Prioritizing the Invisible:
A Study of the Select plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Ms Farha Deeba Shafiq

Under the Supervision of

Dr Iffat Maqbool

Department of English
University of Kashmir, Hazartbal, Srinagar
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Certificate

Certified that the dissertation entitled **Prioritizing the Invisible: A Study of the Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani** submitted by Ms Farha Deeba Shafiq for the award of **M Phil Degree in English**, is an original research work carried out by her under my supervision. This dissertation has not been submitted, in part or in full, to any University/Institution for any degree or diploma. The candidate has fulfilled all the statutory requirements for the submission of the dissertation.

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Supervisor
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Introduction
Indian drama has had a rich and ancient tradition: the *natyashastra* being the oldest of the texts on the theory of drama. The dramatic form in India has worked through different traditions—the epic, the folk, the mythical, the realistic etc. The experience of colonization, however, may be responsible for the discontinuation of an indigenous native Indian dramatic form.

During the immediate years following independence, dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Dharamvir Bharati et al laid the foundations of an autonomous “Indian” aesthetic—a body of plays that helped shape a new “National” dramatic tradition. It goes to their credit to inaugurate an Indian dramatic tradition that interrogated the socio-political complexities of the nascent Indian nation. However, it’s pertinent to point out that these playwrights often wrote in their own regional languages like Marathi, Kannada, Bengali and Hindi and only later translated their plays into English.

Indian English drama per se finds its first practitioners in Shri Aurobindo, Harindarnath Chattopadhyaya, and A.S.P Ayyar. In the post-independence era, Asif Curriumbhoy (b.1928) is a pioneer of Indian English drama with almost thirty plays in his repertoire. However, owing to the spectacular success of the
Indian English novel, Drama in English remained a minor genre and did not find its true voice until the arrival of Mahesh Dattani. Dattani (b.1958), a Bangalore-based playwright belongs to the tribe of literary entrepreneurs to whom English is a first language, devoid of any self-conscious postcolonial unease. Asked why he does not write in his own language Dattani quipped: “I do”. This points to that complete internalization of English by a generation of Indians, spoken without premeditation and completely “Indianised”. Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian English dramatist who wrote Indian plays in English and was not content with the usual western canonical texts that were generally performed when he founded his own theatre company -Playpen in 1984. The first English playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award, in recognition of his “probing of tangled attitudes in contemporary India . . .” the citation also describes his work as “a brilliant contribution to Indian English drama” (quoted in Das 2003: 126).

Mahesh Dattani is a path-breaking Indian dramatist who takes taboo subjects centre stage and “kicks up a storm within the four walls of an auditorium” (Ali online). Mahesh Dattani’s plays are most remarkable for the portrayal of contemporary urban living in India. He probes and unearths some compelling social realities that are otherwise silenced by an orthodox normative patriarchal
order: whether it’s the problem of gender discrimination, familial affiliations, alternative sexuality or communalism. Dattani excels in tackling social concerns through a brilliant use of language and stagecraft. His commitment to give voice to the marginalized is evident in his plays that often are constructed around social issues though not on any specific, sermonizing message. His own remark is worthwhile:

The function of drama in my opinion is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It’s ugly but funny.

(quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 26).

This study accordingly has tried to explore Mahesh Dattani as a playwright with a strong social conscience, a painter of the modern Indian metropolis that pulsates with strong undercurrents of the alternative, bitter realities that often coexist, cheek by jowl with the façade of urban middle-class living in India. His unearthing of some of the taboo-ridden aspects of modern Indian living and his ingenious dramatization of the same makes him an avant-garde Indian dramatist. This study has accordingly analyzed Dattani’s use of unconventional themes as well as theatrical techniques.
Dattani has been studied as a major exponent of the Realistic mode of dramatic representation who relies on contemporary urban social experience as an appropriate subject of drama and theatre. His forging of a new dramatic idiom to portray the face of “modern” India results in a new postcolonial genre, alive to the remaking and reinventions of the post-independence modern Indian state.

The initial survey done on Mahesh Dattani reveals that a good number of books and articles have been written on his plays by critics, research scholars and academicians teaching in different universities in India. For example Angelie Multani has written a critical anthology *Mahesh Dattani’s Plays: Critical Perspectives*. This work explores and evaluates the aesthetic of Dattani’s plays. Similarly Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri’s *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*, provides an exhaustive introduction to Mahesh Dattani. She explores Dattani’s central themes while examining the dramaturgical innovations in his work. “Subaltern Sexualities in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani” an article by Dr. Ibrahim Khalilulla, evaluates the plays of Dattani showing how subaltern sexualities face threat or violence because of their position in the society. Reena Mitra’s article “Mahesh Dattani’s *Final Solutions* and other plays” examines Dattani’s thematic concern focusing how Dattani
is a playwright with distinctive vision. “The plays of Mahesh Dattani: A fine fusion of feeling and form” by Amar Nath Prasad is a brief analysis of Dattani’s three plays and shows that the author is bestowed with a special gift of fusing feeling with form, thereby turning the play into art or in Eliot’s terminology “an emotional equivalent.”

The present study focuses on the social aims that Dattani takes up in his stage plays. In my initial survey, I traced that a fairly good amount of work has been done on the dramatist. But a full-fledged exhaustive discussion has not yet been properly attempted or has been overtly referred to in passing. To achieve this end, the dissertation has been divided into four main chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion.

The first Chapter titled, “Indian English Drama Post-1947: An Overview” introduces the major pre-independence dramatists and their major works. But mainly this chapter mainly focuses on post-independence English dramatists. An attempt has been made to trace the history of Indian dramatists after independence vis-à-vis their major themes and the medium of language used by them. In this chapter, a clear distinction has been made regarding the medium of language these dramatists used. In this chapter I have
mainly tried to answer my first research question: the trajectory that Indian English drama followed since 1947.

The second chapter titled, “Rejecting the Normative Order: Tara and Where There’s a Will” begins with an introduction of Mahesh Dattani as a dramatist and why his plays should be studied as a cultural expression on some contemporary urban realities rather than a dramatic literature to be enjoyed for some aesthetic pleasure. In Tara, the narrative gathers momentum as the tenuous strands in family relationships and gender equations begin to unravel. And in Where There’s a Will, so called stereotypes and behavioral patterns have been deconstructed from the expected format, building up a tension within the dramatic context and ends in the classic Dattani denouement. In this chapter two of his plays Tara and Where There’s a Will have been studied extensively in order to show how Mahesh Dattani has succeeded in dramatizing contemporary urban conflicts through his plays.

Chapter Three, “Centering the Taboo: Bravely Fought the Queen and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai” continues the discussion that how family in Indian middle-class is a limited parochial group: where Dattani exposes the hypocrisies through his dramatic art. Also, in this chapter I have highlighted how Dattani takes up taboo
subject on the stage and unearths the hollowness of contemporary urban living in India.

Chapter Four, “Revitalizing a Tradition: Dattani’s contribution to Indian English Drama” refers to the general position of Dattani’s dramatic art as evidenced in his plays, signaling a new phase in the naturalization of English as a theatre medium in India.

In the “Conclusion”, an attempt has been made to sum up the main arguments of the dissertation and further undertakes a discussion of Mahesh Dattani’s latest plays.
Chapter I

Indian English Drama post-1947: An Overview

Major Indian Dramatists
There were two formative theoretical influences on Indian theatre during the colonial period: the Western canon, best represented by Shakespeare, and the canonical national theatre consisting of the classical sanskrit plays of Kalidasa, Shudraka, Bhasa, Bhavabhuti, Bhatta Narayana, Vishakhadutta, Harsha and the ancient treatise on dramaturgy, Bharata’s *Natyashastra*. The latter playwrights based their plays on the themes of Hindu epics and the puranas; however Indian dramatic activity may have ceased due to foreign invasions. Therefore, with the arrival of the British the gradual spread of English education and Western ideas brought forth a band of earnest Indians who M K Naik writes, “drank deep at the fountain of European leaning” (1984:8). This consummation was not, however, achieved before the British policy concerning the education of Indians had passed through two diametrically opposed stages. To begin with, for almost a generation after the East India Company had virtually become the *de facto* ruler of Bengal, the Government had no official education policy, probably because at that time, even in Britain itself, education had not yet been
accepted as a responsibility of the Government. It was therefore decided to review the study of sanskrit and persian among Indians. This led to the establishment by Hastings of the Calcutta Madarasa for teaching Persian and Arabic in 1781 and that of Sanskrit College at Benaras by Jonathan Duncan in 1792. The Orientalists among the company officials naturally supported this policy. After a century, however, second thoughts began to prevail. At first, there was an equally pressing urgency for Indian clerks, translators and lower officials in administration and knowledge of English was the need of the hour in order to fetch jobs. Even before the close of the eighteenth century, missionary schools which taught English besides the vernaculars had already been functioning in South India; the main aim behind the teaching of English to Indian natives was to spread English education among natives in order that Western culture might be assimilated by the Indians and that this would make for the stability of the empire-a view strongly advocated by Charles Grant, who argued: “to introduce the language of the conquerors seems to be an obvious means of assimilating a conquered people to them”(Spring Online). The impact of western civilization, the rise of political consciousness and the change in society could be seen in what was written during the time British invaded India. The contact with the western world
resulted in India’s acceptance of Western thought on one hand, and a rejection of it on the other, and consequently resulted in an effort to revive her ancient glory and indigenous Indian consciousness. A large number of writers opted for a synthesis between Indianization and Westernization in their search for a national ideology. All these attitudes were combined to bring about a ‘Renaissance’ in nineteenth century India. But it was a renaissance in a country which was under foreign domination. The rise of Indian English literature was an aspect of the Indian Renaissance which is pointed out by Sri Aurobindo, Amrita Paresh Patel comments: “the Indian renaissance was less like the European one more like the Celtic movement in Ireland” (Patel Online).

More than two decades prior to Macaulay’s Minutes of 1835, Indians had already started writing in English. Raja Rammohun Roy’s essay on ‘A Defence of Hindu Theism’ (1817) may be regarded as the first original publication of significance in the history of Indian English literature. The first attempt made by Indians to use English for creative purposes were in the novel and poetry which met with immense success. However, Indian English drama was started when Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885) wrote The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the
Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta (1831). It was the first Indian English play written by an Indian in English. Although, it was less a play and more a dramatic debate, a conflict between orthodox Hindu customs and the new ideas introduced by the English. Banerjee claims in his preface:

Inconsistencies and the blackness of the influential members of the Hindoo community have been depicted before the eyes. They will now clearly perceive the wiles and tricks of Brahmins and thereby be able to guard themselves against them.

(Naik 1982: 98)

It dramatizes a somewhat simple representation of the conflict in the mind of a sensitive Bengali youth between orthodoxy and the new ideas ushered in by a western education. It remained a solitary dramatic effort, not only in Bengali but also anywhere in India for more than a decade. However, Indian English drama saw the first light of day when, in the mid nineteenth century, modern drama and theatre had its beginning in Kolkata (formally Calcutta) in 1779. A Russian dramatist, Horasin Lebedev along with a Bengali theatre lover Goloknath Das staged the Bangla translations of two English comedies, Disguise and Love is the Best Doctor in Kolkatta. In 1831, Prasanna Kumar Thakur established Hindu Rangmanch at Kolkata and staged
Wilson’s English translation of Bhavabhuti’s Sanskrit drama Uttar Ramcharitam laying the foundation for modern theatre in India. Professional drama got its start in Kolkata in the 1870’s with the founding of the National Theatre (later replaced by Minerva Theatre). Modern dramatic forms were pioneered in the city by such playwrights as Girish Chandra Ghosh and Dirabandhu Mitra. Kolkata was still an important centre of professional and amateur theatre and experimental drama. In fact, even in Bengal, the fountainhead of most forms of Indian English literature, drama in English failed to secure a local theatrical habitation, in sharp contrast to plays in the mother tongue and the appetite for the plays in English could more conveniently be fed on the performance of established dramatic successes in English by foreign authors.

However, it is believed that the real journey of Indian English drama begins with Michael Madhusudhan Dutt (1824-1873) who is considered a leading figure of the Bengali Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century. He is credited with poetic and dramatic innovations, best illustrated by his merging of Bengali stories and language with western styles and forms such as those found in the works of Homer and John Milton. Dutt translated three of his own Bengali plays into English: Ratnavali.
(1858) – a version of Harsha’s well-known Sanskrit play, *Sermista* (1859) and *Is This Called Civilization?* (1871).

In comparison with Bengal, the story of early Indian English drama in Mumbai (formally Bombay) is much briefer. The Bombay Amateur Theatre was built in 1776 and dramatic activity was limited to performances by visiting European touring companies. The rise of modern drama in Marathi and Gujarati is heralded by Annasaheb Kirloskar’s epoch-making production of *Shakuntal* in Marathi in 1880. During this period C S Nazir wrote *The First Parsi Baronet* (1866) and this was followed by D M Wadia’s *The Indian Heroine* (1877). The Western impact also opened an exciting chapter of Modern Indian drama written originally in the vernaculars. Owing to the lack of a firm dramatic tradition nourished on actual performance in a live theatre, early Indian English drama in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, grew sporadically as mostly closet drama; and even later, only Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindrnath Chattopadyaya produced a substantial corpus of dramatic writing.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) Nobel laureate and epitome of the Indian spiritual heritage wrote primarily in Bengali and translated almost all his plays into English. His best known
plays are *Chitra* (1913), *The Post Office* (1914), *The King of the Dark Chamber* (1914), *The Cycle of the Spring* (1919), *Muktadhara* (1922) and *Sacrifice* (1936): the major concerns of these plays are deeply rooted in Indian themes. Tagore was the first playwright who invested Indian English drama with symbolic overtones and allegorical significance. Commenting on the plays of Tagore K R S Iyengar rightly opines:

> Tagore could start the play, strike the opening chords, name the characters-and memory and imagination would do the rest. Not the logic of careful plotting but the music of ideas and symbols is the soul of his plays…

(Iyengar 1985: 123)

With regard to the dramatist’s use of language, he uses in language of imagery that creates a situation where plain speech gets transformed into heightened speech, and when expressed in song and dance, it becomes all the more symbolic.

Tagore’s English plays have a compact and neat structure, though their originals in Bengali often followed the loose Elizabethan model. This is so because in his translations, Tagore subjected his texts to rigorous condensation, as a result of which the English versions possess an economy which the originals
mostly lack, though the experts have noted that much complexity and richness may have been lost in the process.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is a prominent dramatist and an accomplished craftsman in verse. His dramatic genius is revealed through his five complete verse plays and six incomplete dramas. One of the best known plays of Aurobindo is Vasavadutta which is actually a historical romance. It is deeply dyed with the colours of both realism and romance. The plays of Aurobindo show a peculiarity of prose-style, a unique experiment in fusing sanskrit with English. The other major plays include Perseus the Deliverer, Rodogune and Viziers of Bassora. Aurobindo’s plays depict a variety of periods and locales, ranging from ancient Greek times to medieval India. All his plays cover diverse landscapes including Iraq, Syria, India, Spain, Britain and Norway. An important characteristic of Aurobindoean themes in the plays are ideas of human evolution in Perseus the Deliverer and love as a benevolent force destroying evil and conflict and making for harmony and peace in Viziers of Bassora, Prince of Edur and Vasavadutta. The plays Savitri and The Life Divine are exclusively models of Victorian pastiches of Shakespearian dramas. The dramatist is handling purely Indian material yet could not throw off the yoke of
Shakespeare, hence resting his dramatic creed on an Elizabethan pattern. As a result, Sri Aurobindo, perhaps imposed crippling limitations on his dramatic talent, whereas in *Savitri* he boldly experimented with age-old epic conventions. While evaluating the playwright M K Naik holds the view:

In the large whispering gallery resounding with Shakespearian echoes which his plays in the main appear to be, Sri Aurobindo’s distinctive voice is scarcely heard as effectively as in the forms. It is sad that even in handling purely Indian material in *Prince of Edur* and *Vasavadutta*, the dramatist could not throw off the yoke of Shakespeare, with the result that his characters seem to think, speak and act less like authentic Indians that like Elizabethan personages in Indian garb. In spite of some scenes of dramatic tension, stray passages of poetic beauty and a few moments of bright wit and humour in the comedies, the drama of Sri Aurobindo is perhaps hardly in the class as his major poetry and prose.

