

The Making of Mahesh Dattani as a Dramatist: Influences and Impressions

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Abstract:

Writing plays in English and their performance before Indian audience is undoubtedly a challenging task. Mahesh Dattani took this arduous task in his hand with pleasure. There is really magic in writing own destiny. Dattani did this magic though it was a bit tough task. Today, Dattani is recognized as Numero Uno so far as Indian English drama is concerned. But the journey from an ordinary person to a celebrated dramatist is no way a cup of tea to undertake. The time he started writing, drama was not a popular form among home audience. He faced numerous criticisms for the treatment of controversial and unusual themes and hybrid language in his plays. He exploited both Indian Tradition and Western Tradition for theoretical practice. He thus made a fine balance among theme, language and stage craft in his plays, making them acceptable in home as well as abroad. To achieve zenith from nadir, he did not simply followed the radical approach. His dyeing interest in watching play, family environment, influences of various playwrights and many other factors have helped him immensely to achieve his goal. A successful play and playwright achieves prominence not simply because of his intrinsic merit but because of the work of mediators, who influence the whole trajectory of a playwright.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Writing plays in English and their performance before Indian audience is undoubtedly a challenging task. Mahesh Dattani took this arduous task in his hand with pleasure. There is really magic in writing own destiny. Dattani did this magic though it was a bit tough task. Today, Dattani is recognized as Numero Uno so far as Indian English drama is concerned. But the journey from an ordinary person to a celebrated dramatist is no way a cup of tea to undertake. The time he started writing, drama was not a popular form among home audience. He faced numerous criticisms for the treatment of controversial and unusual themes and hybrid language in his plays. He exploited both Indian Tradition and Western Tradition for theoretical practice. He thus made a fine balance among theme, language and stage craft in his plays, making them acceptable in home as well as abroad. To achieve zenith from nadir, he did not simply followed the radical approach. His dyeing interest in watching

play, family environment, influences of various playwrights and many other factors have helped him immensely to achieve his goal. A successful play and playwright achieves prominence not simply because of his intrinsic merit but because of the work of mediators, who influence the whole trajectory of a playwright.

II. MAIN RESULTS

Mahesh Dattani's contribution in the Indian English theatre is very remarkable. Mahesh Dattani is an Indian English playwright, actor, widely regarded as one of the greatest writers in Indian English Literature. Today without Dattani we cannot imagine the Indian theatre. He is the only man who re-shapes the modern theatre in his own style. The making of Mahesh Dattani as a playwright is an intrepid and inspiring episode in the history of Indian English drama. Dattani achieved this distinction not simply because of his merits but also because of the influences of his father and forefather in this field. Actually, it is a common trait of all

artists that they are influenced by other artists knowingly or unknowingly. In this regard, Mahesh Dattani is no exception. Encyclopedia Britannica mentions:

Playwrights are affected, consciously or unconsciously, by the conditions under which they conceive and write, by their own socioeconomic status, by personal background, by religious or political position, and by their purpose in writing. The literary form of the play and its stylistic elements will be influenced by tradition, a received body of theory and dramatic criticism, as well as by the author's innovative energy (Web).

There are many factors those have influenced Dattani to write plays. He frequently visited theatre at his early age and ultimately he became a great fan of theatre which made him as one of the distinguished playwright of India. From the very beginning he used to participate in the plays that performed at school. He never missed to watch the live programme on stage. His heart and mind was fully involved and attracted by the audio-visual devices, the dialogues and the characters that are used in the stage. All the theatrical devices attract him and get inspiration to write and performed plays. In an interview with Tuntun Mukherjee Dattani mentioned about his inspiration to write plays, which is as follows:

I participated in the usual school plays and skits but I always yearned to direct performances. I realized that there must be a script for a performance. That's why I started writing - not very serious stuff though, initially. I watched a play whenever I could. Every time there was a group from Bombay or Ahmadabad staging a play in Bangalore, it became a community event that we would all attend. I remember a play I saw as a child at Ravindra Kalakshetra that fascinated me. It used the "play within the play" concept that I'd never seen before and a dramatic finale that took place in the auditorium. The teasing tone, the costume and make-up, the lights -- were all bright and loud yet I was utterly captivated. I later learnt that it was Madhu Rye's *Koi Pun Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo* (Tell me the name of a flower). He is a sensational playwright. I got the chance to see his other plays, especially *Kumarni Agashe* (Kumar's Terrace), also in Hindi as *Neela Kamra*, in Bombay. Then the Bangalore Little Theatre was formed and I became seriously involved in acting, directing and

writing plays. I learnt much from Vijay Padaki in the early years. I started my own theatre studio after a few years (25).

