

Indian Drama and Mahesh Dattani: A Perspective

Akash

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kurukshetra University Kurukshetra (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 October 2018

Keywords

Theatre, Drama, Genre, Playwright, Dramatist

ABSTRACT

Drama is not only an artistic expression of life but also a tool for social transformation. It has been providing entertainment round the world with themes centered on the life styles of people of various regions besides helping them discuss their social issues while instilling dynamism among them. In India, drama began its journey with Sanskrit plays and Natyashastra is the oldest text of its theory. Drama that developed in medieval age was based on oral traditions and included the folk and regional theatre like Raslila, Ramlila and Nautanki. After independence the Indian drama was greatly enriched by GirishKarnad, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mohan Rakesh who produced their drama in regional languages like Kannada, Marathi and Hindi. Mahesh Dattani is the most important contemporary dramatist who appeared on the horizon in the late twentieth century and contributed to Indian drama through his extraordinary plays. Passing through various stages Indian drama got an independent identity and cognizance in Dattani's plays. Dattani is included to the category of the dramatists who champion the cause of true art that is free from any theory, universal in test and appealing to all the sections of society. Dattani explores the contemporary social issues which are considered to be tabooed in Indian society like gays, lesbians, eunuchs, bisexuals and women. He effectively uses drama as a powerful tool to present the reality and bring about a necessary social change. The present paper is an endeavour to contextualize the contribution of Mahesh Dattani in the integrity of theatrical tradition.

1. Introduction

Drama is an independent literary genre that shows the conflict between people and their circumstances. It is an important medium for mobilization and communication. Drama promotes social, cultural, historical and spiritual awakening among people by teaching them about life threatening problems. It nurtures a civic - minded populace that establishes a civilized society based on justice, trust and tolerance. Devoto says, "Drama is a platform of social experiences, an embodiment of social myths and ideal and aims, and an organization of social beliefs and sanctions" (Lingelbach 54). Its evolution and expansion throughout the world emphasizes upon the fact that it has always been an integral part of culture and society. It has been reflecting ethical responsibilities, religious practices, political ideologies, and philosophical approaches. Drama is a parameter through which writers, historians and anthropologists interpret humanity and society. J. B. Priestly stated, "Just as life is the bedrock for drama, similarly drama should become the role model for life" (Murthy 199). In fact, the basic role of drama is to give form, order and expression to our collective, socio - cultural and political sensibilities.

The term "Drama" is traced in the Greek word "dram" which stands for "to do" or "to act" and can be explained in different contexts. The drama is a play written for enactment by actors on religious, secular or mundane affairs of human beings. In the widely accepted sense, drama is a performative art in which a group of actors play the roles of certain characters before the audience. As it is explicated, "Drama is a creation in verse or prose purporting to draw life or character or to narrate a tale often involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and purely designed for theatrical

performance" (Dharmani V). Drama portrays life and hence, is a wonderful learning tool which develops the cognitive abilities of the audience. In the most common context, drama means any kind of mimetic performance which satisfies the primitive human instinct to drive pleasure from an act of imitation which may be in the form of mime, comedy, tragedy or tragic-comedy. M. K. Naik points out:

Drama is an aptitude in which the written dialogues of the playwright obtain absolute scenic cognition only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. To become a true dramatic inspiration a play needs a real theatre and a live audience. (Tandon 180)

The origin of drama in India is traced with the Sanskrit plays. Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* shows the earliest references of Sanskrit drama. It is a treatise on drama which gives an eventual date for the beginning of theatre in India. Contextual passages can be seen in early epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The vocabulary of drama shows that its root is derived from dance. The common term in Sanskrit is "Nataka", "Nata" means the actor, "Natya" means mimic. The root term "Nart" means to dance. It was Brahma who had created the *Natya Vedas* to deal with theater poetics, at the request of Mahendra and other deities he took the same element from the other four Vedas, which would be shared by all mankind, because the Vedas only got the privilege of the Brahmans. The Indian theater has a unique characteristic and is well-sealed in theatrology.