(Naik 1982: 100-101)

Another dramatic voice which appeared on the literary scene that demands attention is T P Kailasam (1884-1946). He wrote both in English and Kannada. Though Kailasam is regarded as the father of modern Kannada drama, his real genius finds its full expression in his English plays such as *The Burden* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *Karna* (1964) and *Keechaka* (1965). He believed ‘that delineation of ideal characters requires a language
which should not be very near to us.’ Therefore, he wrote his English plays which were often based on the stories from Mahabharata, in the style of Shakespeare’s history plays. Kailasam’s English plays unlike his Kannada plays are inspired by Puranic themes, but he renders them brilliantly in the intellectual language of his day. The Burden and Fulfilment (1933) are short poignant pieces. Kailasam has shown in his plays that he can make prose a fit medium for the expression of tragic emotions. Burden has a beauty of its own. Fulfilment is almost the crown of Kailasam’s dramatic art. His rendering of puranic characters such as Bharata, Krishna, Karna, Draupadi and Kunti has a touch of iconoclasm, but the idealism may be deeper than the iconoclasm. Although Kailasam’s total output is not much, his few plays are enough to establish his claim to be considered an original talent who successfully tried to achieve superb self-expression in English through the medium of drama. In this connection M K Naik notes:

Kailasam would have served a greater purpose had he dramatized the contemporary condition in his plays. If he had done so, he would have performed the duty of a true literature. But Kailasam boldly declares “I do not know literature, I am only a playwright.”

(Naik 1984: 160-161)
Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898-1990) with his leftish leaning and revolutionary zeal added a new dimension to Indian English drama. He started his career as a playwright with *Abu Hassan* (1918). This play is light in both prose and verse. Chattopadhyaya was deeply influenced by the Progressive Writer’s movement. Like Mulk Raj Anand, his sympathies were with the underdogs. His social plays abound in seeds of social protests and ideas of revolution, heralding as they do the emergence of a significant working class dramatist with innate potentialities. He is today best known as a playwright of fecundity and versatility. His plays mostly contain a realistic picture of men and manners. As a realist he stands in good comparison with Ibsen, Shaw, and Galsworthy. Referring to this, Venkata Reddy writes:

Like the plays of Arnold Wesker they are warm, humane, sincere, passionate, compassionate, brave, honest, energetic, outspoken full of enthusiasm and concern. The enthusiasm is largely for paving the way for an egalitarian society. The concern is mainly for the well being of workers.

(Reddy 1980: 99)

*Five plays (1937)* is a collection of his social plays—*The Windows, The Parrots, The Sentry’s Lantern, The Coffin* and *The Evening Lamps*. These plays are symbolic and are infused with realism and have a didactic and propagandist purpose. Srinivasa Iyengar notes:
Five plays … contain some of his characteristic works as a playwright, revealing his social consciousness, flair for the realism and like in his prose writing Chattopadhyaya’s social plays are realistic and symbolic. They expose artificial way of life, morality, suffering of the poor in a capitalistic social and economic order. These plays have a social purpose and have a tautness and intensity that are seldom sought in our dramatic writings. These plays are indeed manifestoes of the new realism.

(Iyengar 1982: 234)

Chattopadhyaya’s hagiological plays bring to light the conflict between good and evil. These plays are based on the lives of saints and virtuous souls. Some of the well known plays in this series are: *Pundalik, Sakku Bai, Meera Bai* etc. They usually proclaim victory of the good. They are less effective than his social plays. His attempt to modernize Indian drama is significant. But his plays fail owing to his inability to create living characters speaking in an individual voice and to work out his themes in viable dramatic terms.

The next significant dramatist is A S P Ayyar (1899-1963) who wrote a total of six English plays. His first play was *In the Clutch of the Devil* (1926). He used drama as a mode of apprehending reality pertaining to contemporary life. The ungodly and superstitious practices involving witchcraft and ritualistic
murder current in contemporary rural South India form the central motif in the play. Two collections of his plays are *Sita’s Choice and other plays* (1935) and *The Slaves of Ideas and other plays* (1941). Ayyar’s themes are overtly reformist. In *Sita’s Choice*, the young widow of a consumptive old man finds fulfillment in a bold remarriage to a reformist youth, though the author is tactful enough to pack the couple off to distant Iraq after the wedding. *The Slave of Ideas* on the other hand has a rather melodramatic plot built round the clash between a young lawyer with spiritual learning and his materialistic wife, culminating in her infidelity, which he avenges by murdering her. Ayyar tries to invest melodrama with ethical and social purpose by posing questions such as forgiveness of wrongs and rights of women.

The Madras Dramatic Society, which encouraged amateur European theatricals, was founded in 1875. The Oriental Drama Club followed in 1882 and the first Indian amateur dramatic society in South India, The Sarasa Vinodini Sabha, was founded by Krishnamachary of Bellary in 1890. The most productive dramatist of the period was V V Srinivasa Aiyanger (1871-1954), author of *Blessed in a Wife* (1911), *Wait for the Stroke* (1915), *The Bricks Between* (1918) and *Ram Rajya* (1952). His *Rama Rajya* (1952) is
a play on the theme of ideal Kingship and Government. Though he has tried his hand at a thesis play in *The Bricks Between* and historical drama in *At Any Lost*, Aiyanger is at his entertaining best in light comedies with a farcical touch, dealing with south Indian urban middle class life, like *Vitchu’s Wife* and *The Surgeon-General’s Prescription*. None of the other Madras playwrights were equally active.

Bharati Sarabhai (1912-...) is the maiden woman playwright during the colonial era of Indian English drama who gave a Gandhian touch to Indian drama in English. She is considered to be the most distinguished woman playwright in Indian Writing in English. She has written two plays—*The Well of the People* (1943) and *Two Women with Some Considerable Measure of Success*. In her first play there is a fine blending of music and poetry, memory and symbolism. It’s basically a story of a Brahmin widow who is unable to go to Kashi and Haridwar and so she decides to build a temple for the Harijans in her village. Based on a true story published in Gandhiji’s *Harijan* it’s actually a verse play about an old woman who being lame is unable to go on a pilgrimage to Benaras to have a dip in the Ganga, decides to get a well dug for the untouchables of the village. The play is an
effective dramatization of how during the Ghandian age a new social awareness fused itself with the age old religious consciousness, thus leading to a resurgence of the spirit. Speaking of the play Shanker Mokashi Punekar notes:

Bharati Sarabhai’s *The Well of the People* is probably the only articulate work of literary art giving complete expression to the Gandhian age.

(quoted in Iyer 2007: 6)

G V Desani (1909-2000) is an entirely different kind of playwright who has to his credit the play *Hali (1950)*. It is basically a short poem play which is based on the themes of passion and love. Described as a ‘poem play’ *Hali* was originally a work of 300 pages planned as an epic, later abridged into a drama in poetic prose. It was successfully staged at the Watergate Theatre London in 1950 and in India in 1950-51. It is Desani’s solitary experiment with drama. Detailing the origin of the work Desani writes:

I had a personal tragedy – a serious love affair. *Hali* is a monument to this affair and tragedy…I was there carrying a deep hurt in my heart and *Hali* was a gesture of a loyalty to the love of a friend I bore. After the tragedy I felt so helpless that I would have been killed by the sorrow but for some kind friends.

(Vasudev 1975: 25)
A short poetic play, *Hali* is an attempt to project Hali’s confrontation of the power of creation and destruction, his grappling with life and death, his surrender to the material world, his communion with love and his transcendence of the dualities of time and space. The characters in the passion play are Isha the Lord, Rahu the adversary, the mother Mira, the foster mother and friend Maya, his beloved Rooh, the magician, the narrator and Hali. Maya, Rahu and Isha are drawn from Hindu mythology while Hali himself is named after a Muslim Saint. The ‘action’ is merely symbolic and takes place in the theater of Hali’s soul. An allegorical play *Hali* is everyman’s quest for fulfillment. The protagonist Hali stands for humanity in both male and female aspect. It is significant that he is named after a Muslim Saint, but has long hair like a girl’s, wears bangles and anklets and is also given a girl’s name Girija. Hali lost his mother at an early age, makes early acquaintance with death. Maya (illusion) comforts him for a time later as a young man he falls in love with Rooh who dies young. In dreams and visions, Hali realizes the essential truth of human existence—that Man entrapped—in the ‘snare of dreams’ in the sorrows of life, must ultimately accept the fact that beauty and felicity are all too short lived. Finally he realizes that Man must transcend human love, go beyond life and death and even leaving
behind his limited ideas of god-head, and develop in himself a god like love and detachment. When the play ends, Hali has achieved self knowledge, ‘the Summit city’. It was greatly acclaimed by British critics for its thematic richness and style.

Joseph Mathias Lobo-Prabhu (1906-1999) is the last name in the pre-independence Indian English drama. He has written over a dozen plays but only *Mother New India: A Play of Indian Village in three Acts (1945)* appeared before independence. His plays revolve around reformists themes like inter-caste marriages, marital incompatibility and the education of women. Lobo-Prabhu’s characters are paste-board and his dialogue is full of poeticisms and play upon words. During the pre-independence era, the absence of performance opportunities deprived playwrights of an essential means of learning the craft, and left them without a stake in the development of theatre in the country.

**Indian English Drama Post – 1947**

The period after independence in 1947 marks a significant second stage in the development and history of Indian drama. Prior to 1947, drama scripts were pivoted around Sanskrit plays, English plays and ancient religious historical epics. They related themselves to the social problems as well as the ideology of the
Indian freedom movement, making it an exceedingly powerful medium, intended to make an impact on the life of the common man.

Although pre-independence Indian English drama is notable for its poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, symbolic significance and its commitment to human and moral values, it was by and large not geared for actual stage production. The post-independence Indian English drama benefited by the increasing interest of foreign countries in Indian English literature in general and Indian English drama in particular. Contemporary Indian dramas in English translation have registered a great name and fame not only in India but also all over the world.

The first Five Year Plan after Independence encouraged the performing art as an effective means of public enlightenment and the National School of Drama was established in Delhi. Institutions for training in drama were founded in big cities: drama departments were established in some Universities and the National Drama Festival was started in Delhi by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1954. But all these developments have led, almost exclusively, to the growth of regional language theatre, while most
Indian English plays have had to remain content with a performance or two each even in big cities.

Asif Curriumbhoy (1928-1994) deserves the most Serious attention during the post-independence period. Born into an illustrious Khoja family of Bombay (now Mumbai), Curriumbhoy was educated in the United States. He is a prolific Indian English playwright who covers a wide range of themes from history and politics, society and religion, art and metaphysics. His plays, of which there are twenty-nine in all, are substantial in content and rich in theatrical devices. He uses monologues, choruses, chants, songs, slide projections, sound effects, mime, anything in fact that furthers the dramatic purpose. The four major plays written are: The Doldrummers (1960), The Dumb Dancer (1961), Goa (1964) and The Hungry One’s (1965). He deals mainly with themes of public importance and his plays bear ample evidence to the fact that he has a message to deliver— a vision to fulfill. Fubin Bowers is convincing when he maintains that Currimbhoy’s plays reveal him to be India’s first authentic voice in the theatre.

In spite of the comparative success of Currimbhoy, Indian dramatic writing in English continued to be immature. K R Srinivasa Iyengar comments:
The paucity of goodactable English dramas written by Indians mainly attributable to the fact that the natural medium of conversation with us…excepting for the super sophisticated who live in the cities and the larger towns, in the Universities or in certain Government Offices or business houses—is the mother tongue rather than English, and hence, unless the characters and situations are carefully chosen, it would be difficult to make a dialogue between Indians in English sound convincing.

(quoted in Iyer 2007: 5)

Thus the dichotomy between the spoken languages and atmosphere may be responsible for the slow growth of Indian drama in English. Another factor may be the absence of the element of make-believe which essential to the success of drama.

Some established poets and novelists too have turned to writing plays one such significant figure has been Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004). In the realm of Indian drama, Nissim Ezekiel’s Three Plays (1969), including Nalini: A Comedy, Marriage Poem: A Tragic Comedy, Sleep Walkers: An Indo-American Farce, are considered to be a welcome addition to the dramaturgy of Indian English drama. Song of Deprivation (1969) is also a short play by Ezekiel. His attempts at dramatic writing in English remind us of the colossal failure of English poets like Robert Browning in the theatre. Hence a play like Ezekiel’s Marriage Poem is more
successful in Marathi than in English. Under these circumstances, the ‘Indian reality’ that these dramatists writing in English try to present becomes unreal and unconvincing. The difficulties in the way of Indian playwrights in English could have been overcome if they employed the kind of English spoken in India-English filled with Indianisms.

Gurucharan Das’s (b.1943), a graduate in philosophy, felt that academic life was stuffy and confining and decided to take a year off from academics and write plays. *Larin’s Sahib (1970)* a historical play, deals with Henry Lawrence of Punjab, and successfully captures the mood of the pre-Mutiny colonial encounter between the Indian and British, and the dilemma faced by Henry Lawrence in the peculiar colonial situation. The play dramatizes the conflict between two forces, that is, the British Imperialism represented by the East India Company and all its authorities like Hardinge, Currie and Elliot, and the Indian King Dalip Singh, son of the late Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The dramatist depicts the character of Henry Lawrence with remarkable clarity of motivation. From the beginning of the play we learn that he is known for his sympathy and understanding of the native problems of India. Although, he wants to do lot of good to the Punjab and
win the heart of the native population, he is a puppet in the hands of the East India Company, which has its own imperialistic policy. Das has also written two other plays *Mira (1970)* and *Jakhoo Villa (1996)*. *Mira* is an attempt to present the theme of immaculate God-love. The assumption behind Das’s play is the sexual frustration in Mira’s life with her husband. It is an artistic achievement of immense merit and supreme significance to the re-blossoming of the theatre in India. Clive Barnes opines in *New York Times*:

> Remarkably in the way it combines Indian legend with the sophistication of Western total theatre…Mira has something of the quality of a dream ritual. [She] is a modern woman being broken on the wheels of convention…It has all grace of a lovely voice speaking of eternals in a language just delicately opaque.

*(Das Online)*

Das’s third play, *Jakhoo Villa*, is set in our time, and the theme is the decadence that has overtaken a Hindu family in Simla. Das’s plays are remarkable achievement in historical dramas; he has not only faithfully created history but has also subtly captured the essential historian traits of his historical personae.