Mahesh Dattani is not only a dramatist but also a director. He has directed and acted in many of his plays. He first performs his play at his Playpen, a theatre company. He is the student of History. The plays of other artists are also first performed there and necessary modifications are made in them. Like Nissim Ezekiel, Dattani is not a student of literature, yet he writes plays without facing any problems so the questions arise in our mind that what makes him to write a play and where he gets the language to write dialogue that touch our heart. When Dattani was a young student of college, some theatre group used to perform Gujarati plays in Bangalore. He used to visit the theatre and watch the plays in the company of his family. He enjoyed very much watching these plays and find inspiration to write plays. He was very sensitive to watch the plays and also receives an indelible impression of theatrical performance. It is here who gets inspiration first time for dramas. It sustained his interest of watching Gujarati and Kannada plays for a longer period. He admits:

I didn't know the world at my doorstep. I got involved in theatre and for a long time continued to Gujarati Theater in Mumbai, I realized I had to unlearn a lot that I learnt in school. That is when my true education really began (Ayyar).

Dattani has been impressed by the works of many prominent writers. Basically he is influenced by the works of Madhu Rye, Edward Albee and Indian playwright, Vijay Tendulkar. Dattani has educated with the western education which helps him to go through the works of great writers like Henry Ibsen, G. B. Shaw, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and O' Neil. The non-detailed text of Shakespeare also influenced him at his early stage. All the writers write on the social issues which impact him fervently and he gets inspiration from their writings. Thus, he is influenced by many British, American and Indian dramatists. Some of the playwrights who have inspired him have been pointed out by him in an interview:

The playwright Madhu Rye influenced me a great deal in his portrayal of middle class Gujarati hypocrisies. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence!* the Court is in Session and Saktharam Binder impressed me

with their complex portrayal of women characters (Subramanyam 134).

Dattani is largely influenced by Edward Albee and Madhu Rye, famous playwrights. According to a theatre person Ashis Sengupta, Dattani was impressed after reading one of the greatest American playwrights Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). It urged him to write play. Mahesh Dattani read Albee's play *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in his early life. He was very much impressed with the play and decided to write play. *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the first full length play of Albee. The story of the play is extended over three acts- 'Fun and Games', 'Walpurgisnacht: Sabbath of the Witches' and 'The Exorcism'. It is a three act play. Mahesh Dattani designed his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* as a model of Albee's *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The play has three acts where he dramatizes like 'The Women', 'The Men' and 'Free for All'. In the play *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee examines the failure of marriage of an aged couple, George and Martha. George is an associate professor of History in an establishment College in New Carthage in New England, USA. He married Martha who is the daughter of the President of the college where George worked. She was six years senior to her husband George. They are both failure in their life. George is a failure as a professor and Martha is a failure as a wife. As a woman Martha was failure because she could not give birth to any child. Martha was frustrated and exploited by her husband. George does not care Martha. She has remained a childless woman and a 'shopping' housewife without any identity of her own. She could not get identity from her husband also. So she has become a highly frustrated, vulgar and drunken woman. Dattani in his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* presents Alka who was exploited by her husband. She is like Martha humiliated by her husband Nitin. Alka was unable to give birth to any baby. She, like Martha drank heavily. As a husband Nitin is failure and as a wife Alka is also failure. They are both failure in their life.

Another great writers like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Henry Ibsen and G. B. Shaw have influenced Dattani by their dramatic craft, themes and technique which provide his intellectual

depthness and sharpen him to bring out the different social problems through his writings.

The famous American playwrights Tennessee Williams, Eugene O' Neil and Arthur Miller have influenced him mainly on the matter of stage craft. Their plays paved way to make Dattani a great master of stage craft. Dattani was also influenced by the British dramatists William Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw. He has followed the dramatic techniques used by them and fuses in his own plays. But he did not follow the American or British tradition of stage craft. His mind and soul always are in Indian setup. He has a strong feeling of Indianness. He has read many western writers. However, he uses Indian dramatic devices, techniques etc. in his plays in a very precise measure. The important feature of his plays is that he does not follow the western dramatic convention. In one of the interview with Bijay Kumar Das he answered about the dramatic tradition:

Unfortunately I was educated in a school where there was little or no stress on Indian literature and drama. So my earliest influences are non-detailed texts of Shakespeare and BBC recordings of Shakespeare's plays with heavy English accents (Das 176).

