

# Dramatic Paradigm Shift: Mahesh Dattani And The Transformative Landscape Of Indian English Theatre

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's huge effect on Indian English theatre broke with convention and ushered in a new age of innovative narrative tactics. He did this by breaking free from the limits of conventional storytelling. This investigation is centered on a comprehensive analysis of Dattani's ground-breaking works, each of which is a testament to his ability to disrupt societal conventions and provide unique ideas that speak to the complexities of modern Indian culture. The investigations are the basis of this research. Plays written by Dattani are vivid canvases on which societal standards are not only questioned but also confronted without fear. It is now possible to bring topics that were previously prohibited or confined to the margins of theatrical discourse to the forefront. This presents an opportunity for viewers to confront difficult realities and engage in in-depth conversations about a wide range of topics, including those pertaining to identity and sexuality, as well as family relationships and disagreements between different cultures. In this way, Dattani emerges as a pioneer who utilizes his expertise to criticize, provoke, and ultimately influence the societal debate in Indian English theatre. He does this by using his skill. The contributions made by Dattani have a profoundly transformative influence on the fundamental fabric of dramatic storytelling, and this effect is not limited to the analysis of themed content.

**Keywords:** societal conventions, Indian culture, Indian English theatre, transformative

## Mahesh Dattani and His Plays:

Having authored more than twenty plays for stage, radio, and television, Mahesh Dattani is one of the most well-known characters in Indian English theatre. For over thirty years, his plays have been presented all over the world. Plays by Dattani are renowned for their realistic dialogue and for the way he represents the intricacies of Indian society via language. He frequently uses Indian terms and expressions in his discourse, resulting in a language that is a combination of English and Indian. In addition to being true to the Indian experience, this language use subverts the idea of what is considered "proper" English.

Dattani's plays address topics including gender, sexuality, class, and religion; his use of words serves to emphasize India's rich cultural and linguistic variety. He demonstrates that Indian English is a legitimate and sophisticated style of communication by introducing Indian words and phrases into his discourse. The Indian audience was not enthralled by the foreign plays since they could not identify with the socio-cultural context of the plays. Because the existing, poor translations of plays were unappealing to the urban Indian audience, he composed plays in English. Dattani created his debut English play, *Where There is a Will*, for the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival in 1986. The play was praised by the festival attendees with "laughs, laughter, and laughter." The chuckle of recognition that I had long yearned for. (Page 19 of Dattani, 2014) Because of *Where There Is A Will's* success, he decided to focus on writing in English for the rest of his career.

## The Paradigm Shift:

In the post-colonial era of the 20th and 21st centuries, English, according to Dattani, has gained widespread recognition in India. All of India's states today use it as a uniting language, even though many people still prefer to talk in their native or regional languages, particularly in the major cities where immigrants from all over the nation congregate. Consequently, speaking English becomes normal and is welcomed in all spheres of

society. Dattani responds to this by saying:

Like many urban people in India, you're in a situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your home town. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you're more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English (but...) I wanted to do more Indian plays, (and that) became a challenge, because there weren't many good translations, but they didn't do anything for me. (Mee, 2002, p.14)

Dattani is also in favor of English's acceptability since it shows how Indian culture is essentially flexible and can absorb, integrate, and embrace a wide range of influences while maintaining its uniqueness. India is among the world's major English-speaking nations. Indian culture, especially the urban culture, has absorbed the English language. Because of its widespread acceptability, it is more acceptable locally. Dattani declares:

I really feel that people have come to terms with the fact that English is an Indian language! Just as it is American or Canadian or Australian. We should celebrate the fact that India has this enormous capacity to absorb from all sources. This is exactly how we have survived colonization, unlike the poor Native Americans. We may claim to be rigid and pure, but we are the most flexible and impure of all the races! The sooner we come to terms with that; we can get on with the rest. (Ayyar, 2004, p.24)

Dattani chose to write in English as a result of his upbringing and his schooling at Bangalore's Baldwin High School. His parents were pleased when he said that his school would teach him "good English." Although he was an average student overall, he excelled in English, and it was at school that he linguistically transitioned from Gujarati to English.

