


Socio-Cultural Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Plays



Dr. Nirmala S. Padmavat


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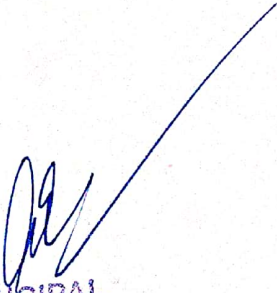


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Editor Name

Nirmala Shivram Padmavat

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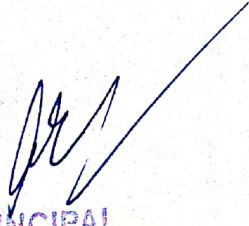
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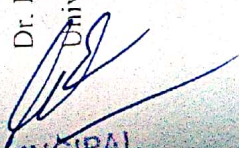
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Preface

It was a pleasant morning and I with my daughters was taking a healthy breakfast which tasted more delicious with a message, I received from Dr. K.P. Singh, Head, Department of English, M.B.P.G. College, Gautam Buddha Nagar NCR Delhi, offering me a chance to be a part of the book which he was going to plan on Mahesh Dattani's plays. I took it as a golden opportunity to work on a new project in collaboration and we worked. Fortunately, we received the blessings of contributors in the form of twenty four chapters/ research papers which were difficult to publish in a single book so we decided to publish them in two books. It fulfilled my dream to dedicate my book to my beloved father Late. Shivrarnji V. Padmavat, who had always been aware of the socio-economic discrimination, existing in Indian society. He was






Edited by Dr. Nirmala Shivram Padmavat

10. A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Use of English Language

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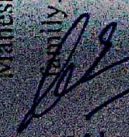

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"Language is the road map of a culture. It talks you where its people come from and where they are going".

Introduction:

Being reputed figure as a dramatist, director and actor internationally Mahesh Dattani wrote many plays not only for stage but for screen and radio also. In which he used English language very beautifully. The popularity of English language in India in the post-colonial era attracted Mahesh Dattani for using English language in writing his plays, so that it would be accept in all walks of Indian life. Though English is accepted as a foreign language but Dattani maintained the balance of Indian life and retained the essence of Indian culture not only in his plays but its characters and dialogues also. People feel very close with the characters of his plays that represent their day to day life.

Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore to Gujarati family. He is graduated in Economics, History, and


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Political Science. He is post graduated in Marketing and Advertisement Management, because he wanted to become a copywriter. After that, he started to work with the Bangalore Little Theatre. Where he acted his first role in Utpal Dutt's Surya Shikhar. Mahesh Dattani is known as one of the most important figures in Indian English Theatre. He wrote more than twenty plays for stage, screen and radio which make him very popular in India as well as foreign country. His career as a dramatist, director, and actor spans three decades and his plays have been performed on the stage not only in India but over the world too. The long career and engagement by medium of theatre with the help of socio-political issues of urban India is described by Dattani himself. His plays have confronted issues that could cause many an Indian audience to squirm as from religious fundamentalism, to child sexual abuse, to gender roles, to homosexuality, to arranged marriage.

Early in his life, Dattani read the play "Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Written by the famous



American playwright Edward Albee he became interested in writing. His interest in play writing developed due to influence of Gujarati playwright Madhu Rye whose play "Kumarni Agashi". Dattani is the first who got Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998. In 1980, he joined Bangalore Little Theatre and started his theatrical career. Eminent directors Arvind Gaur, AlyquePadamsee and LilleteDubey have directed the plays of Dattani. In 1984 Mahesh Dattani established his own playgroup "Playpen" or popularly called "Mahesh Studio". He took Bharatanatyam training at Bangalore from well known artist Krishna Rao from 1986 to 1990 which made him understand the art in a better way. In the beginning his plays follow Greek tragedies and English plays. As a full-time professional in theatre he has been working since 1995. He also helped his father and worked with him in the business of family. Dattani is also a film director. Mango Souffle is the debut film of Dattani, which was adapted from one of his plays. One of the important movie Ragga was also written and directed by him.

