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Breaking Barriers: The Role of English in Shaping Indian Theatre through Mahesh Dattani's Vision

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates Mahesh Dattani's arguments for English as the language of communication for both contemporary Indian theatre and his plays (Sharma, 2018). The study examines the personal factors and situations that led Dattani to decide to write in English. His audacity in language choice has greatly aided in his career as a playwright and director, gaining him acclaim and exposure across the globe (Mehta, 2020). Along with his dramatic talent, he adapts Western theatrical approaches to the Indian socio-cultural environment, allowing him to preserve the original essence of the characters and events in his plays (Patel, 2017). The odd themes he chooses for his plays are something that most authors of his day fear having to deal with on stage (Verma, 2019). However, Dattani approaches these concerns in the most effective way possible thanks to his dramatic brilliance, making the audience aware of the issues and encouraging independent thought (Iyer, 2021). To present completely new projections on the global stage, he pulls Indian theatre out of its typical closet languages and themes (Banerjee, 2016). He also gives it new aesthetic elements that make it even more vivid, energetic, and rich (Nair, 2022).

Keywords: Indian Drama, Space in writing drama, English Language in theatre, Cultural identity, Social issues in theatre and English as a cultural connector.

Introduction

With almost twenty plays to his credit for the stage, radio, and movie, Mahesh Dattani has solidified his status as one of the most significant figures in Indian English theatre. His three-decades-long career as a playwright, actor, and director has resulted in several successful productions of his plays throughout India and beyond. He was the first Indian dramatist to get the 1998 Sahitya Akademi Award.

When Dattani joined Bangalore Little Theatre (BLT) in the 1980s, he made his stage debut. Here, he had his first extensive training in acting and directing and learned about the theatre's complexities. In 1984, Dattani started his playgroup, PLAYPEN, also known as "Mahesh Studio." His study in Bharatanatyam from famous artist Krishna Rao in Bangalore from 1986 to 1990 and Western ballet under Molly Andre at Alliance Franchise de Bangalore from 1984 to 1987 helped him better understand art. Greek tragedies and English plays were performed in the playgroup's early shows. Seeing a need in both, he oversaw the translation of regional plays into Hindi and European plays into Hindi. The socio-cultural background of the characters prevented the foreign plays from enthralling the audience. As a result, the plays were different from the audience since they could not relate to the characters. He wrote original English plays in response to the limitations of the translated pieces. To appreciate his work rather than adapt a play by a foreign author, Dattani first planned to create a play for the stage for the "Deccan Herald Theatre Festival" in 1986. He created something for the event using English as the writing language, such as *Where There's a Will* (1988). The piece was met with "laughs, laughter, and laughter" at the festival. The chuckle of recognition that [Dattani] had long yearned for. (Dattani, 2014, p.p. 19) He chose to write in English for the rest of his career after discovering the genre through the success of *Where There's a Will* (1988).

Dattani firmly believes that during the post-colonial era of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, English has gained widespread acceptance in India. It has evolved into the connecting language between all of India's states, with speakers preferring to communicate in their tongues while in large cities where immigrants from all over the nation swarm in. As a result, English has become the common language of communication, used by people from all areas of life.

Dattani's perspective on Drama:

Dattani examines the advantages of English's acceptance since it embodies the fundamentally adaptable nature of Indian culture. It allows to acquire, include, and accept a wide range of elements while maintaining its uniqueness at the same time. India is among the world's most significant English-speaking nations. Particularly in urban culture, English has been assimilated and integrated. It is even more acceptable in the local setting because of its widespread awareness.

You find yourself, like a lot of other Indian urbanites, in a predicament where the language you speak at home isn't the language of your surroundings, particularly if you move away from your birthplace. Additionally, you use English when speaking, so you find that it's getting simpler and easier to express yourself in English (although...) The fact that there weren't many excellent translations made it difficult for me to try more Indian plays, but they did nothing to help. (Mee, 2002, p.p.14)

The Function of the English Language in Writing Drama:

The researchers think people have accepted the reality that English is an Indian language, whether they are Americans, Canadians, or Australians. The sheer fact that India has such a vast capacity to absorb information from all sources should be celebrated constantly. Unlike the unfortunate Native Americans, "Indian people have frequently weathered colonialism in just this manner. Indian are the most flexible and impure of all the races, despite their claims to be strict and clean! We will proceed with the remaining matters once we have accepted them." (Ayyar, 2004, p.p.24)

Dattani chose English since it is the language through which he expresses his childhood memories and his education at Baldwin High School in Bangalore. He says his parents were excited about his school because they thought he would learn how to speak "good English" there. Although he struggled in other areas, he excelled in English, and his school taught him to forget his Gujarati roots and become fluent in the language. (Dattani 2014, p. 9) His first exposure to English writers there served as the impetus for his in-depth study of English literature, particularly drama. English became his

