘voice-over’ is employed in Seven Steps Around Fire where as the mingling of reality and imagination is given in a form of stage direction in Ek Alag Mausam. His theatrical language modifies his dramatic text and is reflected in the performance of the characters. His technique in interior/exterior, thought/speech and elaborate stage directions to make the situations and positions of the actors, clear and straightforward language are innovations in Indian English drama. Comparing Dattani with dramatists like Ibsen, Shaw and Tennessee Williams, Michael Walling rightly observes:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with 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 multiple perspectives. Post-colonial India and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through his fusion of forms and influences Mahesh creates such a place. This is in itself a political and social statement of astonishing force. (Walling, 229)

References