Expressionistic technique used by Dattani owes to Tennessee William and Arthur Miller. The realistic technique demands that an appearance of real life situation is presented on the stage. The dramatic devices, such as music and lighting are used by Miller in the play *Death of the Salesman* which is the part of the expressionist technique. Dattani also used such technique in his plays. Maheah Dattani is the Shakespeare of Indian English drama. He followed the expressionistic technique like Miller, O'Neill. Expressionism is the technique that chosen by Dattani to show the contemporary urban family struggle of India. Dattani fuses the dramatic techniques used by Shakespeare, Eugene O' Neil and G.B Shaw in the play *Where There's a Will*. He has taken ghost to present the hidden reality and also uses dramatic monologue to expose the inner-self of the characters. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses ghost as a supernatural agent which perform the pivotal to disclose the murder of King Hamlet. If the ghost did not disclose the truth of the murder then nobody knows the truth about the death of King Hamlet and did not take revenge of his father's death. The ghost

appears and tells the truth of his murder to Prince Hamlet. His death was not an accident but a planned murder by his own brother Claudius and his wife Gertrude. The ghost appears to instigate his son Hamlet to take revenge of his father's murderer. But Dattani uses the spirit of Hasmukh that appear in the play just to watch the execution of his Will. His idea is not to take revenge. He was not satisfied with the work of his son Ajit, daughter in law Preeti and his wife Sonal. He just makes a will to correct them. He did not believe his son that he could not handle the business properly. In this regard it should be mentioned that Dattani follows the technique as used by G. B. Shaw in the play Saint Joan.

Dattani's favourite playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have helped him a lot in the preferences of theme also. The Glass Menagerie by William and All my Sons by Arthur Miller are plays of family tension. These plays are regarded as dramas of family relationship. Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie draws the theme of the father and son. The playwright describes a pitiable condition of the family in an artistic manner. In the play Tennessee Williams describes the four characters. They have their own dreams. They have faced the realities of life in the modern artificial world. The dramatist describes about the family who has fell in the conflict of life and finds no way to come out of the disturbances of life. They are victimized by the cruelty of time. They have lost all the things in their life. Now they are in the illusion. In Death of a Salesman Miller also filled out with a detailed evocation of modern urban lower middle class life. Miller has discussed the relationship between Willy and Biff - father and son. Willy and Biff relationship forms the crux of the play. Their relationship represents the modern and traditional value in the play. Biff represents the modern and Willy represents the age old value. The dramatist shows the conflict between father and son. These plays deal with relations between the mother and the son, the father and the son, the husband and the wife, brothers and sisters and so on.

Dattani presented various relationships in his plays to reveal the social status of the people. Like Williams and Miller, Dattani brilliantly portrays the relationship between the mother and the son, the father and the son, the husband and the wife, brothers and sisters and so on. Family relations and

father son relationship are predominant theme in his plays. He portrayed the two distinct worlds. The father-son relationship emerges as one of the predominant themes in his plays. Hasmukh Mehta, Amritlal Parekh, and Chandrakant Patel represent the figure of father on the contrary Ajit, Jairaj, and Alpesh represent the sons of rebellious character. He has shown the father-son conflict in his play Where There's a Will and the mother-daughter relation in Tara. He learned the technique how to create the characters as memorable as Tennessee had used in his plays to present the character lively. Dattani is adept at fusing form and influence for creating a 'space'. Michael Walling observes:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. Post-colonial India and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern western influences can take place. Through his fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. This is in itself a political and social statement of astonishing force (Dattani CP-I 229).

Athhur Miller's influence is obvious in Dattani's writings as Miller presented inter-generational conflicts in his plays which have attracted Dattani. It is also seen the inter-generational conflict in the plays of Dattani. Miller has presented the older generation in his plays All My Sons and Death of a Salesman. Joe and Kate represent the older generation in All My Sons and Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman. It reminds us the father of Hasmukh Mehta and Amritlal Where There's a Will and Dance Like a Man in the plays of Dattani. The play Tara, according to Dattani, (introduction to the play) had been inspired by Tennessee William's play The Glass Menagerie, which is based on Tennessee William's real-life story. Tara was physically challenged girl like Laura daughter of Amanda in The Glass Menagerie. Such influence and concept bring two different societies: American and Indian at the same level. It is common that the girl child born in an Indian family they should suffer some kind of exploitation. But the fact is that the parents gave importance to the son and the girls are consciously or unconsciously deprived of the privileges that provided to the son in Indian society.