His engagement to English writers at that location provided the ground work for his in depth knowledge of English literature, particularly play. Because of his education, he is fluent in English, it results in English as his "personal language" and he started reading and enjoying English plays. (Chatterjee, 2005, p.9)

Throughout his academic career, Dattani admits that English has emerged as the language in which he feels most at ease communicating, both in high school and in college. In 1994, John McRae wrote a prelude to his play, *Final Solutions and other plays*, in which he related an interesting occurrence that happened during a Q&A session at a conference in Bangalore. This particular instance clarifies Dattani's decision to write in English, and McRae contends:

When challenged [for writing in English] at a recent seminar at the University of Bangalore [with the question], "why don't you write in your own language?" [Dattani's] reply, with a gentle disarming smile, was "I do". (McRae, p.9)

He also concedes in an interview that "you have to be true to your expressions." For me, English comes naturally to me. As it is to many Indians both here and overseas, it is my language. Dattani (2003), page two Because he is fluent in English, he has taken the most audacious step by writing his plays in that language. Dattani has succeeded in encapsulating the spirit of the Indian cultural environment in the characters, conversations, ideas, and subject matter of his plays, while writing in English, which is considered a foreign language. His characters are people he meets at the housing society, people he works with, or people he interacts with on a regular basis. They are common individuals. Dattani's grasp of theatre has allowed the characters to take center stage. Even though they are performed and viewed in an Indian context, they are well-liked everywhere. Because he designed these characters in English, which does not require translation, everybody in the world may understand them. About him, it is said that:

His plays speak a cross linguistic and cultural divides; they will work equally effectively in England or Italy, India or Brazil. Yet they need 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 reality of India today. They use Indian mythology, Indian traditions, Indian dance, Indian English, and Indian social problems... (McRae, 2000, p.56)

Dattani has achieved international recognition, although his plays and characters are still very much of an Indian identity. He adds Indian symbols of dance, gestures, dress, mythology, culture, and so on to give them an Indian flavor. Despite being in English, the conversations seem natural and have a distinct local flavor. Since speaking English is a new fad, Dattani does not speak it. During an interview, he responded as follows:

I think it's more of a need than a trend. It is not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture, so it has to be given its respect in India and in the world. (Multani, 2007, p.164)

Since English is the language of urban India, Dattani concentrates on urban issues. His eventful upbringing is characterized by an urban middle class that is in conflict with both society and itself. Because of this, the characters do not seem or sound fictitious when they talk in English on stage. The location is usually an urban one, and the divided stage represents the divided ego, family, relationships, and society. Dattani uses a range of skillfully applied theatrical methods to bring the inner self to life on stage. He has drawn much from western theatre, yet he has modified it for the Indian cultural setting via his own works. Western theatre, especially the plays of Tennessee Williams, John Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw, and Henrik Ibsen, has affected his method of problem-solving. He sets himself apart from these Western writers by applying Western realism to an Indian setting. In "A Note on the Play" of *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Michael Walling reported: His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models 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 multi perspectives. Post colonial India and multi cultural Britain both have an urgent need for cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in

which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through this fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. (Dattani, 2000, p.229)

And only theatre, out of all the popular creative forms of art, can make this space. Poetry, music, dance, and performance are all blended only in theatre. But a marriage with this many facets need skilled writers like Dattani, who has a background in acting, directing, music, and the arts. Dattani presented the following case during his address at the Krishi Festival Plays to commemorate Bangalore's Bengali Theatre's 50th anniversary: Man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language, that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical. Through this language of theatre, he has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has, made of himself and what he aspires to be. (Dattani, 2002, p.1)

According to Dattani, theatre is the most dynamic art form capable of pushing writers' aesthetic limitations to the utmost. His connections with international theatre groups have allowed him to stay one step ahead of the competition. In response to a query concerning his recipe for success as a screenwriter, actor, and director, he says:

I have learnt to embrace change as the only way to survive in the world. Today the world is filled with new ideas and new art forms emerging from the use of technology. Theatre too is moving out of the proscenium and speaking more intimately with the audience. (Dattani, 2014, p.43)

Dattani experiments with writing and directing to create new works both on and off stage. He makes extensive use of information, technology, and tools. He creates fresh approaches to themes and theatre. Dattani's work stands out because, unlike other writers, he tackles unusual subjects for his plays. He takes a fresh approach to writing about taboo subjects that other writers shy away from. He makes topics that people shy away from discussing in public more relatable, yet they still need to be addressed since they affect society. He is acknowledged as a playwright who "...probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism, and gender ... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English." (Agrawal, 2011, p.184-85)