The most significant and the earliest surviving manual of dramaturgy in India is Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra*(200 B C –

200 A D). It was basically created for *Sudaras* since they were prohibited from studding *Vedas*. It is called the fifth *Veda*. It is a collection of performing arts like drama, music and dance. It presents in a great wealth of detail descriptions of the prevalent modes of these art performances; and the extraordinary precision with which the multiple facets of these arts have been defined and analyzed is inductive of the sophistication of the art practices as well as art criticism of Bharata's age. *Natyasastra* was the outcome of several centuries of theatrical practices by heredity actors, who passed their tradition orally from generation to generation. It is the most significant work in Sanskrit literature on the subject of stage craft. It deals with a wide verity of topics such as the appropriate occasions for staging a drama, the proper designs for theatre, the authentic presentation of an art work and special instructions and advice for actors, playwrights and producers.

Natyasastra laid down the foundation for classical Sanskrit drama. It is the most significant source for establishing its characteristics. It is believed that drama has been an inspiration of Bhrama as a means of distracting people from their erotic actions. K. Vatsyayan pointed out, "it (drama) deals with the visible and audible, employs body and language (gestures), speech, music, dress, costumes and an understanding of psychic testes, which involuntary reflect themselves in the physical body, e.g., tears, horrification, etc., expressing meaning and emotional states" (48). In *Natyasastra*, Bharata attributes to Brahma the creation of an educational purpose for drama.

India drama is studied under three distinctive periods – the classical period, the traditional period and the modern period. The classical period of Indian drama includes the writings and performances of theatre up to 1000 A.D. This drama was based on rules, regulations and modifications given by *Natyashastra*. It includes composition of plays, and stage performances. The classical drama had its national identity as it was being done in a language like Sanskrit. The great dramatists of the age were Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakhadatta and Bhavabhuti who contributed to the Indian drama with their outstanding plays which were written in Sanskrit. Most of these plays were based on epics, history, folk tales and legends.

The traditional period of Indian drama shows the drama usages based on oral conventions. It was in practice from 1000 A.D. to 1700 A.D. This later drama was more simple, immediate and improvisational as it included all folk and regional forms of theatre. Moreover, it was not based on rules and regulations as the classical Sanskrit drama was. The regeneration of different regional languages throughout the country promoted the growth of this indigenous drama. It was transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. Hence, this period is known as traditional and folk period of Indian drama. It includes Tamasha, Raslila, Ramlila, Nautanki, Swang, and Dashavtaar, the local forms of drama in Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The modern period of the Indian drama begins with the coming of the English in India. A direct connection established between Indian drama and the western drama during colonial

period. Indian drama started peeping out of the national boundaries and became more varied. The writings and practice of drama are fully prepared towards realistic and natural presentation. The modern drama was not like the classical and traditional drama where realism and naturalism was totally absent. It was based on realism and portrayed genuine problems of life in a realistic and naturalistic manner. It developed as a drama of ideas than a drama of action and the playwrights used stage to spread their revolutionary ideas to reform society. During modern period most of the plays either written or translated in English. *The Persecuted* (1831) was the first drama in English panned by an Indian dramatist, Krishan Mohan Banerji. Along with K.M. Banerji, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt was another writer who selected drama as a vehicle to express his thoughts and feelings. Dutt wrote his plays first in Bengali then translated them into English. His prominent plays are *Ratnavali*, *Sarmistra*, and *Is this Called Civilization?* Ram Kinoo Dutt also contributed to the genre by his *Manipura Tragedy*. The pre-independence Indian English playwrights were the evolved group of playwrights who came right after the Sanskrit dramatists. Rabindranath Tagore, the harbinger of Bengali theatre, Sri Aurobindo, a major English playwright and an accomplished craftsman in verse, T. P. Kailasam, the father of Modern Kannada Drama, and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, a dramatist of the underdogs of society who is more akin to post-independence Indian English playwrights in his modern consciousness.