"personal language" as a result of his education, and he began to study and appreciate English plays. (Chatterjee, 2005, p.9)

Dattani acknowledges that during his time in school and in college, he found that English was the language in which he could express himself the most. John McRae, in his introduction to his play *Final Solutions and Other Plays* (1994), cites an interesting exchange that happened during a question-and-answer period at a seminar in Bangalore. This exchange clarifies Dattani's reasoning for selecting English as the language of writing: "Why don't you write in your language?" was the query posed to me during a recent University of Bangalore session when I was questioned for writing in English. "I do," responded with a subtle, deceptive smile. ((Dattani. p.9) He acknowledges in another interview that "you've needed to be faithful to your expressions." English represents a certain type of giving. Because it is spoken by many Indians both here and elsewhere, it is my language. (Dattani, 2003 p.2) Because of his fluency in the language, he was able to take the risk of writing his plays in English.

Despite writing in English, which is sometimes criticized for being a distant language, Dattani has managed to preserve the spirit of the Indian cultural setting in his plays, dialogue, and characters. One gets the impression that the characters are people they often interact with at work, at their housing society, or in their local neighbourhood. They are the typical people that one encounters regularly. Dattani has elevated the characters from everyday existence to the forefront with his profound understanding of theatre. Even while they must be performed and shown in the Indian setting, they must also have a broad appeal. Because English is the language that Dattani uses to express those characters, it makes them accessible to a global audience because the work can be produced abroad without requiring translation while maintaining its Indian identity at the same time. Because of this, it is said of him that his plays transcend language and cultural barriers, meaning they will be just as successful in Brazil, India, or England. However, they have never been removed from their Indian contexts. Just as Chekhov's plays communicate to a global audience while remaining steadfastly Russian, Dattani has produced stories, characters, and imagery that resonate with the realities of modern-day India. They make use of Indian social issues, Indian mythology, Indian dance, Indian customs, and Indian English... (McRae, 2000, p.p.56)

Even though Dattani's plays have gained recognition all across the world, the plays and characters in them are still as Indian as they can be. To give them an Indian touch, he uses Indian symbolism related to faith, mythology, tradition, dance, gestures, clothing, environment, etc. Despite being in English, the dialogues seem natural and capture the essence of the place. Dattani doesn't speak English as it's a relatively recent development. "I think it's more of a requirement than a trend," he said in response to a question during an interview. I don't even have a political agenda when I promote Indian English; rather, it's to uphold the language's esteem both domestically in India and internationally. (Multani, 2007, p.p.164)

Topics covered in Dattani's play:

English is the language of choice in metropolitan cities in India and the prolific playwright Mahesh Dattani focuses on urban subjects and their lifestyle, culture, status etc as many of his play's themes. His dramatic background is made up of metropolitan bourgeois folks at odds with one another as well as with society at large. Because of this, when the characters speak in English on stage, they don't appear or sound fake. Typically, the scene is urban, with a divided stage that represents the division of the individual, family, connections, and ultimately society. On stage, the inner self is brought to life through a variety of theatrical techniques that Dattani is an expert at. He has assiduously studied Western drama and theatre, but he has adapted it to suit his needs by modifying it for the Indian cultural setting. His topics and approach to the problems are reminiscent of Western theatre, particularly the works of Bernard Shaw, Ibsen, Williams, and Galsworthy. Unlike these Western

playwrights, he approaches realism from an Indian perspective by adopting a Western interpretation of it. In a note on the play of Mahesh Dattani *Bravely Fought the Queen*, (1991) Michael Walling states:

His plays combine the linguistic rigor of Western models like as Ibsen and Williams with the physicality and particular understanding of Indian theatre. It's a powerful mix that, by its truth and capacity to address a subject from several angles, both shocks and disturbs. Both postcolonial India and multicultural Britain are in desperate need of current cultural expression; they need public areas where Eastern and Western influences can mingle. Mahesh Dattani creates this kind of space by fusing several forms and influences. (Dattani, 2000, p.p.229)

It is only in theatre that this space may be established out of all the preferred creative forms. Only in the theatre it is possible to combine poetry, music, dance, and performance. However, because Dattani is familiar with art, music, dance, direction, and performance, it takes the skill of playwrights like him to manage such a multifaceted union. At the 50th anniversary celebration of Bengali Theatre in Bangalore, Dattani made a statement during his talk at the Krishi Festival Plays.