Gieve Patel (b.1946), his significant work, *Princes (1970)* describes the state of war between two Parsi families of South
Gujarat for the exclusive possession of the male child, his most recent plays are *Savaksa (1982)* and *Mister Behram (1988).* Once again, these plays talk about Parsi families, and the spoken English has a nervous power, and the themes transcend the Parsi milieu. Among the Parsi writers few more names deserve equal attention. Cyrus Mistry (b.1959) who entered into play writing with his first play, *Doongaji House (1991)* in which narratives of Parsi ascent and decline can be understood only with reference to the community’s unique, millennium-long history in India. The principal difficulties that the Indian Parsi community faces in the postcolonial period are attitudes of racial, religious and cultural. Ironically, the obscurity of Cyrus Mistry as a playwright and the unusually precarious existence of *Doongaji House* in both print and performance seem to replicate in the world of theatre the problem of Parsi marginalization in the wider Indian world. Motivated by the impulses to memorialize crisis, Mistry incorporates the constitutive features of Parsi identity with ethnographic thoroughness in his play. His most important tool for evoking the quality of Parsi life is the use of language.

Another woman Parsi writer, Dina Mehta’s (b.1928) play *Brides are Not for Burning (1993)* takes its inspiration from social
problems such as the killing of brides who do not bring enough dowry. Her next play *Getting Away with Murder* (1990), deals with the theme of childhood sexual abuse, infidelity and insecure relations.

Shiv K Kumar’s *The Last Wedding Anniversary* (1975) is unaffordable to be left out while tracing the post-independence history of Indian English drama. We also have a noteworthy playwright writing in the mid-seventies, Lakhan Deb, who wrote *Tiger Claw* (1976) a historical play in three acts; his other two plays worth mentioning are: *Murder on the Prayer* (1976) and this particular play is reminiscent of T S Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) Deb describes his effort as ‘a forum where ideas, viewpoints and even opinions argue themselves out in the presence of the ideal.’

Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) is a pioneering figure in modern Indian theatre, who founded the ‘Little Theatre Group’ in 1947. He has penned down nine plays in total, some of which are: *Mirkassim, Tiner Talowar and Fereri Fauj*. Being a staunch theatre personality, he staged plays by Ibsen, Rabindranath Tagore, Shaw and Gorky. As a leading Indian practitioner of left-wing political theatre, Dutt’s Little Theatre Group and People’s Little Theatre
covered a wide range of political forms, from elaborately scenic proscenium productions to street theatre, poster plays and agitprop. The dominant political thematic of Dutt’s work was a transhistorical interest in the theory and practice of the Minerva Theatre in Calcatta (1959-70). And then, developed a singular repertoire of spectacular multimedia productions that urged the spectator to ‘fall in love’ with the experience of theatre itself.

Habib Tanvir’s (1923-2009) name holds an important place among Indian playwrights. A very well known theatre personality, he has more than a dozen plays to his credit. A versatile artist, he wrote, translated, adapted and evolved plays. Instead of the contrived “authenticity” of urban performers experimenting with nonurban performance genres, Tanvir’s theatre has maintained a singular identity between narrative, performer and performance style, providing an influential example of how the urban and the rural may interpenetrate. He insists that the audience for serious theatre in a city like Delhi may be larger than before, but it will not realize its potential or embrace provocative plays “because of lethargy of the people…[who] would much rather see a Hindi film than go to a serious play”(Dharwadker 2006: 115). For Tanvir the real “theatre of the people” exists in village, and “has to be brought
to the educated, because the educated lack the culture which the masses of the villages posses so richly though they are illiterate…After all we are trying to bridge the gap in terms of development in industry, agriculture. In terms of culture also we have to come to grips with what are the roots and not always remain in the urban vacuum which has been created in the last few decades”( Dharwadker 2006: 115). Hence Tanvir’s Naya Theatre, which consists of tribal performers as well as some urban actors, has audiences in cities, towns, villages as well as tribal areas.

Girish Karnad (b.1938) belongs to the first generation of post-independence Indian dramatist group. His plays are not typical ‘realistic’ representations, but writer like Karnad often thrives on a pre-colonial past. In the capacity of a writer he substantially contributed to enrich the tradition of Indian English theatre. His major plays are derived from Indian history, legend and folklore. Some of his plays are Yayati (1961), Tughlaq (1962), Hayvadana (1970) and Nagamandala (1972). Karnad’s characters are freely borrowed from history, myth and legend. He thus invents a structure in which the use of folk conventions is ironic and reflective as well as expedient and natural, and where the action occupies at once the mythic realm of folk culture and historical
present. His inventive frames produce a new dramatic synthesis that contextualizes the mythic story into its contemporary counterpart. Karnad is a multi-faceted in different capacities- as an actor, film producer, director, script writer, etc and to him writing plays is everything. He once admitted, “I became an actor to earn a living.” Soon after deciding to give up cinema he said, “Now I feel whatever time should be spent doing what I like best- writing plays” (Karnad online). The implied idea of these statements reveal the Indian condition that an artist finds it difficult to earn a living with his own writings and to any writer his writing gives satisfaction, and Karnad is not an exception to this. His complete involvement in writing plays brought success not only to him but also to his homeland and to the Indian English drama.

Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) perceived drama as a complex art involving the uniform contribution of actors, scenic effects, lights and music and effective stage direction. He was a dramatist who essentially wrote in Hindi and later his plays were translated into English. His most famous play is Ashadh Ka Ek Din (1958), in which he highlighted the dangers of sycophancy. Several other plays by him are: Adhe Adhure, Leharon Ka Raj Hans, Evan Inderjit, That Other History and There Is No End. In drama
according to Mohan Rakesh, the author is ‘represented’ by a text-published or unpublished- that was created in the privacy of his study, expresses his individual temperament, and exists apart from the staging process. Performance must preserve the sanctity of this text and assign the living author an integral role: to erase the playwright and regard the director as the sole orchestrator of the theatrical event is to create an artistic void in the theatre. Rakesh acknowledges, however, that “the theatre of words cannot only be the theatre of the wordsmith” and hence calls for the equal collaboration of author, director and performers. While considering the “excessive emphasis” on the director’s role detrimental to the integrity of drama-in-performance in 1966, at the invitation of Shyamanand Jalan, he became involved in an intensive three-week process of collaboration over the Calcutta (now Kolkata) production of his second play, *Lahron ke Rajhans*. The play’s third act was rewritten several times, completed two days before the opening night, and revised yet again before publication in late 1966. As a paradigmatic example of the playwright-as-self-expressive author, theorist and critic, Rakesh did not offer any significant commentary, either of drama in general or of his plays in particular.
Badal Sircar (1925-2011) wrote his plays in Hindi which were later translated into English. His dramatic skills are noteworthy in the following plays: *Procession*, *Bhoma* and *Stale News*. The major themes in these plays are corruption, plight of an average Indian and several other social themes. Popularly known as the ‘barefoot playwright’, Badal Sircar uses contemporary situations in order to present the existential realism of modern life. He has to his credit the creation of a ‘Third Theatre’, a theatre which is supported and created by people. He effectively tries to transcend the confines of the urban commercial theatre and indigenous folk theatre. His ‘third theatre’ aims at changing the thought and beliefs of the spectators, leading them to some action. The third theatre dispenses with all stage paraphernalia and lays stress on the most essential tool; the human body. It is literally a free theatre in the sense that no tickets are sold. It is a living experimental communication between the performer and the spectator where the plays become a participatory ritual. What Sircar wants to communicate through his Third Theatre are clear art facts and concrete truths about what is happening in the villages at the grass root level; the nature of exploitation, both industrial and agricultural, and the urban stranglehold on the rural economy.
The ultimate aim of his theatre is to make people aware of various social and ecological concerns.

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) was in the vanguard of not just Marathi but Indian theatre for almost forty years. Beginning his career as a dramatist in the mid-fifties, this prolific writer has twenty-eight plays to his credit. From the very first play *Grihasth* (1955) to *Safar* (1992), his plays have given Indian theatre a rich and challenging repertoire. Death and violence are the recurring themes in the closed, claustrophobic interiors of Tendulkar’s naturalistic plays. A diseased and dying social order, where men are prepared to descend to any level to further their ambitions, is symbolized in his play *Gidhade* (Vultures 1970). In *Shanatata! Adalat Chalu Ahe* (*Silence! The Court is in Session*), the theme of the mock trial is that of infanticide and it ends with the threatened abortion of Leela Benare’s foetus by Kashikar’s verdict. In *Sakharam Binder* (1972), there is the horror of murder, hence the bleak picture emerges from the play. The thematic concerns in Tendulkar’s plays are based on a broad canvas of social, psychological, political, physiological, economical and psychosexual issues in contemporary times. And violence is often a strong leit motif his plays. However, Tendulkar denies that he is a
pessimist and strongly asserts his faith in the resurgence of the human spirit. Tendulkar is perhaps the only literary playwright who has defined his art in relation to the “public” because he views theatre as essentially a spectator-driven form. “Every playwright,” he argues, “has fixed before him an image of his viewers…If the viewer is not kept in sight, playwriting is not possible” (Dharwadker 2006:113). His mission from the beginning, however, has been to challenge the complacency of middle-class urban Marathi audiences whose desire for “brisk, light and mindless entertainment” he blames for the ascent of the medium of film and the decline of serious drama.

The names of women dramatists like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahasweta Devi cannot be ignored as both have made a significant contribution to Indian English drama. Both of them write in English and their works are therefore available at hand for the readers of English. These contemporary dramatists give a brutal account of the socio-political realities. Manjula Padmanabhan (b.1953) came into limelight with her play Harvest, a world-wide success. This play brings into focus a cannibalistic society in which the sale of human organs has become a common practice. Another play Lights Out (1984) presents a tragic spectacle
of the daily rape of women, watched at a distance by the middle class characters. Thus, the major themes of her plays are alienation and marginalization of women.

An equally important name among Indian English women dramatist is Mahasweta Devi (b.1926), the Bengali writer and activist. However, her works are translated not only into Indian languages but also in foreign languages such as French, Japanese etc. Her important works are *Aajir* and *Water* and in them the most recurrent themes of Devi’s works surround the subalterns for their basic rights. All her plays express the playwright’s deep concern for the untouchables who are denied for their fundamental rights. These women playwrights have something distinct to offer to the audience. They have given new dimensions by infusing new type into this genre.

However, Indian English drama per se remained very weak in comparison to Indian English fiction and poetry. The reason for this conspicuous paucity is obvious enough. First of all, writing plays happens to be generally more difficult than writing fiction. Then, the writing play in English is more difficult than writing plays in regional languages. Even if the plays are written in English, the chances of performance of such plays are very rare in
the Indian context. Also if the performances of such plays are arranged, the response of the audiences is restricted to the intellectual class. Secondly, if Indian drama in English is still in its infancy, the publication of plays is even more so. Publishers will take plays seriously only if they have been produced, but producers will touch plays only if they are commercially viable. And this leads to the unsuccessfulness of the ‘living theatres’ in our country.

Owing to the spectacular success of Indian English fiction, drama in English remain a ‘lesser’ genre and did not find its true voice until the arrival of Mahesh Dattani (b.1958). He is the first Indian English dramatist who wrote Indian plays in English and was not content with the usual western canonical texts that were generally performed when he founded his own theatre company-Playpen in 1984. He seems to have his fingers in many fields, from acting to writing plays, directing and producing. Dattani chooses realist representations of contemporary urban social experience as the appropriate subject of drama and theatre. He invoke the dominant legacy of realism in Indian theatre and the strong traditions of social realism in India. Therefore, as a playwright, for him the origins of dramatic forms and performance conventions are
a distinctive brand of realistic, cynical and quasi-melodramatic urban tragicomedies.

Indian English drama has found a new life in the work of Dattani who chose to walk on untrodden paths. He has handled with great success some comparatively less explored themes such as the third gender, conjoined twins, alternate sexualities, AIDS, and so on. As a socially sensitive playwright, he makes use of the onstage fictional space to tackle the disturbing abstractions of society that he encounters in the actual world around him. His plays are discussed in detail in the following chapters.
Chapter II

Rejecting the Normative Order: Tara and Where There’s a Will

Dattani directing on the stage
The plays of Dattani should be studied as a cultural expression on some contemporary urban Indian realities rather than a dramatic literature to be enjoyed for aesthetic pleasure. He presents a stimulating and provoking platform for dissenting views, cultural tensions and human relationships. His plays mirror in a very incisive manner a lot of issues which are common urban problems. The dramatic canvas of Dattani is colored with real life situations and the experiences related with urban cosmopolitan and middle class Indians. His firm belief is that drama can be successfully used as a tool for social awareness.

He was neither a student of literature nor did he show any signs of a literary imagination, expecting to spend a life helping run his father’s business. His career marks a blending of contradictions and it seems to have no direct relationship with the theatrical art. A multifaceted personality, Dattani has written many plays over the years. His plays are primarily written to be staged not to be read as stories in drawing rooms or classrooms. He is
charged by the voice of his characters through the mouth of the actors. That is why, he used to give final shape to some of his plays after they were staged. Dattani, a theatre personality, was involved in stage production and performing on the stage, draws inspiration from the Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar and also from Mahesh Elkunchwar and Madhu Rye. Unlike Girish Karnad who lays emphasis on history and myth, Dattani concentrates on contemporary society and reality in a fast changing world:

I’m strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power-play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leitmotifs of my plays. I am, however, not a social activist. From my long experience in theatre, I know what will work in a play, that is, what will be empowered writing. My first service is to the story and I believe that the form should serve the content. Usually, there is something like coming to terms at the end and audience can experience a catharsis - like situation. That’s deliberate and is part of my craft!

(Banerjee, 2004:48)

After decades of active urban usage and in a sense homogenization of the English language, with the audiences becoming much more at home with the many varieties of Indian English that is internalized and spoken without premeditation, Indian theatre in English has began to emerge with a distinctive and vigorous identity. Mahesh Dattani is in the vanguard of those
who have made this happen; he is an actor and director with his own theatre group and has an innate sense of dialogue that is vital, stimulating, lucid and effective. Dealing with some compelling issues rooted in his milieu, he has dispelled the perception about English theatre as just gratuitous fizz. His audiences have been large and responsive, both to the spectacle and the language:

…people have come to terms with the fact that English is an Indian language!…India has this enormous capacity to absorb from all sources…the sooner we come to terms with that, we can get on with the rest

(quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 14)

Dattani speaks of his choice of English as his medium as one that is home grown and Indian - a ‘hybrid language’ that is spoken normally and unobtrusively, in an uninhibited way, as a matter of course by his characters who are essentially Indian. ‘…you’ve got to be true to your expression also. English is for me a sort of given. It’s my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad’ (Menon and K S Prakash online). Dattani further clarifies his position as an Indian English playwright:

Like many urban people in India, you’re in this situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you are 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 – or, there may have been good translations, but they didn’t do anything to me.

(Mee 2000: 14)

The plays of Mahesh Dattani are therefore, the first to challenge effectively the assumption that Indian drama written in English presents a disjunction between language and sensibility, material and medium. Dattani does not see his choice of English as arbitrary nor as a “postcolonial” gesture or as an example of “the empire writes back”- a phrase that he incidentally describes as “politically incorrect.” English is the language in which he says, “he can best express what he wants to” (Dharwarker 2006: 83). Dattani’s work therefore may signal a new phase in the naturalization of English as a theatre medium in India.