In an advertising company, Mahesh Dattani began his career as a copywriter. He wrote his first full length drama, "Where There's a Will" in 1986. In the play we can see many characters. Characters like Hasmukh Mehta, his wife Sonal Mehta, his son Ajit Mehta and his daughter in law Priti. Kiran Jaweri mistress of Hasmukh Mehta. It is about the Gujarati family. The play began the death of Hasmukh Mehta and he appears in the drama as a ghost. The members in the family all are busy in their own life. Dattani concentrated mainly on the social issues in the drama. We can see here, the relationship between father and son. However, Mahesh Dattani focus on the female characters in the play, where they always busy in work and preparing dinner. In the play we can observe from the interaction of the characters it is evident that nobody has deep familial relationship. At the end of the drama, Dattani light on the Gujarati family and in our today life we can observe the current problem in the 21st century. Though, Dattani has written the backdrop of a Gujarati family, "Where there is will"

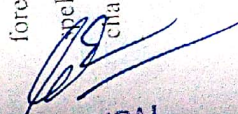
is applicable to join family system prevalent in several parts of India. He wrote many plays, one of them is "Tara: A play in two Acts" deals with the central idea of gender discrimination in society. Dattani's meant to present the struggle of an ancient eastern civilization attempting to revolve modern, western values, and failing.

"Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move. Without meaning."

— Mahesh Dattani, Tara: A Play In Two Acts

Mahesh Dattani's Use of English Language:

He directed European dramas translated into Hindi and regional dramas into English but the foreign plays weren't ready to hold the spectators wellbound because the socio-cultural context of the characters and it had been different from which the


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audience did not recognize itself with the characters. The shortcomings of the translated works inspired him to compose original plays in English. In 1986, he wrote his own first drama named 'Where there's a Will' in English for stage for the 'Deccan Herald Theatre Festival'. He decided to write down his own creation to not take up any foreign drama or author. Within the festival his play was received during a great success. The success of the play 'Where there's a Will' made him confident about English his medium for his writing for the remainder of his career.

The English language has become a commonly used language in India within the post colonial period of 20th and 21st century. It made him to write down in English. English has become the bridging language across all states of India preferring to talk within the local or regional languages. People of India used English for interaction. Its accepted altogether walks of life.

Regarding this, Dattani comments:



Like many urban people in India, you're during this example where the language you speak reception is not the language of your environment, especially if you progress from your hometown. And you employ English to speak, so you discover that you're more and easier expressing yourself in English (but...) I wanted to undertake to to more Indian plays (and that) became a challenge, because there weren't many good translations, but they didn't do anything on behalf of me. (Mee, 2002, p.14)

One possesses to convey during a language that's not his own but the spirit is his own. In alien language one can convey the unlimited colours of a specific thought movement that appears maltreated. Here use the word 'alien', yet English isn't really an alien language for people. It is the language for our intellectual making not for emotional like Sanskrit or Persian. People are all instinctively bilingual, many of the people writing in their own language and in English. We cannot write just like the English. We should always not. We cannot write

only as Indians. We've grown to look at the huge world as a neighborhood folks. Our method of expression therefore possesses to be a dialect which may someday convince be as distinctive and colorful because Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

Moreover, Mahesh Dattani sees at the positive side of English language's acceptability and representation of the elemental quality of the culture of India. Making itself so rich in variety and range, remains unique in itself at an equivalent time. Within the world, India is one among the most important countries where English is spoken by the people. Within the Indian culture English has been absorbed and included, especially within the urban culture. English has been accepted and recognized at the international level makes it the more acceptable within the local context. Dattani states that i actually feel that folks of India have come to terms with the very fact that English is an Indian language. Not even as American or Canadian or Australian language. We should always celebrate

the very fact that India has this enormous capacity to soak up from all sources. This is often exactly how we've survived colonization, unlike the poor Native Americans. We may claim to be rigid and pure, but we are the foremost flexible and impure of all the races! The earlier we come to terms with that, we'll get on with the rest. (Ayyar, 2004, p.24)

Dattani chooses English because the medium of expression for his writings lies in his childhood experiences and schooling at Baldwin highschool, Bangalore. He said that his parents were very enthusiastic regarding his school as he would learn to talk in good English there. His introduction to English writers there stated the inspiration to his thorough understanding of English literature, especially drama. His schooling made English his "personal language" and he started reading and enjoying English plays. Though Dattani writes in English, (Chatterjee, 2005, p.9) which is accepted as a far off language, yet he has maintained and retained the essence of Indian cultural-context in his characters, dialogues and

plays. People feel that the characters from Dattani's plays are from one's day to day life that one interacts with at his/her workplace or within the housing society or within the immediate surroundings. The characters are the standard that one meets within the daily routine.