There's a genuineness to the way he presents issues on stage. This is the reason he never tries to preach or moralize. After bringing the audience's attention to the issue, he takes a backseat and allows them to consider it independently. This is the rationale behind the mention of Dattani: "He aims not at changing society but only seeks to offer some scope for reflection in the hope that his plays will give the audience some kind of insight into their lives." (Nair, 2001, p.2)

Philosophical and spiritual concerns are of no interest to Dattani. He writes about the middle-class, everyday Indian living in urban areas who is looking for a place that is widely accepted. It is the conflict that emerges between a person's inner aspirations and how society around them suppresses those impulses. This paradox causes challenges, and Dattani's efforts to resolve these concerns make up the subjects of his work. "...to supply an interpretation of his (man's) anguish and aspirations." (Collins, 1964, p.1)

The themes he often selects are regarding the common man caught up in uncommon situation of daily life. His ability to make the audience identify with the characters and the situation has given his plays the power and ability that they stand apart from the mundane theatre and that is what makes his theatre alive. (Mohanty, 2005, p.171)

He adds fresh perspectives to Indian English theatre, enabling critics to remark:

Indian theatre in English is speaking to us in its own distinctive voice, of traditions, of problems and situations which we encounter in our daily lives, and it is speaking in our own accents, not borrowed or cultivated ones. There is still a long way to go and much more needs to be done, but Mahesh Dattani is emerging as one of the foremost Indian contemporary playwrights, taking English theatre in this country in a completely new direction. (Multani, 2007, p.60)

His expansion of literary aesthetics would be beneficial to the Indian English Theatre as it aspires to greater heights. In the future, historians will acknowledge his impact on Indian English theatre and the English language as having broadened the range of language, ideas, characters, settings, and subjects. He receives congratulations from Alyque Padamsee for his achievement, adding, "At least, we have a playwright that gives sixty million English-speaking Indians an identity. Thank you, Mahesh Dattani!" (Dattani, 2000, CoverPage)

Worldwide performances, stage adaptations, film adaptations, and radio broadcasts of his compositions have all taken place. Dattani stands out from other writers due to his insatiable curiosity, which drives him to always seek for the novel and intriguing. He utilizes a sentence from Nazia's performance in the play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?* to clarify his viewpoint on theatre. "I want more dances. Dances, that nobody can take from me. Oh! This van is too small! It can't take my dancing. Your cinema is too small for me. My life is BIG and GENEROUS. Only the theatre deserves me!" (Dattani, 2014, p.44)

Because of his ardor, desire, and fascination with theatre, Dattani has always been able to explore new potential possibilities, which has enhanced both theatre and the world at large. Dattani's achievement has been made possible by his infatuation with theatre.

### Conclusion:

Beyond his career as a playwright, Mahesh Dattani is remembered in Indian English theatre as a visionary who reinterpreted the fundamental nature of the theatrical experience. His venture into inventive narrative turns into a potent force that fundamentally alters the Indian English theatre scene. By carefully examining social conventions and modern settings, Dattani has emerged as a force for reform, upending long-held beliefs and clearing the path for a more vibrant and welcoming theatre.

Dattani's capacity to question conventional narratives and take on topics that were previously taboo or confined to the periphery of public conversation is one of his greatest contributions. His plays take on the role of a mirror reflecting the changing cultural dynamics of modern-day India, giving viewers a forum to discuss and consider the complexities of relationships, identity, and societal systems. In addition to having a real resonance, Dattani's stories create new thematic avenues for inquiry into the human condition, so promoting a deeper and more varied examination of it.

Dattani shines as a light at the nexus of tradition and modernity, demonstrating the potential of Indian English theatre as an engaging and adaptable platform for cross-cultural dialogue. His creations act as a link between the past and the present, giving viewers a perspective from which to comprehend the nuances of a society that is changing quickly. The plays of Dattani have had a lasting influence, which highlights their importance in the continuous development of Indian theatre and supports the idea that theatre is more than just a kind of amusement but also an essential forum for social reflection and cultural analysis.

Serving as a trailblazer, Mahesh Dattani's efforts bleed into the national consciousness of a country undergoing change, even off the stage. His plays are well-liked by audiences not just for their creative value but also for their capacity to elicit thought, debate, and discourse. Within the wider artistic environment, Dattani's impact serves as evidence of the storytelling's transformational potential and the theatre's ability to spark social change.

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