Mahesh Dattani subverts conventional theatre by acknowledging that he is not a conventional theatre artist or a theorist of drama. He succeeds in fabricating his art on the stage by inducing subtle techniques. For him theatre is a place where his dramatic art gets its life. The synthesis of artist, thinker and craftsman is the essence of Dattani’s dramatic achievements. Drama being a dynamic medium admits of greater possibilities to recreate life on stage. Shakespeare, through Hamlet, affirms the vitality of drama: “the play is a thing wherein I will catch the
conscience of the king.” This suggests that dramatic art has an evident power to prevail upon the conscience of an audience. It also suggests that drama corresponds with a live audience and not with the passive and admits of greater possibilities of risk and dangers. Dattani admits in an interview that a dramatist has a greater responsibility towards society than a novelist or poet:

I think, this is a very wrong perception prevailing, among the academics, especially the view that writing for the stage is inferior to writing a novel or writing poetry. I think, it is important to keep in mind that the playwright is actually a craftsman. He is a ‘wright’ and not ‘write.’

(quoted in Mouli and G A Ghanshyam 2010: 132)

Dattani tries to make an authentic representation of experience and remains an acute observer of the drama of human suffering. The canonical dramas did not fascinate him and he tried to make an effort to carve a niche of his own, develop a creative dramatic mode and hence expand the horizon of Indian English drama viz-a-viz ‘theatre.’ His mission as a dramatist is to explore the living experiences of the lives of people. Dattani says:

I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of production. I write the play for the sheer pleasure of communicating through the dynamic medium.

(Nair Online)
At the same time, Dattani as a dramatist is not guided by any definite principles of stage craftsmanship or philosophic creed. For him, theatre is a platform to bring life on the stage and to communicate the concern for those odds of life that make human life difficult to tolerate. Dattani through his plays makes an authentic representation of several burning social issues. He conceives a situation, contemplates its various phases and transforms them into theatrical experiences with a view to establish a direct communication with audiences. It has been accepted by him that drama by virtue of a living experience can work as a more potent medium to bring social awareness. He admits:

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 is a craft communicating through language of action.

(quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 18)

Dattani, instead of dealing with the social problems in a traditional way with stereotypes and sentimentalism, represents unconventional, radical and rational dynamics of social issues, containing the seeds of the clash of the ‘self’ of an individual against the pre-determined schemes of society. In plays like Where There is a Will, he exposes the oddity of parental authority that
makes the survival of the individual impossible. In the plays Dance Like a Man, Tara and Bravely Fought the Queen, Dattani express his concern for gender roles. It’s not only the women but also men who suffer terribly because of the restrictions embedded in gender-determined roles. In Bravely Fought the Queen and Dance Like a Man, the dramatist takes the ground helplessness of an individual against the compulsions of society and generates frustration and rebellion. In these plays, he projects female images that are not weak or nervous but are aware and confident to retaliate against the wrong doers. In Final Solutions there is a sensitive exposition of conventional communal frenzy: he deals with the subject of communal conflict with a vision that the realization of human sensibility is above all communal differences.

Dattani marks a distinction in Indian theatre for his confidence to expose issues like alternate sexuality, child sexual abuse and an uncompromising sympathy for marginalized communities armed with a radical vision, he expands the range of Indian theatre and brings it close to a revolution in modern theatre at the global level.

Dattani’s play Tara (1990) is confined around familial relationships where each individual in his/her own way has to bear
the burden of social values and their efforts go beyond them bring helplessness in their lives. This play deals with the unit of family and the changing, evolving and disintegrating relationships within the family. *Tara* centers on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins. In the play the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their own mother and grandfather to favour the male child over the female results in tragedy. Tara though smarter than her brother Chandan is never given an opportunity to grow. She is always suppressed, that eventually wastes her life and she finally dies. Chandan escapes to London and changes his name to Dan. He attempts to repress the guilt that he feels over his sister’s death. This play is woven into the issues of class and community of urban middle-class Indian society. The earlier idealized, Indian view of family harmony, domestic comfort, and supportive relationships on nurturing intimacy is somewhat jeopardized in Dattani’s plays. And there is a clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values.

In *Tara*, the plot revolves around the conjoined twins Chandan and Tara. It is a riveting play-hailed for its feminist concerns- that questions the role of society that treats siblings with double standards. Chandan and Tara are Siamese twins and it’s
through surgical operation that the twins are separated at birth. The fact that the injustice is perpetrated by the victim’s own mother, whose preference for the male child suggests the complicity of women in perpetuating patriarchal group. For Dattani, the real danger of the patriarchal code lies in denying an individual the opportunity for an independent growth. The pathos of the play is deeply felt as much by the author as by the reader.

Mahesh Dattani has very deftly revealed the theme of gender discrimination in this play. All along social norms, economic standards and cultural factors have been responsible for injustice against the girl child. All these factors combine to create a social system in which the girl has to live and die. Tara too is killed by this social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. The trauma of coming to know the role that her mother had played in her life and the discrimination she faces becomes too much for her. Tara’s potential is thereby sacrificed at the altar of gender. Identity crisis becomes a chain with which a female is bound when the question of choice between male and female comes up. Dattani’s plays show the hollowness of middle-class lives and explores what lies below the façade that characters and families put up to fool the world, revealing the essential loneliness
of people. He presents to us the vulnerability of characters, the emotional price they pay in their quest for successful appearances, in their need to ‘belong’. Most of Dattani’s characters are usually displaced and disenchanted. They are average, people who are in search of happiness and fulfillment. They need to work out their destinies within the family unit, as it is the basic unit of society. The family in Dattani’s plays stands for society at large. His characters search for security and acceptance which are everyday concerns of every person.

The play clearly shows the discrimination against the girl child in the contemporary urban society. The conjoined twins Tara and Chandan had three legs between them and but the major blood supply was from Tara’s side. After the operation Chandan got two legs and Tara one. This was done at the behest of their mother. But the second leg didn’t suit Chandan and it had to be amputated. The girl child suffered and died. Though Chandan lived, he was haunted by a guilty consciousness throughout his life.

As the story moves, we are told that Chandan went to live in London, and has adopted a new name, Dan- in order to free himself from the burden of injustice done to Tara. He therefore tries his hand at writing in London. His inner consciousness constantly
haunts him for being responsible for the tragic condition of Tara. A sense of guilt grips his conscience and he always feels she is another half of him and is a separated self of him Erin Mee aptly writes, “Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self” (CP 2000: 320). Dan could not write his story without the story of Tara. He in a telephonic conversation with his father informs him that he would not return to Bombay:

Dan: …it’s just that I don’t think I can face life there anymore… Tara has been dead for six years and now that mummy has also gone as well, there is nothing left for me to come back to…

(CP 2000: 372)

The construction of gender does as much harm to men as to women. The men in the play, carry as much of an unfair burden as the women. Mr Patel is complicit in the working of patriarchy but then so is Bharati, the mother. The play is obviously about the complications of family life, the façade of middle class morality and commitment to family values. What is the morality that the Patel family has practiced? If the decision to give the leg to Chandan was taken by Bharati and her father, Patel had kept quiet because of Bharati’s father’s social status, as also because he had no clear-cut view on the contrary. His family has cut them off because of their inter-caste marriage, inter-regional marriage.
Dattani’s also exposes the corruption prevailing in the bureaucracy and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession. The playwright indicts corruption in the medical profession through Dr Thakkar:

But one cannot absolve Mr Patel of the fault, he too is party to gender discrimination. He is always concerned more about the future of Chandan than Tara:

Patel: I am disappointed in you. From now on you are coming to office with me. I can’t see you rotting at home.

Chandan: I don’t want to go to the office.

Patel: you will come with me to office until your college starts.

Chandan: I don’t want to go to college! (Fighting his tears.)

Not without Tara! If she is going in for surgery, I will miss a year too!

Patel: you will not. I won’t allow it.

(CP 2000: 351)

Bharati’s excessive concern for Tara results from her past guilt. She feels the pangs of past guilt. She, in collusion with her father, had done a great injustice to Tara. As a result she wants to compensate the loss by giving her own kidney to Tara. She offers a part of herself and craves satisfaction out of this. But Mr Patel
disapproves her ideas of giving her kidney to Tara when there is another donator available:

Bharati: *(pleadingly)*. Why don’t you let me do it?

Patel: *(controlling)*. Because…need I tell you? Because I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it.

Bharati: I will do it?

Patel: you will have to obey me. It’s my turn now.

*(CP 2000: 344)*

This play shows how women are marginalized and discriminated by the forces of social injustice. It is a bitter commentary on the injustice done to a girl under the cloak of gender dichotomy. Therefore, it is not just a story about gender identity nor it’s a story of medical phenomenon. The play is, in wider sense, a gruesome tale of injustice done to a woman by the patriarchal society. The roots of our mind-set are still the same despite the development of civilization. Bharati’s love for Tara is pure but her maternal love is at the same time marginalized as a woman and she is compelled her to sacrifice her maternal love to cope up with social expectations. Here it’s the patriarchal code that pushes mother-daughter relationship on the periphery:

Dattani establishes the mother and daughter relationship is ultimately subordinated to the directives of patriarchy. It makes
obvious that women’s lives are organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, all cultures and all countries by establishing values, roles, gender perception and prescribe unequal means to achieve the “wholeness” for women.

(Agarwal 2007: 89-90)

Dattani is successful in highlighting the complete situation in which Siamese twins are trapped by Nature. Therefore, patriarchal society manipulates and makes the situation more complex and intricate. It brings forth the very unhappy and absurd situation for a girl, Tara. Adrienne Rich emphasizes the absurdity of the situation:

Though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control and the physical situation of becoming mother is disciplined by males. This glorious motherhood is imposed on women, conditions her entire life.

(Rich 1967: 45)

Bharati’s helplessness and the calm stoicism of Tara are suggestive of the fact that the happiness of women’s lives are determined by patriarchal codes. Bharati’s condition grows worse and she struggles hard to carve out her space in the family. After her wealthy father’s death, her efforts to compensate the loss caused to Tara by her, cause a conflict with her husband and that finally leads her to mental breakdown and she is hospitalized. Hence, Mr Patel discloses the truth before his children Tara and
Chandan. Patel and Bharati’s conjugal life was happy and peaceful.

Patel affirms to his children:

Ours was a happy marriage. We were all overjoyed when we came to know Bharati would have twins.

(Chandr 2000: 373)

Though this was a short-lived joy. Patel adds:

You looked like two babies hugging each other. It was only at a closer look… we were now prepared for the worst.

(Chandr 2000: 377)

And it was Dr Thakkar who explained the reason for such a complex birth:

Dr Thakkar: Sometimes-we don’t know why-a fertilized egg, destined to separate and develop into two different embryos, fails to do so fully. The result is a conjoinment- in this case from the breastbone down through the pelvic area. It is indeed a marvel that they are born alive. Twins with a conjunction of such complexity are, in most cases, stillborn.

(Chandr 2000: 331)

But the case of Chandan and Tara is even more special in the history of Siamese children. Dr Thakkar adds:

Dr Thakkar: You see, there is something even more remarkable about this case

Dan: and what is that?

Dr Thakkar: Conjoined twins-your Siamese twins-developing from one fertilized ovum are invariably of the same sex. Well, almost invariably. But here these two were obviously from different fertilized eggs.
Dan: so?
Dr Thakkar: The twins are of different sexes. Very, very rare case.

(CP 2000: 332)

Dr Thakkar further informs about the complications involved in the operation. The playwright has aptly directed the actions of incident in his plot in order to explore how a doctor who is considered to be like God violates professional ethics, accepts bribes and servers the leg of Tara. In this way he takes away Tara’s life. Though this play is about the injustice done to women, it is also a play about injustice done to men, like Chandan for no fault of his goes through a sea of agony and spends his life in guilt. His struggle and anguish is clearly visible when he apologizes to Tara:

Forgive me Tara, forgive me, for making it my Tragedy.

(CP 2000: 380)

Dattani himself comments on the play:

I see Tara a play about the male self and the female self. The male self being preferred (if one is to subscribe to conventional categories of masculine traits and feminine traits) in all cultures.

(quoted in Mouli and M Sarat 2009: 208)

Dattani exercises great care in ensuring through his detailed stage directions that readers and potential directors understand all this. The division of the stage allows clearly demarcated space for
certain characters, or time periods, as well for different locales. He specifies the use of lighting for a similar purpose. This allows Dattani to cut from one character to another, one time frame work to another, one locale to another. This helps him to build tension as well as further the action. The stage also becomes emblematic of the layered nature of our lives. C K Meena says in her article on Dattani that this distribution of ‘the action among different levels on stage…not only makes his plays visually exciting but makes them move at a snappy pace’ (Meena Online). Dattani isn’t averse to experimentation and is an innovative playwright. He seems to favour the well-made play as a vehicle, he doesn’t mind playing around with it, bending and twisting it to his will. The well-made play is tailor made for Dattani because it essentially suits his kind of theatre where the characters are foregrounded and key actions are revealed in climaxes. This structure helps him to build tension and to reveal things gradually till the tempo is heightened in the climax.

We can see in the play how the plot develops through the point of view of the chief spectator. In the process of recalling the past, the dramatist artistically brings history into the mechanism of the play. In our very first view of the stage, Dattani breaks the
unity of the place. He disregards the other two unities as well – the unity of time and the unity of action. Dattani uses his ‘voice-over’ technique to bring in the authorial note through the mouth of his protagonist. He makes us very aware of the constructed nature of all narratives by having a quick break in action and restarts the action to satisfy Dan’s aesthetic requirements. Dan is not only the narrator, he is also a character in the play. He is not just looking back but also participating in the action. Dan is the interviewer at this level of action, where Dr Thakkar holds forth proudly on his God-like intervention in the lives of Tara and Chandan. But action at Dan’s level does not consist of only direct address to the audience. Dan receives a phone call from his father who is in India:

Dan: Hello (Louder). Hello, Dad? Can you hear me? Dad? ... This is Chandan. Praful uncle called me….but please dad, don’t ask me to come back…Tara has been dead for six years and now mummy has gone as well, there is nothing left for me to come back to…

(CP 2000: 371-372)

The mode switches over to the personal, seamlessly. The teller and the tale merge throughout the play. The protagonist Dan also assuming the mantle of the narrator / dramatist is in the process, writing a play which he calls ‘Twinkle Tara’ – a play in two acts.
Dan: In poetry, even the most turbulent emotions can be recollected when one is half asleep. But in drama! Ah! Even tranquility has to be recalled with emotion. Like touching a bare live wire. Try distancing yourself from that experience and writing about it! A mere description will be hopelessly inadequate. And for me… I have to relive that charge over and over again. (Pause) Excuse me while I recharge myself.

(CP 2000: 323)

Dattani proceeds to drop his various masks – another obviously metatheatrical device:

The handicapped intellectual’s mask. (*Mimes removing another mask.*) The desperate immigrant. (*Mimes removing yet another*)

The mysterious brown with the phoney accent…

(CP 2000: 24)

Then the memories flood in and the other levels on the stage are activated to play them out. Dattani is dealing with, ‘invisible’ issues in art – making artistic capital out of angst, sorrow, or feeling of the subjects. When Dan finally gets out of the act of the interviewer, he says:

Dan: …Yes. The material is there. But the craft is yet to come. Like the amazing Dr Thakkar, I must take from Tara – and give it to myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world in anger.

(CP 2000: 379)
Mahesh Dattani gifted with the vision to see beyond the accepted and conventional attitudes and established institutions and beliefs, attempts to shatter the stereotypical representations of women and her place in society in his plays. His is the genuine voice of the urban middle class society of India, with family as the nucleus of dramatic concern, through which he unravels the complicated dynamics of human relationships as his characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constrains of gender and repressed desire. Dattani’s idea of womanhood is neither the search for idealized goddess like image, that it has been the basis of Indian thought. Dattani confirms that men and women are the biggest stereotypes in the whole world. The marginalization of the female experience by patriarchy shows how male experience has become the determining and dominating norm. Patriarchy with its political, economic, social and ideological dimensions recognizes the androcentric literary canon as a collection of great texts expressing universal truths and humanistic values. As a male playwright who writes about gender politics, he once remarked:

In fact I am not even sure about the politics of gender since at times I don’t even think about the gender of my characters. It's only when other characters in the play react to their own
gender, or the gender of those around, that the issue comes alive.

