

Mahesh Dattani's Views on English in Modern Indian English Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one of the leading playwrights of contemporary Indian English theatre. He deals with socially relevant topics which are very much Indian. His use of English also has a touch of distinct Indian flavour. It is simple, yet graceful. The immense popularity of his plays has something to do with his use of English language. In this paper I have tried to present his views on the use of English language in theatre and how it heralds a new dawn in the tradition of Indian English writing.

Keywords: English language, Indian English theatre, Indian English writing.

Article Publication

Published Online: 14-Feb-2021

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Research Review Journals

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1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is known as the harbinger of the new dawn of Indian English Theatre. He is special not only because of his dealing of new themes but also for his use of English as the medium of theatre. Indian drama has its origin in the Sanskrit theatre that dates back to the 5th Century B.C. However, drama is primarily a phenomenon of the twentieth century. In addition to dramas written in the twentieth century, a number of dramas from Bhasha literatures were translated into English. Dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar, Manoranjan Das, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad translated many plays into English.

So the question of the use of English comes to the fore. It cannot be denied that the issue of use of English as a medium of communication has always been a contentious issue. Girish Karnad, in an interview with Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar, has accepted that "writing in English about characters who are presumably speaking in an Indian language for audiences for whom English is a second language is not a situation conducive to great drama" (Dharwadkar, 1995: 365).ⁱ

Dattani was initially quite confused at this as is evident from his own playgroup 'Playpen' had started performing Greek tragedies and English plays. His effort of directing European plays in Hindi translation or regional plays in English translation did not satisfy his creative impulses. He started feeling the inadequacy of drama in reaching out to the mass.

He then started experimenting with theatre bringing in a revolutionary change in the dealing of theme as well as in the use of English which is more Indian than British. In 1986 he wrote *Where there is a Will* for the 'Deccan Herald Theatre Festival'. The play was received by the audience in an unprecedented way with 'laughter, laughter and laughter. The laughter of identification that I had craved for. I was elated when people came backstage in huge numbers congratulating me for writing something that they could identify with. They were all too tired of the fake accents on stage and the posturing that went on in the name of theatre in English. It looked like I had unwittingly pointed out that the Emperor had no clothes.'" (*Me and My Plays*, 19) ⁱⁱ

Dattani's success ensues from his faith in the fact that people have been trying to accept English as the language of the cities with more and more from the young generation preferring English than the vernacular. English is trying to come out of the shackles of

British strain and is gradually identifying itself as an Indian entity which can be used to express an Indian tale.

English was an import of the British rulers to run the system of administration and governance. It was so a colonial hegemony imposed upon India as colonialism not only deals with the realm of materialism but also with language, culture, religion and history among many others. Macaulay's Minutes on Education of February 1835 made it obligatory for the Indians to read English literature. The main aim was to produce an English educated generation which would be completely oblivious of its own great history and heritage. Many writers in pre and post Independent era could not come out of this shackle of thought. This dilemma has to some extent weakened the quality of the Indian English literature. Writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao in the post Independent era, and Raja Rammohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore in the pre Independent era were quite vocal about this. In his Selected Essays R.

K. Narayan has said- "We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own thought and idiom." (*Selected Essays*: 1988; 197)ⁱⁱⁱ

However, with the emergence of new interest in English after the departure of the British, the new Indian English writers found a fresh lease of air to use English in the most Indian way to express the thoughts hitherto expressed mostly in the vernacular. It was a kind of self-discovery which was completely without any kind of renitence. In the field of theatre playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mya Krishna Rao, Satish Alekar, B. Jayashree, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar, Asif Currimbhoy, Mnjula Padmanabhan and many others paved a new way to search for 'national theatre' aimed at highlighting a unique national identity. A new wave of detaching the tie from the Western theatre can be discerned.

Dattani's attitude towards the use of language and poetic license in a play can also very well be formed from the following quotation: "*Should the play be read in classrooms, I sincerely wish that English language teachers and staunch Wren and Martinites will not dismiss my syntax as bad English, or worse still, as incorrect. While knowledge of the rules of grammar is important, the richness and variety of the spoken word is a study in itself.*" (qtd. In Ramaswamy 278-279)^{iv}

Dattani's world remains very much Indian both thematically and linguistically. His characters are mostly urban middle class people fighting with the society or with the self. The characters do not appear alien to us in their English. Apart from the use of very simplistic English, Dattani uses many novel theatrical techniques like 'thought' and 'voice over' (instead of soliloquy). He never let go of the Indian flavour. Michael Walling while commenting on *Bravely Fought the Queen* in 'A Note on the Play' notes that "*His plays fuse the physical and the special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams.*" (Dattani, 2000, p229)^v

Mahesh Dattani's plays cover a wide range of subject matter. *Hijra* (eunuch) comes to the fore in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* which was broadcasted by BBC Radio 4 on January 1999. The gay theme of love, partnership, trust and betrayal become central in *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful*. *Ek Alag Mausam (A Different Season)* is about the HIV Positive patients. *Dance Like a Man* is about dance as a profession as well as vocation. *Morning Raga* is based on music. His radio plays like *Clearing the Rubbles* and *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* deal with human misery caused by natural disaster. *Final Solutions* deals with Hindu Muslim relationship. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is about an Indian joint family with intricate relationship among its members. During Sahitya Academy Award citations he was declared as a dramatist who "*.....probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender..... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.*" (Agarwal, 2011, page 184-185)^{vi}

The most important aspect of Dattani is his ability to deal with invisible and taboo issues like homosexuality, lesbianism, gender relationship, plight of the hijras, the complex relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim community among others. He delves deep into the psyche of the characters exposing their identity crisis with which middle class can easily identify. Family also comes to the fore in his plays in the most candid way as we see the breaking of the bond of family by mutual distrust, unfaithfulness, extra-marital relationship among others. Dattani was very much aware of the fact that plays are written mainly for the sake of stage performance. So we find lot of stage direction in his plays which often make the reading of the play quite tiresome. Shabana Azmi praises the screenplay of Dattani's plays in the following way. "Mahesh's screenplay makes emotional transitions between the lines rather than through the dialogue"^{vii}

So Dattani plays a very important role in taking Indian writers out of the dilemma they have been suffering in regard to the use of English as the mode of literary discourse. Authors like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore were concerned with it. In the Forward to *Kanthapura* (1938) Raja Rao's words find reality in the works of Dattani. Raja Rao wrote: "*The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own; the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omission of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not for our intellectual make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We*

cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.”^{viii}

Mahesh Dattani’s plays have tried to present an India with its reality in a very realistic mode of expression. His contribution lies in the fact he has shown enough guts to expose the taboo subjects and everyday problems. We cannot but face the reality in his plays which we tend to ignore in the real life. Apart from thematic innovation we also see the technical innovations made by Dattani in terms of stage direction and the use of language. He has brought forward ‘thought’ and ‘speech’ in order to represent subconscious and the conscious mind respectively. His use of conversational idioms is also an innovation. The generation playwrights will obviously take inspiration from him in their creative works.

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