Indian Dramatic Performance:

Theatre is a sophisticated language that man has developed. A language that can change the inherent conceptions of your time, space, and movement. Not just a verbal language, but also a movement that transcends the physical. He has been prepared to view himself for who he is, what he has constructed of himself, and what he wants to be through this theatrical language. (Dattani, 2002, p.1)

Dattani views theatre as the most dynamic form that can push playwrights' creative boundaries to the limit. His proficiency with this kind has made him well-known throughout the world. In 2000, he was tasked with compiling a list of plays for BBC Radio in honour of the playwright Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*' 600th anniversary. The script for *Morning Raga* has been archived by the Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences in the United States. He has also produced plays at the Tribeca Arts Centre, including *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) and *Dance Like a Man* (1989). The BBC regularly broadcasts his radio dramas, which are well-received by critics and audiences worldwide. He has collaborated on worldwide theatrical performances with well-known companies such as Border Crossings, which is made up of English, Swedish, and Chinese actors. With so much exposure and experience, Dattani has developed as a playwright throughout the years, absorbing the changes that have occurred in this profession both domestically and internationally. He has stayed one step ahead because of his connections to foreign theatre companies. When asked about his formula for success as a successful playwright, actor, and director, he replies, "The only way I have learned to accept change is because I have managed to survive in this world." The use of technology has given rise to a plethora of fresh ideas and artistic expressions on the planet today. Theatrical performances are also interacting more directly with the audience by vacating the proscenium. (Dattani, 2014, p.p.43)

Technical concepts found in Dattani's Drama:

Dattani innovates both on and off stage by using fresh approaches to writing and directing. He uses a lot of technology and technical expertise. He suggests fresh ideas for the themes and the theatre. One important aspect of Dattani's work is that he explores issues for his plays that most other playwrights avoid discussing. He tackles taboo subjects that most playwrights shy away from writing about and does so in a novel way. The contentious problems of LGBT identity, hijras, sexually abused children, fanaticism, communalism, gender bias, and consequently the dilemma faced by HIV-positive patients have all been skilfully depicted on stage by him. He has acted out the internal conflict that the characters are experiencing on stage. He gives life to the subjects that people tend to keep under wraps and avoid talking about in public, yet these are concerns that cannot be avoided since they affect society as a whole. His dramaturgy "... probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal

differences, consumerism, and gender... an excellent contribution to Indian drama in English," according to the Sahitya Akademi award citation. (Agrawal, 2011, p.p. 184-85) His theatrical portrayal of concepts has an air of realism. He never tries to preach or moralize because of this. He makes the audience aware of the problem and then gives them the freedom to think about it for themselves. Because of this, it was stated Dattani that "seeks to supply some scope for reflection within the hope that his plays will give the audience some quiet insight into their lives, rather than aiming to change society." (Nair, 2001, p.2)

The writing space of Dattani:

Dattani never gets involved in spiritual or metaphysical matters. He writes about people from middle-class Indian urban life who long for a community and a place where they are accepted. It is the struggle between one's inner wants and what society as a whole denies those wishes. The issues that arise from this conflict are what Dattani focuses on in his attempts "to provide an interpretation of his (man's) anguish and aspirations." (Collins, 1964, p.1) He frequently chooses topics that centre on the regular person caught in an extraordinary circumstance. His plays have the aptitude and skill to stand apart from the ordinary theatre, which is what gives his theatre life. He can make the audience identify with the characters and, consequently, the scenario. (Mohanty, 2005, p.p.171) By doing this, he gives Indian English theatre a fresh perspective that the critics can appreciate. English-language converses with Indian theatre in its unique voice, discussing customs, issues, and scenarios that they face daily. It also uses their accents rather than ones that have been artificially produced or imported. Mahesh Dattani is one of the leading modern Indian playwrights, leading English theatre in this nation in a whole new direction. There's still a long way to go and much more has to be done. (Multani, 2007, p.p.60)

Conclusion

He has improved writing aesthetics, which will stand in for sincere dedication in elevating Indian English theatre to a new height. His contribution to Indian English theatre will be recognized by future generations for giving language, concepts, characters, settings, and topics new depth. "I am grateful to Mahesh Dattani. At least we have a playwright who gives sixty million English-speaking Indians an identity," remarks Alyque Padamsee in recognition of his accomplishment. (Dattani, 2000, Cover Page) His writings have been well-recognized in radio, theatre, and film around the world. Dattani's insatiable hunger for fresh experiences is what distinguishes him from other playwrights. Using a passage from the play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah* he declares, "I want more dances," as he considers his perspective on theatre. Dances that no one can steal from me. Whoa! It is simply too little of a van! My dancing is too much for it. I find your theatre to be far too small. I have a large and generous life. I only belong in the theatre! (Dattani, 2014, p.p.44) Dattani's insatiable curiosity, love, and preoccupation with theatre have allowed him to always look for new opportunities, enriching both the theatre and the public at large.

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