(quoted in Mouli and M Sarat 2009: 210)

Therefore, as a non-judgmental observer, Dattani maintains the position of an outsider. Dattani has strongly focused his attention on the marginalized female in the male dominated Indian society.

*Where There’s a Will (1988)* is one of the earliest plays of Mahesh Dattani, in which the dramatist successfully exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal code. This play presents the story of a successful business tycoon, Hasmukh Mehta who tries to dictate his son’s life through his “will” after his death. The play begins in the drawing room of Hasmukh Mehta and dramatizes his own actions after death. He ruthlessly exercises a patriarchal code and believes in absolute power in the way he acts as a dictator to all the members of his family.

The play *Where There’s a Will* is chronicled typically in a Gujarati milieu, in which the follies and prejudices of Indian societal set-up are reflected through an Indian middle-class family. In the play, the ‘traditional’ family values completely subvert the existing stereotypes. There is a clash between unexpected twists in the story of the supposedly, ‘self-made’ industrialist Hasmukh
Mehta. Dattani has carefully structured the play to fit in with the needs of the plot - be it the first half, prior to the death of Hasmukh, where he is a strong patriarch or the second half, post death where Hasmukh is playing a ghost. Wicked humour created by Dattani is at its best in the first half, revealing itself in the acerbic venom that the protagonist is spitting on everyone in general. The problem arises in the second half, where Hasmukh’s ghost perceives himself and the world around him is itself left behind and new power centers in the place. The entire perception of the world is a subversive repositioning of stereotypes whereby the play hints at a pathos and a new kind of bonding takes place between Hasmukh’s wife, Sonal and his mistress, Kiran, its here that Dattani succeeds in exploring the dichotomy between the male/female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and shows transformations when a women takes over.

Like most of the plays of Dattani, this too is a complex play where the dramatist has woven more than one theme in the plot. This play is about a father-son relationship in the modern Indian society which is increasingly becoming individualistic, like the western societies. It also looks at husband-wife relationship through two generations, underlining the changes that have taken
place. The present study shows how Mahesh Dattani excels as a dramatist in fusing western models with a native theatrical tradition. The play is a satire on the water tight patriarchal system in which the protagonist Hasmukh Mehta is the autocratic head and demands unquestionable obedience from his family members. The dramatist very aptly succeeds in exposing the patriarchal social set up. We can see this from the beginning of the play when Ajit is talking on the phone and Hasmukh Mehta enters through the main door with his walking staff:

Ajit: (on the phone). Five lakhs. That’s all. Give me five lakhs and I’ll modernize the whole bloody plant. That’s what I tell my dad. I mean, come on, five lakhs is nothing!

Hasmukh: (to the audience). My son, the business man. Just listen to him.

(Concordance of Plays 2000: 455)

Hasmukh recalls his childhood life and explains the deprived life that he lived. Now, that he is a forty-five year old man and the wealthiest person in the city, he is known the “Garment Tycoon.” He criticizes his son Ajit’s ways in the following words:

Hasmukh: (goes to his bedroom and talks to the audience as he removes his safari suit and changes into a kurta-pyjama). It was wrong on our part to get him married at such a young age. We should have waited till he grew up. Till he is forty-five? What will he be like when he is forty-five? I am forty-five and
and look at what I have achieved. This is because I had the good sense to learn from my father. (*putting away his clothes in the cupboard.*) Now he was a hard worker, my father. He started his own industry when he came to the city. He came with his wife and two young growing sons....today, I, Hasmukh Mehta, am one of the richest men in the city. All by my own efforts. Forty-five years old and I am a success in capital letters. Twenty-three years old and he on the road to failure, in the bold letters!

(CP 2000: 463-464)

Further, Hasmukh explains how his son Ajit is a good-for-nothing. Hasmukh being an autocratic father checks and controls each and every movement of his son. In a way we see him treating his son like a slave. Ajit Mehta is quite weak and could be described as the filial subaltern. The play dramatizes the politics of patriarchy which doesn’t only marginalize the women folk of the family but also the other male members of the family. Hasmukh Mehta by exercising the absolute control over his home and business affairs have overpowered his only son Ajit:

Hasmukh: That was an even bigger mistake. What makes it worse is knowing that I actually prayed to get him. Oh God! I regret it all. Please let him just drop dead. No, no. what a terrible thing to say bout one’s own son. I take it back. Dear, God don’t let him drop dead. Just turn him into a nice vegetable so he won’t be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory, he has been in my way.

(CP 2000: 455)
The statement above reflects that Hasmukh Mehta regards his son Ajit as an incapable and irresponsible young man of twenty-three who resists all his attempts to take him under his wings. Ajit, on his part, considers the father to be a strong-headed man who is just not ready to consider any other opinion except his own. While they talk to one another, Hasmukh is quite brusque and contemptuous, and Ajit is defiant. In a series of revealing conversations, the dramatist makes the attitudes of both clear:

Ajit: Don’t I have any rights at all?

Hasmukh: You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.

Ajit: Thank you. You are so generous I could kiss your feet.

Hasmukh: there’s no need to do that. Just polish my shoes every morning and I’ll be happy.

Ajit: you will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune. And I will never do that.

Hasmukh: don’t be so stubborn!

Ajit: you are stubborn too!

Hasmukh: I’m stubborn because I know I’m right. You’re stubborn because you are a nincompoop!

(CP 2000: 458)

In a patriarchal system, the father acts more or less in a despotic manner and in the father’s eyes a son never grows up. He
always thinks that his experiences of life entitle him to have the last say in everything. Therefore, he considers the efforts of the son’s self-assertion as an act of defiance. The play interestingly shows that same that Hasmukh’s father too was a typical patriarch. When his elder son ran away from home to join a group of hippies, he tightened his control over the other son. His father orders him to leave school and work hard in the factory, that his father has set-up. Hasmukh is obliged to his father for the command that his father gives him. But he is unhappy with his son Ajit because the latter does follow in the footsteps of his father. He tells him that he needs ‘seasoning’ to make him fit him to run the company where he is already working as a managing director. Ajit reacts to this by saying that he wants his son to be merely an extension to him:

Ajit: I mean that you want to run the show, play Big Boss as long as you can. Or as long as God permits. And when all of a sudden, you are ‘called to a better world’, you will still want to play Big Boss. And you can do it through me. In short, you want me to be you.

Hasmukh: I should have prayed for a daughter. Yes, I want you to be me! What is wrong with being me?

Ajit: And what becomes of me? The real me. I mean, if I am you, then where am I?

(CP 2000: 461)

The basic conflict between father and son is clearly reflected in the above mentioned lines. The father wants a
submissive, docile, hard-working and obedient son. He clearly states that he has no use for a son who is imaginative, individualistic and independent. The son Ajit, on the other hand, is not ready to be merely a prototype of his father. He fights for his own identity, “Why it is that everything I say or do has to be something that somebody had told or taught me to do!” (CP 2000: 459). Though, strange enough, Hasmukh Mehta has made Ajit the managing director of his companies. However, Ajit is not allowed to undertake any business errand and affairs of his own. He has to execute his father’s orders and commands keeping his own say aside.

As Sonal is to Hasmukh, Preeti too is a counterfoil to her husband, Ajit. Preeti is young, charming but quite calculative and assertive in her ways. Hasmukh while introducing her says, “That’s my daughter-in-law, Preeti, pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake” (CP 2000: 456).

Throughout the play, the characters are self-exposed when Hasmukh’s affair with Kiran is brought to light, the scene is highly comical where the members of Mehta family condemn and flout each other:

Preeti: How could he do this to us?
Ajit: Well, he’s done it.

Preeti: It’s all your fault!

Ajit: My fault?

Preeti: Yes. If you had been nicer, all this wouldn’t have happened.

Hasmukh: Clever girl.

Ajit: I wasn’t nice to him because he wasn’t nice to me.

Preeti: So what? He wasn’t nice to me either.

Sonal: And he wasn’t exactly in love with me either. If I’d known he had a mistress, I would have left him.

Hasmukh: I should have told her years ago.

Preeti: Well, I have to suffer on account of you two.

Sonal: How can you say that?

Preeti: He didn’t get along well both of you. So he did what he did. I was always obedient to him.

Sonal: I haven’t noticed him leaving you any money! You didn’t fool him for a second.

Hasmukh: Full marks!

Preeti: Rubbish!

(CP 2000: 481)

The play is tightly structured and realistic and contemporary in tone, hence maintaining a natural flow till the denouement.
At the end, Dattani’s plays often reveal many skeletons tumbling out of cupboards. *Where There’s a Will* also presents a shock to Mehta family after Hasmukh Mehta’s death. There is shock upon the revelation of Hasmukh’s mistress Kiran Javeria and the ‘will’. Soon after his demise, these skeletons are brought out into the open. It is clear to the members of the Mehta family that the authoritative patriarch and ‘garment tycoon’ will continue to dictate their lives through the terms and conditions inset in the ‘will’. The news of his death appears in the newspaper under the caption ‘Garment Tycoon Dead, the dead Hasmukh talks to the audience in the form of a ghost:

Hasmukh: … (*picks up a paper cutting.*) ‘Garment Tycoon Dead’. That felt good. You never really know how famous you are until you are dead. Of course, it’s at the bottom of page seven and it’s only six lines. But look at the obituary page. Filled with my photographs. All inserted by different companies. (*Throws the paper away*) Now it’s all over…you see, I have made a special will! (*Laughs*) they are going to hate me for doing this to them!

(*CP 2000: 479*)

As per Hasmukh’s instructions, the lawyer summons them exactly one week after his death to read out the ‘will’. Hasmukh has formed a charitable trust named Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust. He has donated all his property including finances and
shares to the trust. Mehta family as per the ‘will’ shall receive a regular allowance from the trust. Further, the ‘will’ reads that Ajit has to attend office everyday at nine and can leave only by six p.m. in the evening. He also cannot sanction any business projects till he turns forty-five. And if Ajit and others in the family in any way fail to abide by the terms and conditions, the trust will donate its funds to various charities as approved by Hasmukh Mehta. The Mehta family receives another bolt when Mrs Kiran Javaria comes to Hasmukh’s house to stay with his family members. However, they all decide to keep her with them after knowing the instructions provided by Hasmukh in his ‘will’. Kiran as the manager of the house declares:

Preeti: And what if we refuse?

Kiran: Refuse? What do you mean?

Preeti: What if we refuse to let you stay with us?

Kiran: (studies Preeti). You are forcing me to say this. I never intended saying it outright, but now I have to make it clear to you. As the trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust, namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holdings of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder. Which will mean that you won’t ever get to see even a single rupee earned by your father-in-law. Now will you refuse to let me stay here?

(CP 2000: 494)
Hasmukh has almost shunned his family by making the ‘will’ and makes things difficult by making his mistress Kiran Javaria the trustee of the trust. Javaria is a headstrong woman who looks somewhere between thirty to forty years. Soon after the reading of the ‘will’, Preeti begins to behave differently. Hasmukh ruled his family when he was alive. After his death, he tries to control his family from his grave through his ‘will’. As Kiran puts it: “Hasmukh was intoxicated with his power. He thought he was invincible, that he could rule from his grave by making this will” (CP 2000: 508).

Dattani forces the audience to look at the imaginary and fanciful myths concerning men and women built by patriarchal society. Men too are forced to adhere to socially prescribed gender roles against their wishes but Dattani poignantly presents an individual’s struggle for freedom and acceptance as his characters refuse to follow accepted norms and traditional ideologies. Dattani through his major works brings to light disintegrated relationships between the married couple, father and son and mother and daughter, and endeavors to expose the politics of gender in the Indian society.
Chapter III

Centering the Taboo: *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

Dattani directing a scene in *Bravely Fought the Queen*
Mahesh Dattani confidently challenges the traditional denotations and connotations of the words ‘India’ and ‘Indian’. He places on them constructs that are far removed from the ones prevalent in modern theatre but are meaningfully related to social, cultural, sexual and religious issues that hold centre stage in life in the present times.

In his plays, Dattani explores what he calls the ‘invisible issues’ of Indian society. He believes that there are several issues in our Indian society which cannot be addressed because they are taboo and what he calls ‘confrontational’. Dattani’s plays reveal his preference for the virgin field, the sphere least discussed or not discussed at all such as that of homosexuals, eunuchs and incest. In Indian writing to some extent this kind of writing comes into the realm of ‘taboo’. Though some writers have written on this subject, Dattani’s approach is certainly different:

Homosexuality is not the first subject matter chosen by Dattani as writer; it has been dealt by numerous creative talents who prefer to unearth the least explained fields.

(quoted in Mouli and M Sarat 2009: 246)
Homosexuality is a rare subject in Asian literature in contemporary times, but there are a few writers who deal with this subject in their major works. These are: Gayatri Gopinath, Hanief Kureishi, Prafulla Mohanti, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, Andrew Harvey and Suniti Namjoshi. We cannot say that such topics were totally unthinkable in the past. Vatsyayana’s *The Kama Sutra*, the world’s oldest sex manual has an entire chapter devoted to homosexuality. There are women writers whose works deal with sexual love. Ismat Chughtai’s *Lihaf* (“The Quilt”), written in Urdu, was published in 1942. Narrated from the point of view of a ten-year-old girl, the story focuses on the sexual relationship between an aristocratic Indian woman and her female servant. When Kamla Das, a well-known poet in South Asia, published *My Story* (1976), she created a minor scandal. The candid autobiography not only revealed her extra-marital heterosexual affairs but also her adolescent crush on a female teacher and a brief lesbian encounter with an old student. More controversial is Shobha De’s *Strange Obsession* (1993), a rambunctious novel about lesbian love.

Mahesh Dattani also chooses themes related to sexuality and gender issues. His characters represent people of contemporary society who are usually set aside as perverse by authors and
dramatists. He challenges the heterosexual normality considered as central to our culture. This centre is a cultural construction based on an erasure of homoerotic relations from mainstream drama and literature. *Seven Steps Around Fire* (1990), a radio play foregrounds the so-called perverse ‘hijras’ and explores the cultural instruments responsible for the subversion of their identity. *Do the Needful* (1997), deals with a gay man forced to marry a woman who does not want to conform to a traditional system of marriage. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), Dattani takes up the problem of homosexuality of a married man which ultimately mars his conjugal life. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), Dattani handles gay themes and questions conventional standards of the social institution of marriage.

Gender is not a product of different properties of bodies but is a product of social behaviour and practices. The media, the schools and colleges, the families, the courts, literature and art – all construct the notion of gender and Dattani seems to unearth the excesses and repressive forces behind such constructions. Classification of sex in terms of biology or ascribing connotations in terms of logic of grammar as masculine, feminine and neuter that produces the gender system has not categorized
‘homosexuality’ under another independent gender. The biological and grammatical classifications exclude the real relations among human beings in the society. The asymmetry that is inscribed in the cultural discourse of gender system is the focus of liberationists as is evident from the proliferation of feminist theories, gay theories and literary works that foreground the condition of repression, the marginalization that women and gays undergo. In this connection Dattani comments:

   Gender is a major part of it […] it has to do with my own comfort with both feminine and masculine self in me […] the masculine self is very content; it doesn’t need to express itself. But feminine self seems to seek expression […].