Dattani also draws his inspiration from Indian dramatists Vijay Tendulkar and GirishKarnad. He was so much impressed with the complex portrayal of women characters by the famous playwright Vijay Tendulkar. Dattani is influenced by his play *Silence! the Court is in Session* and *Shakaram Binder*. The original name of the play is *Shantata Chalu Ahe*. Dattani's presentation of society is like that of Tendulkar who presents a world apparently dominated by male chauvinists. Dattani is influenced by the hypocrisy of the middle class society the presentation of female in the plays *Silence the Court is in Session* and *Sakharam Binder*. Tendulkar portrayed the male dominated society in both the plays: the society that has double standard in the treatment of women. The male dominated society does not realize the emotion of the women. He just uses them. Dattani has dramatized same treatment to her women characters in his plays.

Dattani is also influenced by Henrik Ibsen, who is considered as the Father of Modern Drama. He has been called a pioneer in the theatre of Modern realism because his Problem plays attacks heavily on the contemporary social issues and maladies. A Doll's House by Ibsen can be termed a problem play for in it the playwright discusses the vital issue of husband-wife relationship. The problem centres on a key domestic issue – that of the status of a woman in relation to her husband and her home. Dattani like Ibsen discusses the issues of husband-wife relationship in his play *Bravely Fought the Queen*. No doubt both the play deal with gender relations in modern society and stress importance on the need for a new found freedom for woman.

Dattani is influenced by the British playwright George Bernard Shaw. Like George Bernard Shaw, Dattani's plays deal with the burning social and political problems e.g., religious tension, communal disharmony, child sexual abuse, lesbianism, sexuality and gender discrimination. That is why, Alyque Padamsee, the well-known stage director calls him one of the 'most serious contemporary playwrights'. Dattani is fascinated by the play *Candida* where Shaw presents the idea of marriage and the status of women in the society which are same idea as present by Dattani in his play *Where There's a Will*. Shaw noticed the problems of family, love, marriage and sex-relations and presents these issues in his plays. Shaw's aim is to write

plays where he reflects the important aspect of contemporary social life and the social evil. He also exposes the hollowness of romantic love in the play *Candida*. Though Dattani and Shaw culturally different and belongs to different country yet they dedicated themselves to art for life's sake.

Dattani very frequently uses the theory of drama propounded by Brecht. Brecht is one of the most prominent figures of the contemporary culture. Brecht developed the 'Alienation Effect' in 1920's and 1930's. 'Defamiliarisation' and 'Alienation' are two terms that Brecht used to denote 'distancing', 'estrangement', or 'defamiliarisation'. Brecht's tries to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality by using the stage devices like induction, prologue, play-within the play, direct speech, aside, music, dance, lighting, documentary effect etc. . Like other prominent dramatists of India such as Pratap Sharma, Asif Currimbhay, GirishKarnad, Mahesh Dattani is also influenced by the strategy of Brechtian Epic Theatre and communicate a direct link between the spectator and the spectacle and also make a distance between the audience and the happenings that is going on the stage.

Like Brecht, Dattani wanted a change in the world by raising the new problems that are faced by the people but not touched the hearts of others. He tries to refresh the mind of the audience by portraying the various aspects of society and the family relationships that he presents in his plays which touched the heart of the people. He has taken the responsibility of the society so he dramatizes the socially neglected people. Dattani has a bird's eye. He keenly observed the marginalized section and finds out the sole reason of their marginalization and presents them to the readers as well as the audience. Hijras (eunuchs), gays, lesbians and women are marginalized sexually. Hijras are considered the third gender who are deprived of all rights. They are compelled to bear suffering because they are biologically deprived human beings. Gays and lesbians keep their sexuality a secret for fear of exclude from the society. Basically women suffer mostly in the society in one way or other. Dattani is captured with these 'fringe' issues and describes such themes that he concerns very seriously.

The most important thing is that Dattani is influenced by the Indian society. His heart is throbbled when he noticed the different sort of issues

and his mind starts reacting to write and presents them to the audience so that they can learn the outcry of the deprived section of people that they are living in the society by hiding their inner-self from the others.

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