Dattani through his understanding of the theatre has brought the characters from routine life to the centre place. Although they need been presented and played within the Indian context, yet they need a universal appeal. the selection of English because the language of expression of those characters by Dattani opens them up to the whole world because the work doesn't need translation to be presented internationally, but remaining Indian at an equivalent time. That's why it's said regarding him that: His plays speak across linguistic and cultural divides, they're going to work equally effectively in England or Italy, India or Brazil. Yet they have 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 truth of India today. They use Indian mythology, Indian traditions, Indian dance, Indian English, and Indian social problems ... (McRae, 2000, p.56)

In spite of achieving a worldwide acceptance to his plays, Dattani's plays and characters remain as Indian together can imagine. He produces Indian symbols of faith, mythology, tradition, dance, gestures, dress, setting etc. to offer them an Indian color. He's not writing for the people that are poor or hungry, or raising existential questions, abstract or philosophical issues. Dattani is writing specially for the urban middle class people, who struggle and try to achieve their ambitions and aspirations in life and pestered by various issue of family, individual freedom and social and cultural prejudices. His plays are an apt representation of Manisha Vardhan's statement that —the more your basic needs is taken care of, the more room you've got to reflect on certain things. Whereas, if you don't have that space and are concerned 24 hours

about your basic needs, then you would like to flee into something else... (Vardhan, 2004,19).

Although the dialogues are being in English, don't seem artificial but have the local touch in them Dattani doesn't use English because it's the new emerging trend. When he was questioned in an interview, he responded saying that, "I think it's more of a requirement than a trend. It's not that I even have a political motive to market Indian English, but it's a neighborhood of Indian culture, so it's to tend its respect in India and within the world. (Multani, 2007, p.164) Mahesh Dattani takes up urban themes because English is that the preferred language in urban India. His theatrical context constitutes urban bourgeoisie individuals that are in conflict with the self and therefore the society. That's why the characters don't look or sound unreal once they speak English on stage. The setting of the play is usually urban, mostly with the divided stage, signifying the divided self, family, relationships and therefore the society. The inner self of the characters are delivered to life on the

stage; employing various theatrical techniques during which Dattani is master. He has learnt more from the western theatre and drama but he has molded it to his convenience by innovating for the Indian cultural context. His themes and handling of the issues have the reflection of the western theatre especially that of Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw, Ibsen and Williams. Dattani uses the new technique and ideas in his writings and directions. He is very innovative person not only on the stage but off the stage also. He makes much use of technological tools and technical expertise. His contribution are going to be remembered by posterity for adding new scope to language in Indian English Theatre. Alyque Padamsee acknowledges achievements of Dattani by saying, "At least, we've a playwright that provides sixty million English speaking Indians an identity. Thank you, Mahesh Dattani! (Dattani, 2000, Cover Page).

Conclusion:

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In conclusion we can say that Mahesh Dattani has paved the way for Indian writers to write unselfconsciously in the English language without having to give reasons to justify their choice. He abundantly makes to use Indian traditions and relates them with the issues and challenges of new generations of India. He raises these social concerns to such a higher level that they touch the human chords and emanates love, happiness while at the same time revealing identity crisis, feeling of self-guilt and remorse etc. His play brings to fore not only the contemporary social problems but also examines very imaginatively with multiple perspectives what really lies at the core of those social issues and the other way round. He brings out the complexities of the problems and therefore the fragmentation of the contemporary urban lives also as demonstrates through his characters how this fragmentation results in distorted social manifestations.

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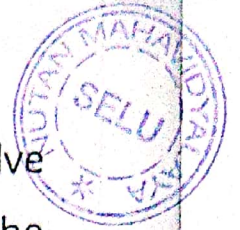
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About the book: This book is a collection of twelve research papers by different scholars on the contemporary themes and issues in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. He is a modern Indian playwright who is still living and writing. His plays deal with the certain subtle, ignored, unspoken and hidden issues which are generally encountered in the present day family and society and are usually brushed under the carpet to protect individual identity, family name and social honour/ prestige. The research papers included here, take up and reflect upon those vital issues as delineated in different plays of Mahesh Dattani.

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