India became independent and the dramatists predicated a silver lining to the dark clouds of Indian dramatic achievements in English. In post – independent India a new generation of dramatists emerged including Asif Currimbhoy, Lakhan Deb, Gurucharan Das and Nissim Ezekiel. Their plays were successfully staged in England and America and this way Indian drama got recognition abroad. Drama in translation also made Indian drama more effective and innovative. The prominent playwrights in translation phase are Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Mohan Rakesh who wrote plays not only in Indian regional languages but also translated them into English. This influential convention of translation established a closer or dynamic contact between the theatre workers from different regions and languages. As it is analyzed by T.S. Chandra, "Translation is inevitable to Indian conscience. Translating etiquettes, manners, customs from one speech system into another has been an indiscernible attribute of the Indian consideration and India has competence to imbibe" (Ramana 78). Actually, regional theatre in India slowly prepared a platform for national theatre into which all streams of theatrical art seems to combine.

Street theatre or Nukkad Natak also contributed to the development of Indian drama as a public manifestation. Theatre activists and social reformers found Street theatre a potent weapon for contacting the people and voicing their opinions. The primary aim of Street theatre is to sensitize people towards contemporary social issues, inspire them to bring about a necessary social change and lastly to help them to promote solidarity and consistency. The common theme in street theatre is the issues concerning women. It plays an important role to awaken women towards gender discrimination, harassment as well as their needs and

potentialities. *Machine, Aurat, Scream* and *Hallaboi* are important plays based on the issues about women and have gained popularity as best street plays. Nishant, Samvedan, Lok Kala Manch, Privartan, PrajaNatyaMandali and Garage are worldwide Street theatre groups in India. They perform dramas not only in India but in foreign countries. *Toba Tek Singh*, based on SaadatHasanManto's short story, is an excellent production of street theatre. Actually, Street theatre is an effective and efficient medium of communication with the people as it administers with the use of elaborate costumes, and sets and lights. It is didactic, economical and portable to convey the message because the street theatre artists do not wait for an audience to come to the theatre instead they go out to the people speaking them at bus stations, street corners, parks and markets. People from all walks of life and from different strata of society are put on the same platform. Street theatre not only contributed to Indian drama to be developed but also made it possible to reach people where theatre is not accessible to the majority like narrow streets, local markets, slums, villages, schools, small parks and residential areas.

Passing through the different stages Indian drama got a self – determined reorganization in the last decades of twentieth century in Mahesh Dattani's dramas. Dattani is the most prolific dramatist of contemporary India and included to the category of the playwrights who champion the cause of true art that is free from any theory, universal in flavor and taste, and appealing to all sections of society. It is the disparity of the dramatic outlook of Dattani that he took the tradition of Indian English drama as the faint reflection of European traditions. He relished drama as a medium to represent the real depth and vitality of human existence. Therefore, it has become obligatory to contextualize the contribution of Mahesh Dattani in the integrity of theatrical tradition. Regarding the future dimension of Indian drama Mahesh Dattani said, "There is going to be an appropriate positive advancement, because as we get into the internet era which isolates human beings, the act of communication will be a premium. Theatre is our cultural activity directly related to human beings' communication with each other" (Murray 98). Dattani is the only major Indian English dramatist writing in English in the closing decades of the twentieth century and now, in the twenty-first century.

Dattani's drama is modern in real sense which is developed through ages. His plays are originally written and performed in English. Dattani is the most influential contemporary Indian dramatist who has been awarded the prestigious SahityaAkademi Award by Indian Government for his extraordinary contribution to Indian drama. His two volumes of plays, *Collected Plays* (2000) and *Collected Plays, Vol. II* (2005) are landmarks in Indian drama. He has revolutionized and given a unique identity to Indian drama through his theatre experiments and innovations. Regarding the significance of Dattani's plays John Mc Rae points out, "They are the plays of contemporary period, sometimes as real as to cause altercation, but at the same time they are the plays which personate many of the classic concerns for world drama" (Halder 232). Being a modern Indian dramatist Dattani's response to contemporary social issues is realistic. His plays are a telling comment on the contemporary Indian society in a fast changing globalized world. The social issues which are

patronized in his plays are homosexuality, patriarchy and communalism.