   (quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 48)

Dattani’s preoccupation with fringe issues has become an important element in his works – issues that remain hidden and suppressed and are usually pushed towards the periphery come to the surface and literally occupy centre stage. While answering a question in an interview, Dattani admits:

   My characters are simply personification of my perceptions. What moves me actually is an individual’s struggles for identity. In fact a more realistic view of things in life is my ‘credo’.

   (quoted Talwar and Bandhana 2005: 157)

In the light of this comment, it is not surprising that Dattani chose to explore issues related to homosexual identity in his plays.
To him goes the distinction of writing the first Indian play openly depicting the ‘gay’ scenario in India, an issue which has been pushed under the carpet as far as Indian drama is concerned:

...you can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can’t talk about gay issues because that’s not Indian, [that] doesn’t happen here. You can’t write about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having, sex with a cook or actually having a sex life – that isn’t Indian either – that’s confrontational even if it is Indian.

(Mee 1997: 24-25)

The major concern of Dattani in plays depicting a homosexual situation is the identity crisis which results from being marginalized and oppressed. He chronicles the struggles of characters who face pressures from outside as well as from within. At one level the confrontation is directed outwards, facing the prejudices and rejection of the society and at the other it is directed inwards where the confrontation is with the divided self, the product of social conditioning and sexual impulse. Dattani highlights and explores the individual’s inner self and its ‘responses to rejection’, ‘alienation persecution’ and ‘social conditioning’. The ensuing struggle is for visibility, voice and social space, not to be frozen into stereotypes but to have freedom of choice as individuals. In preface Dattani observes:
I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally.

(CP 2000: xv)

In the play, *Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)*, Dattani tries to unearth the position of women in conventional Indian society. In the matter of love and sex, Dattani takes a radical and rational vision against the sentimental and conventional vision popular in Indian society. This plays shows the emotional, financial and sexual intricacies of a joint family in modern-day India. It presents the clash between traditional ideology and contemporary culture that has created a new canvas of familial relationships. The play is presented in a multi level stage to expose the juxtaposition of past and present. The play is divided into three acts, titled ‘Women’, ‘Men’, and ‘Free For All’. In the first act, the focus remains on the home-confined identity of woman. In the second act, there is a fine exposition of the world of man representing the outer spaces of the business world. And the final act third lays bare characters and their two worlds. The play dramatizes the emptiness and sham in the lives of its cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous men, lost in the web of terrible secrets, deceptions and hypocrisy.
There are three couples in the play: Dolly and Nitin, Alka and Jitin and Lalitha and Sridhar. In the first act, there is an exposition of the domestic life of Dolly and Alka – women who remain mostly home and look after the men’s old mother Baa. The focus here is on the manner in which the setting coalesces with the themes, the trademark Dattani often uses for his stage in order to create resonance. The level where Baa is placed remains a constant in all the acts, and the time shifts that occur in terms of her memory carries the audience back and forth in time even as the present seems to parody the past. In the second act, men play out their part in office. Such repetitive devices serve to undercut the issues itself and reveal the facades. Finally everyone stands exposed to unpalatable realities of abuse, alcoholism, adultery and homosexuality. Michael Walling comments:

…as the starting point for a kaleidoscopic approach to the text… centred on a slightly abstract inner space, furnished with three white blocks, which represented Trivedi household and the office. The only naturalistic element in this area was a bar: a glowing blasphemous shrine to alcohol, with the all-seeing eyes of the television above it. Around this central area was another world: red and dusty full of torn newspapers… This is a play about performance; and uses the theatre to demonstrate how, in world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life. Paradoxically, it is only by the overt performance of the theatre that such acting can be exposed for what it is…

(CP 2000: 229-230)
The play is more about alternate sexuality, although the approach is more oblique and perhaps secondary to the more overt themes of gender differences and the rupture between the world of men and that of women. As the play also looks into the politics of the Indian joint family as the setting, it constantly views the gender divide and the dominance of the one over the other. Nitin tries to continue a loveless relationship with his wife Alka, like Bunny Singh of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the ‘happily married’ TV actor, who covertly indulges in queer relationships behind the façade of his macho public image.

The upper-class couples in Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen*, are major characters in the play who repeatedly draw attention to their own entrapment, but no one possesses the ability to arrest the collective descent into hopelessness. Power and will are dispersed to create multiple antagonisms, not concentrated into individualized conflicts that move towards some kind of tension and crisis. And Dattani is never judgmental in terms of sexual choices.

All the three women in the play suffer in their own way. Old Baa’s husband has abandoned her in favour of another woman. She now lies bed-ridden and aged, and no one responds to her call
though her sons and their families live there. Dolly, Baa’s eldest daughter-in-law, is a pale and meek character. She is beaten by her brutal husband, when she is in her advanced stage of pregnancy, consequently her daughter Daksha is born deformed. Alka, the younger daughter-in-law has her own cross to bear; her husband is a homo-sexual and that too with her own brother Praful, who has planned the marriage to carry on this relationship, right in the house, in the outhouse. The two sons of Baa, Jiten and Nitin, are failed businessmen. The Bonsai plant which appears in the play is an apt symbol of the entire family which has not ‘grown’ normally but stiffed and suffocated.

The play opens with the women’s world in which Lalitha arrives as an intruder and becomes a medium for the audience to have a peep into the lives of Dolly and Alka:

Lalitha (with a hint of perverse curiosity). Oh, it’s not Baa. We were talking bout Kanhaiya.

Alka: Oh! So you want to talk about Kanhaiya.

Dolly: No!

Alka: Why not?

Dolly: I feel . . . embarrassed.

(CP 2000: 259)
And later Alka broaches the issue of Dolly’s affair with the cook. She asks Dolly if the mention of the cook in front of Lalitha embarrassed her:

Alka: Does this … Will this make any difference to you?

Dolly: No, silly. Why should it? It’s nice to have an audience.

Alka (smiles). An audience. (laughs.) An audience! I never thought of it that way.

(CP 2000: 293)

The audience is made to realize that this is a drama being performed as the illusion of reality is shattered. In a Brechtian way, an alienating effect of dramaturgy is achieved. The theme of performance in the play can be best understood in the light Judith Butler’s ‘theory of performativity’. Where Butler connects identity to linguistic performativity, we can observe that these identities are constructed and constituted in a language. Hence, words and deeds are not just performed by a subject but are constituted upon the subject performativity. In a similar manner, Alka and Dolly assume new identities through their performances in front of Lalitha, constructing new selves, unknown to themselves even:

Alka: Then why did you bring it up?

Dolly: I didn’t. it was only ...(Angrily.) All right, I will say it!
You’re always implying that you have a better deal than me!

(Mimics.) Oh, didn’t Jiten tell you that? Niten told me a week ago!

Or, Niten me all four of us were going but Jiten changed his mind!

Alka: But that’s true! There’s no need to imply anything, it’s a fact!

At parties, you just sit in a corner sipping your lime juice and speak when spoken to. You refuse to mix, you refuse to be interesting.

You are just not . . . an interesting party. That’s why they don’t take us out more often.

(CP 2000: 274)

The half sentences and unsaid truths point towards the façade of urban family, where a complex scheme of affairs remain unexposed. Dattani, a nuanced writer builds up a tension in his plays without showing any neat categorizations.

The play is a portrait of sexual, moral and financial deprecation in the lives of Trivedi brothers living in a posh suburb of Bangalore. The play also unearths how the joy and happiness of conjugal relationship is taken away by the addiction to prostitutes. Jiten and Sridhar are pleasure seekers in prostitutions. In a way the play presents shifting Indian values and dramatizes the conflict between traditional and contemporary cultures:
Jiten: Screw the survey! You know who you should have tested it out on? Men!

Sridhar: Men!

Jiten: Yes! Men would want to buy it for their women! That’s our market. Men. Men would want their women dressed up like that. And they have the buying power. Yes! So there is no point in asking a group of screwed-up women what they think of it. They’ll pretend to feel offended and say, ‘Oh, we are always being treated like sex objects.’

(CP 2000: 276)

The play exposes male chauvinism and women as the colonized victims in the male dominated Indian society. Both Baa and Dolly are meted out injustice and ill treatment at hands of their husbands:

Baa: You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (Jerks her face as if she’s been slapped.) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face. I beg you! Hit me but not on . . . aaaah! (Covers her face weakly as her scream turns silent and the light on her fades out.)

(CP 2000: 278)

Dolly: And you hit me! Jitu, you beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up!

Dolly: Fifteen years ago. Hardly married for a year. Praful comes to visit us. The same day, your mother receives a letter from her cousin in Ahmedabad. What fate! It had to be the
same day! And it had to be the crucial month for me! What was in that letter? Our whole history. Including the portion which Praful hadn’t told you about.

(CP 2000: 311)

Baa’s ill memory of her husband is still fresh with her. Jiten too is like his father but he blames Baa for provocation. No one in the Trivedi household is ready to accept the guilt:

Jiten (sobbing). No! No! (Points to Baa’s room) She made me do it! She did it!

Dolly: No! Oh no! I will not let you get away so easily! They were your hands hitting me! Your feet kicking me! It’s in your blood! It’s in your blood to do bad!

(CP 2000: 312)

The play also depicts the issue of homosexuality in a very bold manner. The suffering of a wife due to her husband turning out to be a gay is responsible for her anguish and agony. Alka retorts and pours her anger against her brother for making her a scapegoat:

Alka: Our saint of a brother used to warn us against men like you. (Points to Jiten.) And what does he do? The saint gives his sister to the sinner and disappears! (Makes a motion of wiping her hands.) Finished. Matter over. Or is it? The saint has another sister who is (slaps her own face) bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. Not a coincidence.

(CP 2000: 300)
Alka’s responses can be compared to Leela Benare of Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* who has similar feelings of awe as well as contempt for authority. Although Alka is not a rebel like Benare, she prefers to hide behind a comfortable veil of stupor provided by alcohol. *Bravely Fought the Queen* encompasses the issue of gayism along with the main theme of exploitation of educated women in urban metropolis. Niten is revealing his ‘gay’ relationship with Praful:

Nitin: He tricked you too, didn’t he? How can you still love your brother after what he did to you . . . ? That’s right. Don’t answer. Just sleep. *(Laughs.)* You always were a heavy sleeper. Thank God. Those times when I used to spend the night at your place, I used to sleep on his cot. And he would sleep on a mattress on the floor, beside me . . . When all the lights were out, I would lie on the cot. Waiting. For at least an hour . . . I would get up and quietly walk to your room . . . Yours. Your sister’s and your mother’s to make sure . . . That’s right. Don’t wake up. Just sleep. And I would go back to Praful’s room . . . and kneel. At times he would wake up immediately. At other times I would lean forward to look at him. Close enough for my breath to fall gently on his face. And he would open his eyes. . . I love him too. He is . . . was he feel after! He made me cry each time! That was a game he played. And I-I was caught in it . . . He told me that you knew. That he had told you . . . about me. And that it didn’t matter to you. You only wanted the security of a marriage. He . . . he told me everything work out fine . . . But you didn’t know! He tricked you! I – I am sorry. It wasn’t my fault. *(Moves to her and slowly covers her face with the blanket.)*

*(CP 2000: 314)*
Thus, the play ends with the Niten’s confessional soliloquy. The closing spotlight falls on the pitifully huddled figure Alka in her drunken slumber before darkness envelops the stage. The two worlds converge violently in the last act, all the characters stand exposed, the sham and façade ripped apart. Dattani admits:

I am not sure I have portrayed the women as victims in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. I see men as victims of their own range and repression. This has serious consequences on the lives of women.

(quoted in Agarwal 2007: 27)

This play is more about performances and use of theatre to show, how in a world of hypocrisy acting becomes a way of life. The immensely significant semiotic referent, the bonsai is introduced via subtext and becomes the single most metaphor to shows the existence of all the characters that people play.

The motif of homosexuality which is touched upon in *Bravely Fought the Queen* is at the centre in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Dattani being preoccupied with social and political realities, embeds his thematic concerns in the urban Indian family. In its impact on the individual, the plight of women and ‘homosexuality’, it becomes an explosive subject for a writer.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998)* is one of the best loved and most performed plays of Dattani, both at home and abroad.
Despite its offbeat subject – gay love – the play convincingly shows its moorings in family relationships as its chosen milieu. It is a celebration of gay life, but it also deals with middle class family values and virtues and friendship. As a path-breaking play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* raises plenty of questions such as – what is it that has put gay population on the defensive? Was Indian society always closed to this issue? Is there a tradition of rejection of gay populace due to their gender preference? Ruth Vantia and Salem Kidwai attempted to trace same sex love in India and to the introductory section of their book they define 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century India as ‘modern’. Ruth Vanita and Saleen Kidwai in the book *Same Sex Love in India* write:

Two significant phenomenon develop during this period-first the minor homophobic voice that was largely ignored by the mainstream society in pre-colonial India becomes a dominant voice, and second, sexual love between women is depicted increasingly explicitly while such love between men is almost entirely silenced.

(Vanita and Saleem 2001: 191)

An anti-sodomy law was passed in 1861 which criminalized homosexuality in section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Raj Ayyar in the review of *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* comments:

Not only did colonialism stigmatize traditional non-puritan sexualities, it also criminalized some of those behaviours…

(quoted Talwar and Bandhana 2005: 158)
Gay marriages too emerge as an issue challenging the sanctity of marriage with procreation as the natural and expected norm. Love between the same sex, since it cannot be procreative is seen as unnatural and carnal. Dattani questions the stance which rejects the possibility of love, loyalty and dedication in a relationship between a eunuch and a homosexual. Using a ‘who-dun-it’ detective plot, Dattani skillfully brings to the surface petty jealousies and strong loyalties in order to expose the hypocrisy that permeates Indian society at large. Hoshang Merchant in an introduction to *Yaraana, Gay Writing from India* notes:

> …most homosexuals get married due to social pressures. Some commit suicide. Most adjust to the double life, so do their wives.

*(quoted Talwar and Bandhana 2005: 159)*

Dattani highlights the hypocrisy inherent in forced marriages or marriages of convenience that homosexuals enter into due to their inability to take a stand against societal pressure. The victim, usually in such marriages, is the wife who either develops self-doubt if unaware of her husband’s preferences, or is left with little option but to compromise. Dattani critiques the workings of personal and moral choices of gay sensibilities through his plays. Asha Khthari Chaudhuri observes:
Much of ‘mainstream’ society, Dattani believes, lives in a state of ‘forced harmony’, out of a sense of helplessness, or out of a lack of alternatives. Simply for lack of choice, they conform to stereotypes like ‘homosexuals’ that in some sense leads to a kind of ghettoisation within society, little spaces to which the marginalized are pushed. The way in which this is tackled, the struggle to be heard and seen is the stuff of the plays.

(Chaudhuri 2005: 45)

The play begins with a shocking start where a middle class aged security guard is being paid for sex. The action takes place in the living room of Kamlesh, a fashion designer living in Mumbai. In the company of some of his guests, he confesses that he is still in love with Prakash, a man who apparently moved on, gone ‘straight’. Therefore, Prakash has got rid of his obsession of homosexuality and is planning marriage with Kiran, the sister of Kamlesh. The party arranged by Kamlesh exposes the varied experiences of the homosexual community. Looking at how society creates stereotypes and behavioural patterns that devour any aberration from the expected norm, the play builds up tension within this context and ends in the classic Dattani denouement – distorting the given norms that the audience has begun to expect.

