

Stage as a Mirror: Mahesh Dattani's Experimentation and His Critique of Contemporary Society

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Abstract: Theatre is the mirror if used wisely and Mahesh Dattani has showed it with his experimental forms, languages, stagecraft in Indian Dramas with Indian societal issues such as gender inequalities, communal tensions, sexuality, family conflicts, socio-political tensions, or cultural hypocrisy. His playwrights are influenced by both Indian traditions as well as western dramaturgy with fragmented narratives, symbolic stage settings and also non-linear storytelling techniques to showcase the uncomfortable truths to audiences. Using theatre as a medium to explore contemporary realities, Dattani not only stands different for experimental staging techniques but also for their fearless exploration of taboo subjects. In the post-independence era, Mahesh Dattani stands out as a pioneer, and is one of the foremost voices in Modern Indian English Theatre, who has awarded with Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for "Final Solutions", the first English Language playwright in India to receive this honor. He is also awarded with Padma Shri in 2007 for his immense contribution to Indian theatre and Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 2011 for his skill as a playwright and theatre innovator.

Keywords: experimental, contemporary, playwright, themes, social, cultural, Indian.

INTRODUCTION

Dattani, born on 7th Aug 1958 in Bangalore, initially, was not knowing about theatre or dramas or writing. Though he was pursuing studies and working in his family business, theatre came early into his life, he attracted towards his passion making remarkable directions towards his career. He was trained as an actor and director before establishing himself as a playwright. As his focus was clear – bringing Indian English theatre to the forefront while addressing complex and relevant societal issues, he started his own company named "Playpen", and this was marked as the beginning to his career, standing him as a

pioneer in the playwright field and now-a-days, Dattani's plays have been performed around the world. This research paper will analyse Mahesh Dattani's plays which serve as critiques of contemporary Indian society and also to highlight his experimental playwright techniques.

ILLUSTRATION

Dattani says " I see myself 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 plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium."

Mahesh Dattani wants to highlight social issues not through the words on the page, but through the acting of the characters. Because emotional resonance and depth can be reflected from characters facial expressions and acting in the theatre and emotions can be felt more directly through dramas and plays instead of reading books pages. So, in short, he believes in the magic of spoken words, and his characters on the stage play the vital role to spread the required message to the audience. And accordingly, Dattani plays very well with objects on the stage like arrangement of furniture, lighting, props, etc on the set as well to mirror the tension and power dynamics within the narrative. It symbolizes the confined lives and suppressed emotions of the characters. Use of space on the stage technique is also highly innovative to heighten the theatrical experience.

Though Dattani tried to showcase Indian culture and issues through his dramas, he has played significant role in shaping Indian English Theatre, not only addressing Indian local but also global themes. So, he has inspired future generations, how to write stories and showcase them fearlessly exploring taboo topics,

it has created a new wave of storytelling and playwrights.

Dattani's work is so impactful that it continues to resonate with audience day to day life's contemporary issues, promoting acceptance and inclusivity and exclusivity in his dramas.

Mahesh Dattani's plays are so deeply rooted in Indian culture and society in such a way that they often critique societal norms, challenge audiences to rethink their assumptions. He captures minute details in his writings and dramas from the Indian family dynamics, social norms and cultural expectations.

He uses experimental and innovative approach to weave intricate stories which are widely much-admirable with his bold exploration of taboo and sensitive topics like homosexuality, child sexual abuse or gender identity, which showcases his talent and though he has some similarities with other playwrights, his unique techniques differentiate him from other playwrights.

Dattani's plays feature realistic characterization, authenticity, multilayered characters grappling with complex and multifaceted emotions and experiences, allowing audiences to connect on a personal level with the human experience. Also, he adds layers of meanings by adding symbols and metaphors to interpret his work by the audience on both symbolic as well as literal levels to add depth and resonance to his stories and plays as well. At the same time, Dattani artistically creates a unique blend of modern and traditional elements using Indian languages as well as cultural specifics with contemporary English dialogues.

Mahesh Dattani is not only experimental playwright but also a part of a larger global tradition of social critique in Theatre.

In terms of social critique, Dattani is closest to Indian playwrights Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad.

Karnad uses forms like myths, folk tales, whereas Dattani uses urban settings or realisms. Both explore social issues and Indian identity through their dramas. Tendulkar and Dattani critique social hypocrisy using themes of violence, corruption, gender oppression; but Dattani's dramas are more family-centered and psychological, less political and satirical.