Dattani eliminates the distinction of page and stage and makes theatre a place to articulate the voice of marginalized people like eunuchs, gays, lesbians, women and minority communities in a society which is characterized by the shifting codes of morality. He effectively uses drama as a powerful tool to present the reality and bring about a change. He works with the actors to recreate his texts in a form which suits their approach to performance. His plays fuse the physical and spacial awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It is a potent combination and approaches a subject from multi perspectives. Through his fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh Dattani creates such a space in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place.

The most important aspect of his plays is that they address the "invisible issues" and exhibits contemporary society in the fast changing world. The issues Dattani raises in his plays are communal dispense between Hindus and Muslims, prohibited same sex marriage, female subservience, and suppressed and propitiated life style of sexual minorities like eunuchs and bisexuals. Hence, his plays appear to be both revolting and sometimes outrageous. Dattani explores the life of urban middle class people who live gloomy and dispirited existence and caught between the deep quagmire of conventionality and modernity. He also portray their strong dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic and political conditions of the time and gives vent to the dissatisfaction and discontent the people feel at the failure of the welfare state to live up to its promises. It is also shown how their anger and frustration inspires them to be rebel. Dattani's plays attack the stifling traditions and attitudes of the rigid class system in contemporary social milieu. With its focus on a realistic portrayal of prevented minorities, they can be seen as a reaction against the plays written during pre – independence period. The characters are ordinary middle class youth, socially and mentally unsatisfied and live in cramped conditions. As it is analyzed by Erin Mee:

Mahesh Dattani often prefers as his subject the sophisticated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters scramble for some sort of freedom and happiness under the impression of convention, social construction of gender, and suppressed desire. Their dramas are performed out on multilevel sets where interior and exterior become one, and geographical destinations are broken – in short, his settings are as fragmented as the families who reside them. (Das 7)

Mahesh Dattani portrays the real picture of the contemporary Indian social milieu. As Madhu Jain stated, "Dattani is an authentic contemporary voice whose plays are rooted in contemporary urban experiences" (Tandon 20). He has portrayed a flaming description of social victims as well as the absurdity, foible and callousness of present Indian society. He has criticized and presented the middle class family in his plays which are eloquent defenses of society's outcasts and rebels. He presents how modern man lives a dual personality

to avoid resisting eyes of society. His characters are fully rounded men and women and gays with a past behind them. They are rooted in the urban cosmopolitan setting of modern middle class India and struggle for some kind of freedom and delight under the burden of culture and traditional construction of gender and repressed desire. His characters whether they are good or bad; right or wrong are treated with understanding and sympathy. He does not proclaim any compensate or infliction for them but allows the justice of nature to operate. He doesn't pronounce any reward or punishment, thereby allowing the natural law of justice to prevail. Jeremy Mortimer states, "Dattani's plays frequently features characters who are interrogating their identity, and who realize detached and lonely in some way" (CP 4). He condemns the Indian patriarchal society that allows a man to establish relations out of marriage and prevents a woman to approach a man out of marriage. He is a genius artist and loves his art very much. In order to convey his message to the audience and the reader as well he uses day to day abuses to make them realize that such things happen to society. Being gender sensitive Dattani explores both the masculine and the feminine self within him. Michael Walling analysis of his plays:

Dattani's plays combine the substantial and ethereal consciousness of the Indian theatre with the textual stiffness of western prototypes 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 perspective. The multi-cultural contemporary Indian society needs a public collocation in which amalgamation of eastern and western influence can occur. Through this fusion of form and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. (Walling 1)