John McRae comments:

…as the characters’ masks fall, their emotions unravel, and their lives disintegrate. For the fault is not just the characters’ –
it is everyone’s, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity.

(CP 2000: 46)

Dattani’s plays are related to the elite urban milieu to which his characters belong. Bijay Kumar Das, in his book, *Postmodern Indian English Literature* writes, “Dattani’s plays are about contemporary reality that one encounters in the metropolis of our country” (Das 2003: 126). The urban realist plays of Dattani follow the familial focus and conflictual structure of realist drama, with one crucial difference. There is usually no ‘protagonist’ whose selfhood can render the struggle within individualistic terms. Dattani maintains an exceptional dexterity in unearthing the layers of human consciousness on the issues that are buried in perpetual silence. He further confirms that gays/lesbians have their concept of sexual relationship but they can’t escape the need of sexual differences determined by nature.

In the introductory note to the play, John MaRae admits, “…it is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates” (CP 2000: 45) thus introducing the theme of
alienation. Dattani explores a host of issues related to homosexuality.

The play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is the first in Indian theatre to openly handle gay themes of love and betrayal, issues which are generally invisible in the Indian context. A gathering of gay characters, a lesbian and a heterosexual provide multipohonic perspectives. Through characters who are diametrically opposed to each other, Dattani projects alternative realities about sexuality. Kamlesh the romantic riding the high horse of sacrifice and duty, Sharad the witty one and the only character at ease with his gay identity, Guard the exploited heterosexual with unacknowledged homosexual leaning, Deepali the lesbian feminist in command of herself, and Kiran the only straight character projecting a heterosexual womanhood. The play projects the essence of each character, yet the felicity with which Dattani portrays them prevents their emerging as stereotypes. MacRae in this connections comments, “They are a carefully balanced range of individuals with a depth of experience that exceeds traditional expectations” (CP 2000: 45). Dattani, through these characters explores the dynamics of personal and ethical choices made by them while
focusing on interpersonal relationships and themes of friendship, love, deception and betrayal. M K Naik comments on the play:

The play presents a group of well-to-do homosexuals in Bombay, their changing mutual relationships, their revelations, their self-delusions and self-discoveries.

(quoted in Talwar and Bandhana 2005: 161)

Dattani’s characters are instilled with the courage to speak boldly and blunt as before the public. By doing so, he intends to negotiate the issue with the society. While dramatizing the dynamics of individuals, ways of gratifying carnal desire with a little bit of a humourist approach, a kind of free air is provided to homosexual expression:

Sharad: I knew it within a month of moving in you …
Kamlesh: I tried, Sharad, I …
Sharad: You tried to love me, but …
Kamlesh: I wanted to love you, I tried for a whole year.
Sharad: But you couldn’t.
Kamlesh: I do love you.
Sharad: Oh! Spare me the lies! You could never love anyone because you are still in love with Parakash!

(CP 2000: 56)

The play is full of suspense and revelations. It is here we come to know that Prakash and Kamlesh were deeply in love with
each other. The separation between them causes immense pain and distress in the heart and mind of Kamlesh. Thereafter, he comes in contact with Sharad and develops homoric relationship with him. However, Kamlesh could not adjust with Sharad as he is constantly haunted by the memories of Prakash who is now known as Ed and intends to marry Kiran.

The play maps the grey realities of the society which forbids love and same sex relationships between two people. Kamlesh is caught up in the frustration, he is forlorn and frightened. He ventilates his feelings in the following way:

Kamlesh: I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while, I believed him. Because the medication helped me to cope with the depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is possible to change society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself.

(CP 2000: 69)

On the contrary Bunny is a gay in disguise:

Bunny: Since you want us to help you – let me give you some advice. You are looking in the wrong places to forget your Prakash. Get married.

(CP 2000: 70)
What is very fascinating about the play is its bold and frank treatment of gay themes. Depiction of such issues needs guts and courage on the part of the dramatist. Dattani unravels the whole issue in a very dynamic way. He instills courage and spirit into the minds of his characters that can openly reveal their gay identities. They don’t bother about the society’s aversion and reaction:

Kamlesh: Let them talk! If two men want to love one another, what’s the harm?

Kiran: Being divorced doesn’t help. Everyone seems to know all details. Or think they do. At that party, I felt their stares, as if they were saying, ‘That’s Kiran. The one whose husband dumped her.’ Kamlesh, take my advice. Don’t let people know bout you. You will spend your whole life defending yourself. If I had the choice, I would stay invisible too.

Kamlesh: Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?

( CP 2000: 91)

They are so absorbed with their conviction and commitment that even dare to leave the country for keeping their gay relations and identity intact and safe:

Ranjit: Call me what you will. My English lover and I have been together for twelve years now. You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country!

Deepali: Tina and I can tell all of you to go jump!

Ranjit: I guess you are an exception. But you guys will never succeed because you end up loving all the wrong blokes.

( CP 2000: 71)
Deepali’s conversation with Sharad is pertinent:

Deepali: You men! All you do is screw around like bunnies!


Deepali: I am all for the gay men’s cause. Men deserve only men!

(CP 2000: 60)

The dramatist has tried to show how gay people behave and act under the pressure of traditional cultural construction. This society, in which queer people have to necessarily live, does not accept them for what they are. Rather, it tries to make them what they are not, and the results are often disastrous. It brings about their self alienation through a complex web of discourses, as subjectivity is colonized by forces with which they cannot see eye to eye. Dattani tries to find out why the queer people seem to be hypocrites, escapists and introverts. Or is it simply a strategy for them to cope up in a hostile environment? The apt example in the play is that of Bunny Singh and Ed who get married to prove to the society that they are normal while secretly carrying with their gay relationships:

Bunny: Find yourself a nice woman. You can always have sex on the side.
Sharad: And pretend to be straight like you?
Bunny: What’s wrong with that? Huh? Do you think I will be accepted by the millions if I screamed from the housetops that I am a gay.
Ranjit: Yes, but you do scream from the rooftop that you are straight.
Bunny: Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can’t find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage.

(CP 2000: 70)

Though Dattani has disturbed the world of theatre by themes dealing so candidly with gays and lesbians, but a reading of his play clearly shows that while the play reveal the psychology of these people, they are made to feel, realize and express that they too would want to be ‘normal’ like others and be accepted, and are even uncomfortable of such relationships:

Kamlesh: Please! I am afraid! I need your help! I need you all. I am afraid. Frightened. (Pause.) After Sharad went away – I decided that I didn’t really need anyone to live with me. I had my work. They should have been enough. It wasn’t. I felt this void. The same feeling when three years ago, Prakash left me. I would have understood it if he had left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship. It would have worked between us, but he was ashamed. I was very angry. I left my parents and my sister to come here, all because of him. I know, I know shouldn’t blame him entirely for that – Sharad has told me often enough.
(Pause.) Sharad, this is something I haven’t told you because I know you would disapprove. For the first time in my life, I wished I wasn’t gay.

(CP 2000: 68)
There is always the fear of not being accepted which makes them put up all shams to cover up their shame:

Bunny: You can leave the country, but you can never run away from being brown. You are ashamed of being Indian.
Ranjit: That’s really rich coming from a closet homosexual like you! Yes, I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can’t seem to be both Indian and gay. But you are simply ashamed. All this sham is to cover up their shame.
Bunny: *(really hurt)*. That’s not true. You cannot make me an outcaste both inside and out.
Deepali: Bunny, you are a Sardarji. Why did you cut your hair?
Bunny: What has that got to do with…? Okay. Not because I am ashamed of being as Sardar. I am proud of it. I believe in my faith. My children learn from the Guru Granth Sahib… But because if I had a turban, I will end up playing a stereotypical Sird in all those movies. And that would hurt even more.
Deepali: Thank you, Bunny. I rest my case, Ranjit.
Ranjit: What do you mean?
Deepali: It’s not shame, is it? With us? … It’s fear … Of the corners we will be pushed into were we don’t want to be.

*(CP 2000: 88-89)*

And these fears make Bunny lead a double life and he confesses:

Bunny: I know. Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me – the real – me are present here in this room. And you all hate me for being such a hypocrite. The people who know me are the people who hate me. That is not such a nice feeling. I have to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either. I am sorry, Kiran, I lied to you as I have lied to the rest of the world. I said to you that I am a liberal-minded person. I am not them but I accept them. Actually, it is they who are liberal-minded. They have accepted me in spite of my letting
them down so badly. I deny them in public, but I want their love in private. I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now – I am a gay man. Everyone believes me to be the model middle-class Indian man. I was chosen for the part in the serial because I fit into common perceptions of what a family man ought to look like. I believed in it myself. I lied – to myself first. And I continue to lie millions of people every week on Thursday nights. There’s no such person…

(CP 2000: 102-103)

These discourses damage the vitality and energy of human beings. As a result, the subjects of such discourses create around themselves a cocoon of cultural codes and institutions which further increase their subjection. Gay subjectivity is shown to be constructed as an oppositional subjectivity against an oppressive discourse of normative heterosexual behavior. These discourses construct an idea of the subject, so that people start seeing themselves as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant.’ When a queer person sees himself as a hypocrite, he has internalized the discourse, not being critically conscious about it.

Conventionally, the play could have ended with Ed committing suicide, but Ed is saved and is shown to get up, although with help. He starts walking towards people he earlier dreaded facing. Dattani, though not very loudly makes a plea for an atmosphere of acceptance and acknowledgement for the queer community and also successfully brings gay issues out of the closet.
into the open. The play stands on the side of gay celebration, as Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri notes:

Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make to his audience. But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatizes and peoples the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with, facing genuine, real-life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for the empathy and sensitivity to India’s ‘queer culture’.

(Chaudhuri 2005: 51)

The audience then begins to move beyond expectations of the stereotype. The initial shock on stage runs through a conventional audience upon their discovery of two men making love in bed would become diluted, and perhaps dramatically less potent. The play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* therefore lifts the façade of sexlessness from male-male intimacy; hence the play openly deals with homosexuality. Dattani, breaks the silence which reigned so far on the matter of non-heterosexual relationship. In a country like India where heterosexuality is considered a norm, homosexuality or same-sex bonds have been treated as deviant, pervasive or even criminal. Socially those who practice it are harassed, victimized, and mocked at. Dattani boldly tackles the taboo-ridden aspects and captures the anguish and agony of is marginalized group. His plays on the queers are a wake-up call for the understanding and empathy for this ‘deviant’ group.
Chapter IV

Revitalizing the Tradition: Dattani’s Contribution to Indian English Drama

Dattani’s latest photograph
Dattani’s Sahitya Akademi award citation reads as follows:

[Dattani] ‘…probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender…a brilliant contribution to Indian English drama.

(quoted in Das 2003: 126)

Dattani’s work has in effect revitalized the English theatre scene in India. Despite the presence of playwrights like Pratap Sharma, Gurcharan Das and Asif Currimbhoy in the sixties and seventies, which I have already discussed in chapter I, Indian drama in English was most often associated with light amusement for the urban elite. In this connection, Shankar Mokashi-Punekar writes:

The absence in the 1980’s of new major Indian dramatists writing in English is indicative of the fact that while there is a vibrant theatre in the indigenous languages of India, there is little professional activity in English language theatre.

(Mokashi 1994: 386)

The first significant thematic formation to appear after independence consists of a succession of major plays that invoke
the nation’s premodern and precolonial past through the two principal modes of retrospective representation—myth and history. For instance, the inaugural playwrights such as Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh and Girish Karnad were major exponents of such thematic concerns. Dharamvir Bharati’s *Andha Yug* (1954) is a verse play which subjects the main story of the Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*, to create acute compression as well as elaboration. *Ashadh ka Ek Din* (1958) by Mohan Rakesh, places the historical figure of the archcanonical Sanskrit poet and playwright, Kalidasa, within a largely invented action to create an ironic portrait of the artist. Karnad’s *Yayati* (1961) uses an early episode from *Mahabharata* for its counter-oedipal narrative of a son, Puru, who temporarily accepts the curse. Thus, the first active decade in Indian drama after independence established narratives of both myth and history.

Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, K.N. Panikkar, Ratan Thiyam and Mahesh Dattani are authors, actors, directors and founder-managers of their own theatre groups. Utpal Dutt was the leading Indian practitioner of his Little Theatre Group and People’s Little Theatre from the late 1940’s until his death in 1993. His theatre covered a wide range of political forms, from
elaborately scenic proscenium productions to street theatre, poster plays and agitprop. The dominant political thematic of Dutt’s work was a transhistorical interest in the theory and practice of rebellion and revolution, but as manager of the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta (1950-1970), he developed a singular repertoire of spectacular multimedia productions that urged the spectator to ‘fall in love’ with the experience of theatre itself. Habib Tanvir’s Naya Theatre developed more than a dozen major productions around folk narratives and tribal performers. His theatre maintained a singular identity between narrative, performer and performance style, providing an influential example of how the urban and rural may interpenetrate. Panikkar is best known as for his revivals of the \textit{Mahabharata} plays of Bhasa. Ratan Thiyam’s work testifies to the survival of Brahanmanical Hinduism and Hindu epic traditions. The above mentioned directors developed an antirealistic, stylized, indigenous musical forms that enhanced the theatricality of their productions. Like the texts of literary drama, their plays also appear in the print medium. Sircar became interested in developing minimalist theatre that could provide an alternative to urban realistic drama as well as rural folk forms.
Tendulkar was the most significant screenplay writer for the Middle Cinema movement in India in Hindi and Marathi between the 1970’s and 1990’s. Along with Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Mahesh Dattani are among the major contemporary practitioners who work predominantly in the realist mode and possess a social imagination that expresses itself primarily through the psychodrama of family relationships. The contemporary tradition of urban, realist, predominantly domestic drama is large and varied and includes some of the most influential plays of the last five decades: Vijay Tendulkar’s *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (1967), *Sakharam Binder* (1972) in Marathi; Mahesh Elkunchwar’s *Raktapushpa* (1972), *Wada Chirebandi* (1985) in Marathi and Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* (1990) and *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), in English. The preferred mode of writing plays after independence in indigenous languages such as Bengali, Kannada, Hindi and Marathi was realism, for it was felt that it was through this mode that the ‘modern’ sensibility could best express itself. By expunging melodrama, spectacle and sentimentality from the forms of realism inherited from the pre-independence period, a playwright like Vijay Tendulkar fashioned serious new vehicles for the stage that determined the direction of his work. His drama of ideas represents perhaps the most substantial exploration because
his customary method is to translate social and political conflicts into personal dilemmas and resituate them within the domestic sphere. Tendulkar’s generation in Marathi theatre, therefore, epitomizes the position that realism is an indispensable modern mode for understanding, coping with, and representing the post-independence present.

Mahesh Dattani, the most successful contemporary playwright in English, combines an essentially text-centered literary playwriting with extensive work in the theatre as actor, dramaturg, dancer and director. His own distinctive brand of realistic, cynical and quasi-melodramatic urban tragicomedy provided him with several leading roles on the stage, and provided his Bangalore-based group, *Playpen*, well-received original productions throughout the 1990’s, while his recent published work has signaled a strong interest in gay theatre and avant-garde performance.

Dattani’s work, which began to be published in the late 1980’s, does much to challenge the stereotype that Indian English drama was just a light amusement. Dattani himself admits:

A lot of the damage colonization has done is reflected in the theatre, in the English language. The way most people speak the English language, most of it is imitative, there is an
embarrassment about speaking it with your own background, there is a need to sound different, to sound British.