As compared to Badal Sircar, Dattani's plays are innovated with multimedia, fragmented narratives. Sircar prefers the street theatre or collective forms.

As Dattani is famous worldwide, his work is compared with famous playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Henrik Ibsen, etc.

Arthur Miller critiques American dreams whereas Dattani critiques urban Indian consumerism and patriarchy. Tennessee deals with lyrical, poetic, southern gothic, and Dattani's work is realistic in nature keeping consciousness socially. Henrik and Dattani are writing as per their century's contexts.

Notable Works according to themes:

- When there is a will (1988) – Authority, inheritance, patriarchal dominance and control themes are interpreted with the character of Hasmukh Mehta who continues to control his family even after death through his will, which exposes greed, and manipulation. Or dysfunctional family ties.
- Dance like a Man (1989) – Generational conflicts, clash of tradition vs modernity and gender roles kind of themes are depicted through relationships of son-father, husband-wife, also parental control over children's dreams. At the same time, it shows male suppression in patriarchal settings.
- Tara (1990) – It is one of the famous plays of Dattani, play about Siamese twins, which shows themes such as parental betrayal, disability and gender bias. Deep rooted patriarchy has been shown with the family decision to favor son (Chandan) over a daughter (Tara), also it shows sibling love contrasted with parental guilt. Affection and injustice have been narrated through these characters. It challenges societal norms about expectations and gender identity. Intertwining past and present, play experiments with narrative form in a unique way.
- Bravely Fought the Queen (1991) – Themes of hypocrisy of upper-class society and domestic violence have been shown with Trivedi family, which reveals abusive marriages, which uncovers topics like suppression and exploitation of women and silences. It showcases the hypocrisy behind modernity's appearance.
- Final Solutions (1992) - Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998, explores communalism, identity, religious intolerance with Gandhi family who represents middle-class attitudes, reflects fears and prejudices which pass across

generations. This play shows communal tensions, promoting understanding, addressing religious prejudices, scars of partition.

- On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1993) - Delving into the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, highlighting their struggles and triumphs, Dattani has done a great work in this play with a theme of “chosen family” and not the blood-family of friends, showcasing themes of inner conflicts of queer identities in urban Indian society, highlighting the rights and struggles of the LGBTQ+ community. Homosexuality has been openly discussed in this play, which is ignored largely in mainstream theatre.
- Do the needful (1995) and Seven steps around the fire (Radio Play – 2000) – Both plays have theme of sexuality, family pressures on marginalized ones. Family expectations conflicting personal identity or Hijra community depicted.
- Thirty days in September (2001) – Trauma and child sexual abuse such kind of issues are shown with the mother-daughter like complex relationships, family becomes complicit by ignoring such issues like abuse. Dattani portrayed this theme very well in this play to spread the awareness, revealing underlying tensions and power structures
- Ek Alag Mausam (2002-Film Script) – Social acceptance or how stigma fractures family bonds with HIV/AIDS kind of issues.
- Brief Candle (2007) – Resilience has been shown with cancer like illness and death, highlighting grief, love, legacy.
- The Big fat city (2011) – Mumbai like big fat city has been objected to narrate the themes of urban consumerism, corruption, moral emptiness, selfishness, or greed with different characters and with their different professions.

CONCLUSION

No doubt, after knowing about all his plays, Mahesh Dattani’s experimental approach to storytelling creates the unique plays for highlighting the social and cultural contemporary issues, Indian as well as Globally by using English language. His contribution is immense to the evolution and redefinition of the theatre as well as society.

Dattani has inspired new generation of storytellers to explore diverse narratives and themes with his unique and different style.

Dattani's plays are full of techniques for thought-provoking and complex storylines which challenge the conventional norms.

He is a prominent figure in Indian drama with his innovative thematic concerns, narrative techniques, and socio-cultural contexts.

Dattani’s willingness to engage with such delicate but bold and complex issues demonstrates a commitment to experimentation, offering a loud voice to marginalized or subaltern people in the society by traditionally or by social norms. It gives visibility to issues which are excluded from public discourse. He always breaks the fourth wall, directly involving audience on the stage, though in the dramatic way, but with the real-life experiences and issues to rethink their own roles within society.

Dattani, a true pathbreaker, uses experimental dramaturgy with unique techniques and themes, not just to entertain but to hold a mirror to society.

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