The fact remains that Indian English drama is a potent public voice that acquired a safe mooring in the dramatic art of Mahesh Dattani. He carved his passage beyond the canons to eliminate the distinction of page and stage and to make theatre a place to articulate the voice of marginalized in the shifting code of morality. Drama is the easiest way to express trauma and sufferings of marginalized people as Dattani confessed, "The love of my life was drama and I want to write more plays" (Prasad 23). John McRac asserts about his plays, "they are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concern for world drama" (McRac 1). In fact, through the theatrical art Dattani's purpose was neither to make survival imitation of the canons nor to establish canons. His purpose behind his art was to seek a matrix of theatrical bond to establish harmony between the flux of the consciousness of the audience with the artifice of the theatre, sacrificing all pretensions of excellence and reducing theatre close to the psyche state of human experience. In this context Dattani found theatre more vibrant and convincing. Dattani

himself said, "I think of all arts and of all writing genres, theatre perhaps is the most dynamic because no other art form is as vibrant" (Prasad 23). The assumption of his theatrical art is to bring theatre close to the real life experiences and to avoid conventionality and imitation in the context of form and content. It represents the permanent clash of the desires of the individual and social norms and exposes the deep recesses of human psyche within the periphery of stage. It elaborates the art of drama from the burden of canons both from the ancient Indian and European traditions and synthesizes the performance dynamics with profundity of idea. He said:

My milieu is theatre, you can't operate in isolation...I do want a theatre movement to happen. The major block for that is lack of sound training and professionalism. We have the talent but theatre is more than that, it's a craft of communication through the language of action. (Das 46)

Dattani conceptualizes the marginalized psyche. He is not interested in polemic but writes frankly about the oppressed and the suppressed class. Recognizing the importance of his images taken from the urban middle class milieu, John McRac remarks, "Mahesh Dattani has given us images which could not be created in the theatre, images which deserve to be seen by audience worldwide, images which give Indian drama a vital new place in modern world theatre" (Rai 21). Dattani has discerning eyes to identify the contemporary social issues and smell the perpetual clash between conventionality and modernity.

2. Conclusion

There is a rich and prosperous convention of drama which has been developed through ages. Mahesh Dattani has contributed to the main stream of Indian English Drama through his outstanding plays which provide an excellent commentary on contemporary social scenario. His plays have a fine fusion of feeling and form, matter and manner. They mirror the aspirations and frustration, conflicts and compromise that characterize the contemporary middle class Indian society. They highlight the pain of forced separation by making a new country and its lingering nasty effects that caused periodic communal riots. The most vital aspect of Dattani's plays is that they address the invisible issues of contemporary Indian society such as gender discrimination, plight of eunuchs, homosexuality and lesbianism. They focus on the ills of the society which make human life quite miserable generating conflicts between individual self and accepted and established norms of the society. The purport of the victory of the human spirit over social oppression connects all the issues in Dattani's plays. He tries to present the suffering and sobbing of the marginalized people particularly residing in our urban areas with a sense of insecurity, unrest and anxiety.

Works Cited

1. Das, Sangeeta. "Identity Crisis of Women in Tara." *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant. New Delhi: Prestige, 2005. Print.
2. Dharmani, Deepti. *Interpreting A Play: The Merchant of Venice & Developing Composition Skills*. Chennai: Macmillan, 2017. Print.

3. Halder, Santwana. "Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: A Study of Prejudice in Patriarchal Society". *The Dramatic World of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Exploration*. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2009. Print.
4. McRae, John. "A Note on the Play: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*." Introduction. *Collected Plays*. By Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
5. Mee, Erin B. "A Note on the Play: *Tara*." Introduction. *Collected Plays*. By Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
6. Muni, Bharata. *Natyashastra*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1996. Print.
7. Murthy, S. *In Search of Theatre*. New York: Vintage Books, 1953. Print.
8. Naik, M. K., ed. *Aspects of Indian Writings in English*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1999. Print.
9. Prasad, Amar Nath. "The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Fine Fusion of Feeling and Form." *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant. New Delhi: Prestige, 2005. Print.
10. ---. *Critical Essays: Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003. Print.
11. Ramana, M.V. *Collected Plays*. Madras: Pearl Publication, 1982. Print.
12. Tandon, Neeru, Ed. *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English drama*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006. Print.
13. Walling, Michael. "A Note on the Play: *Bravely Fought the Queen*." Introduction. *Collected Plays*. By Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
14. ---. "Gender and Performance in *Bravely Fought the Queen*". *Mahesh Dattani's Plays Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Angelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. Print.