(Mee 1997: 25)

Dattani’s plays do much to dispel this barrier by promoting an Indian English familiar to the urban middle-class audiences he writes for. However, like other writers who write in English, he also receives a fair share of criticism for his choice of language. In this connection John McRae writes to the introduction to *Final Solutions and other plays* (1994):

> When challenged [for writing in English] at a recent seminar at 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 2000: 9)

Dattani admits later in an interview:

> Its 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 it’s reflect in India and in the world.

(Mee 1997: 26)

This liberal use of language exhibits Dattani’s favour to write effective plays in English on contemporary Indian issues:

> I am reluctant playwright. I would choose to direct first before, I write. But I wanted more plays written primarily in English language for Indian audience.

(Nair Online)
The use of English language has been a central concern of playwrights as well as critics of Indian English plays for obvious reasons. A very few experiments that succeeded, such as the plays of Gieve Patel and Cyrus Mistry, unfortunately were not followed up, as the plays received modest productions and publicity. But Dattani’s use of an authentic Indian English on the Indian English plays stage was widely applauded.

Dattani, through his plays makes an authentic representation of several topical contemporary issues, which was to some extent unthinkable in the past. His dramatic creed is not guided by some definite principles of stagecraft. Theatre, for him is a platform on which he believes real-life situations can be performed. He admits:

My milieu is theatre. You can’t operate in isolation…I do not 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 is a craft communicating through language of action.

(quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 8)

Therefore, Dattani clearly admits that the success of drama consists in the manipulation of appropriate language. It is the only valuable device that can establish a chemistry between the dramatists, the actors and the audience. It becomes the responsibility of the dramatist to use apt words, expressions, images and dialogues to make the experiences more lively and
authentic on stage. Dattani also admits that he has been influenced by several Marathi playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar. Unlike Girish Karnad who lays emphasis on history, myth and purana, Dattani concentrates on contemporary urban India and his plays address subjects of gender, sex, religion, communal tension, feminine identity, same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian relationships.

Over the last two decades, Dattani’s use of language and his range of subjects have been resonating more and more strongly with urban Indians both at home and abroad, who can identify with his plays on many different levels. He often tries to seek psycho-philosophical justifications to make his plays more subtle and authentic. He dramatizes them not as a social critic but reflects the idea that theatre brings life to a drama. Dattani cautiously maintains a balance between exclusive theatrical art and seriousness of thought. Michael Walling comments:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of Indian theatre with the textual vigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It’s a potent combination which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy and its ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives. 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 and western influences can take place. Through this fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh
Dattani creates such a space. This is in itself a political and social statement of astonishing force.

(CP 2000: 229)

Therefore, Dattani’s theatrical art is a process of social content, psychological element and philosophical truths that help him to make his art a compact pattern of strong dramatic situations.

European and conventional models of drama did not fascinate Dattani and he made efforts to carve out his own dramatic convention to expand the brand of ‘Indian Theatre’. His mission as a dramatist is to assimilate the art of drama with living life experiences. Dattani’s Indian Theatre in English addresses us in its own voice of traditions, of problems and situations which we encounter in our routine daily lives, and it speaks in our own accents, not borrowed or cultivated ones. He confronts all of them with a warmth, spontaneity and clarity tinged with a comic over view. The tone, ambience, characters and ideas, almost everything is Indian in his plays.

Drama is a performing art: dramatic art is the most wide-ranging, the most polyphonic of all the arts: it both represents life and is also a way of seeing it. Written words don’t matter in dramatic art, as they do in a novel or in a poem. When a play is staged, a multitude of signs are unleashed for its reception and the
perceptive capacities of the audience. The stage direction, movement and setting of the play matter most in our understanding of the text. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri comments:

The dramatic script, like an operatic score or the scenario of a ballet, is no more than a raw material from which the performance is created. The actors, rather than merely reflecting a creation that has already been fully expressed in script, give body, voice, and imagination to what was only a shadowy indication in the text. The text of a play is as vague and incomplete in relation to a fully realized performance as is a musical score to a concert.

(Chaudhuri 2005: 100)

Therefore, it’s the performance through which the text reveals its meanings and intentions. And Dattani primarily writes his plays in order to be staged or performed.

We find a significant number of theoreticians, who have worked out reading strategies, both in terms of the written or performance texts. In the field of semiotics, the text-performance dialectic is put in a scene, the system of association those unities have, the diverse stage devices which forge a performance. The dichotomy between the ontological paradigms of the text and performance would leave no room for mutual co-operation and fulfillment, hence would itself be against the pluralist agenda of the postmodernists. Bert O. States comments:
From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior document; it is the animating current to which the actor submits his body and refines himself into an illusionary being…it is by virtue of the absent text that the actor becomes a real living person…

(States 1985: 128-29)

Patrice Pavis, another semiotician adds:

…a performance text is only decipherable in its intertextual relationship with social discourse.

(Pavis 1982: 139)

Thus, these theoreticians suggest that the way to go for theatre theorists is not just through text or performance, but the audience and its associated pragmatics that need further clarifications. Reader-response theory along with semioticians like Umberto Eco (1979) have set out detailed criteria for the ‘model reader’; Wolfgang Iser’s (1974) ‘implied reader’; or Stanley Fish’s (1980) theories have all prioritized the reader of the print world.

Dattani’s position differs because the problems seem to ease out a little due to his stage productions in which he writes, directs and sometimes also acts in his plays. He came to writing plays from acting and directing experiences that had stressed group work, and like Tendulkar, he underscores the importance of practical experience in the theatre. Dattani writes in preface:

I am practicing theatre in an extremely imperfect world where the politics of doing theatre in English looms large over
anything else one does. Where writing about the middle class is seen as unfashionable…I am certain that my plays are true reflections of my time, place and socio-economic background…in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally.

(CP 2000: xvi)

The fact that Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person, therefore, enables him to structure stage mechanism effectively. He knows well enough how he at times, allows the texts to speak for themselves. In this regard, Dattani many times had to edit his original scripts for stage production. Also there was hardly a playwright who had actually begun with roots in theatre. Dattani admits:

I think that’s the tragedy. I think that’s what they lose out on. They have to have a theatre background…you should begin by getting involved in a production. Because there’s nothing like that experience.

(quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 104)

The notion of team work is a primary force in theatre for the director who is putting together all effort in the staging of a show. Dattani observes:

If you look at my plays, you would find that each character, every character has, you know, his or her space in the play, which an actor can develop.

(quoted in Chaudhuri 2000: 104)
So according to Dattani, it’s evident that a playwright has to realize that he is not meant to be only read but has to stage actors and no theatre is possible without an actor or without an audience. Dattani comments:

Everything is geared towards ‘rasa’. Which is why I always direct the first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instructions, which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. That way, there is no conflict.

(Nair Online)

For instance, in a play like *Bravely fought the Queen*, which I have discussed in detail in chapter III, the realities that Dattani deals with are multiple, and stage directions from the house and office are incorporated, hence the play moves from without to within, a kind of internalized terrain is observed by the spectator. The stage space in Walling’s production was defined and redefined by lighting design and by the actor’s bodies showing diverse terrains on the peripheries, whereas the centre stage continues with parallel narratives. The extensions and stylized shifts are conveyed within the text and the sub-texts. As soon as Dolly makes her revelation, she begins to dance as Daksha would dance uncontrollably until she collapses. In this act, there is a profound inwardness, a pure moment of theatre is unearthed. The actor is to
perform Dolly; Dolly will perform Daksha; and Daksha will perform the dance. Michael Walling comments:

…about performance; and uses of theatre to demonstrate how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life. Paradoxically, it is only by the overt performance of the theatre that such acting can be exposed for what it is…By exploiting layer upon layer of performance, of unreality, Mahesh allowed his actress a route to emotion in its rawest form: the pain, the anguish in the blood-knot of the family, which is his constant theme. ‘Isn’t that the way she dances?’ It seems an innocuous line on the page. But this is writing beyond words: this is theatre.

(Edmundson 2000: 230)

In order to revalidate the value of theatrical interpretations Dattani had to edit his original script several times for this production in concrete terms.

Similarly, Lillette Dubey’s production of Dance Like a Man is distinct from Dattani’s own use of stagecraft. Dubey’s stage production is extremely intricate in this play, the text echoing with multiple meanings. In this play the idea of playing different roles by the same character is unique in the history of Indian drama:

…it is an amazing script…beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than a role which really tests the actor’s talent and how seamlessly all is done.

(Sumanaspati Oline)
Mithran Devanesen, a Chennai based theatre director comments on Dattani’s stagecraft:

I used a minimalist approach to set design, which gave me freedom to choreograph movement composition with the broad strokes, sometimes sculpture in quality and often fluid like a dance in full flow.

(CP 2000: 383)

Dattani affirms that the perfect dramatic structure can be invented through the synthesis of the understanding of human relationship and the dynamics of social order. The formal dramatic structure in creating an art is not an essential component of dramaturgy. In an interview Dattani comments:

…it is more to do really with dramatic structure and less with literary skills. I think the skill of playwright is listening to the day-to-day speech and not making it sound flowery…I think, it has more to do with understanding of human relationship and how conflict can be present on stage.

(Agarwal 2007: 174)

A survey of contemporary Indian drama shows that the works of Mahesh Dattani represent a powerful resurgence in Indian English drama. This playwright has given a new direction to Indian theatre, with his innovative and experimental work that resonates with contemporary relevance. John McRae acknowledges Dattani as “the voice of India” hence causes controversy but at the same
time they are plays of today. Many of his plays embody the classic concern of world drama.

Dattani has an unyielding drive for experiment and innovation. He unearths newer issues and stages them with a befitting stage mechanism. In his dramatic world, the experience has to pass through five stages – the organization of words in script, the contextual suggestions, tone and direction, gestures and postures of actors and most importantly, the effect of the action on the audiences. He conceives the position of theatre not in ‘isolation’ but as a ‘totality’ in which the distinction of page and stage diminishes. For the performative stage mechanism, a balance is required in order that the dramatist shows his vision in concrete images. The text of the drama gets life in theatre through the appropriate tools of performance. Julian Hilton writes in his book, *New Directions in Theater*:

…in the theatre any plot or action exists only in the moment of performance and has no stable meaning or identity outside the performance process…there is no single or necessary definition of what plot or action is, even in the case of play with an authoritative source ‘test’ for every performance redefines, however marginally the nature of performed…

(Hilton 1994: 7)

Dattani has been making conscientious efforts to showcase the issues and problems of contemporary urban Indian society-
making them an integral part of his dramatic credo. He does not merely deal with human sensibility and human experience but his dramatic world projects something that is challenging and new which differentiates him from other dramatists at work in the present times.

A close study of Dattani’s plays reveals that his plays are protests against the imposition of restraints and constraints, of social myths and conventions that often exhibit a dehumanizing treatment towards others. His theatrical creed strongly implies that he is a thinker and a devout humanist. His theatre vehemently asks us not to discriminate between people on the basis of colour, gender, religion or country.

Dattani’s theatrical credo therefore established a new phase in Indian English drama. This new ‘English Theatre’ in India signals a drama of substance that could be produced in future theatre. Dattani’s theatricality is characterized by a realistic tone and humanist approach. He tries hard to diminish the disparity between the ‘page’ and ‘stage’, enabling theatre as an instrument in articulating the voice of the masses. He dramatizes the stark reality of life without much romanticizing because for him ‘stage’ is the manifestation of ‘human self’. For him, therefore, theatrical art can be enhanced and enriched by affiliating it to the truth of real life.
human experiences. He observes human life very closely and interprets the same through his theatrical performance. In Dattani’s own words:

I would like to challenge the assumption of what is Indian. Does that mean traditional theatre forms? Yes, they’re wonderful, they’re very sophisticated, they’re very impressive, but are they really India? That’s something I would like to question and challenge. Are they really reflecting life as it is now, that is the question that I would like to ask. They’re fine, but there is the danger that if you look at them as if they’re quintessential India you’re doing those forms a great disservice, because you’re not allowing them to change. What we need to do now is to look at those forms and say we’re approaching the twenty-first century, this is were we are and this is our legacy, so where do we take that.

(Mee 1997: 25)

By examining and evaluating different dramatic traditions from a historical perspective, I would like to argue that Dattani’s plays highlight new ways of being ‘postcolonial’ ‘feministic’ ‘humanistic’ and ‘naturalistic’ in the twenty-first century. He does not totally discard the past but presents it as an artifact by reinventing different aspects in order to make meaning for our present and future.

Dattani’s theatrical premises are built upon innovative techniques and novel themes. All his plays stand testimony to his unique ability as a dramatist. His plays bear the unmistakable
imprint of his profound thought processes and imagination. He is an authentic theatrical voice in the world of shifting values and changing phenomenon. His understanding of human nature and human relationships are extensive and profound and with his vivid imagination and uncommon theatrical ability, Dattani’s vision is beyond cultural diversities and linguistic variations.
Conclusion
After having elucidated the general tendencies and assumptions of drama in the Indian context in the very first chapter of this dissertation, one cannot refute that Indian English drama has become an independent and outstanding genre of writing in the ‘postcolonial’ literatures. In the beginning, fiction and poetry had been highly influential literary endeavors and drama was a less profitable pursuit both in critical as well as commercial terms. However, Indian English drama with the arrival of Mahesh Dattani started gaining audiences and its success now depends more on the performance than on its written counterpart. Dattani with his immense skills in dramaturgy made explicit that drama is basically a theatrical art which decodes the messages and defines the meaning of life. Therefore, it’s theatre which breaks the web of illusion and ignorance of people’s perception and develops an understanding through its stage performance.

In the hands of Dattani, Indian English drama transformed itself beyond the limitations of imitation, amateur, translation and proper patronage. He has emerged as a potent voice that dramatizes
the dilemmas of human existence. Some of his common themes bring gender inequalities, caste-ridden practices, social discrimination and an all pervasive moral depravity. The resultant play often deriving strength from a structural compactness and ability to bridge direct communication between the sensible soul of the artist and the audience.

Mahesh Dattani has been making continuous efforts to showcase the issues and problems of contemporary Indian society, making them an integral part of his dramatic credo. His dramatic world projects challenges which differentiate him from other Indian dramatists such as Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar etc who have also dealt with issues that have been confronting human being for ages. In a way, they have mirrored the problems and issues of contemporary Indian societal set-up but none of them has ever made them an essential part of their dramatic art as Dattani does.

Dattani takes a lead to represent the commoner’s voice which did not find due expression on account of conventional theatrical canons and devices. This study has explored how Dattani has been constantly striving to uplift and explore the position of the marginalized sections of our society for relocating their identities. Dattani self-consciously uses theatre to bring about social change,
Erin Mee, defines this process as “a way of decolonizing theatre” (2002: 14). As a modern playwright, Dattani unshackles Indian English drama from worn out and stereotypical artistic conventions. For example within the framework of theatrical structure, Dattani succeeds exceptionally to expose the social evils of discriminations based on gender (see chapter II). In this way, Dattani’s dramatic art has expanded the new dramatic horizons in the field of Indian English drama.

Dattani attributes his success to the fact he has a theatre company which produce his plays. He is India’s first playwright to use theatre as a powerful medium to bring social change. He has an array of themes to offer us in his plays and issues and the one he chooses to project are most topical but also the most controversial. The example is his latest staged play Where did I leave my Purdah (2012). The play is set against the framed company theatres that performed dance-dramas through the 1950s till the 1980s. The major thematic concern in the play is of retrieval of cultural identities. In this play Dattani proves that he has not lost the masterly touch he has had, of delineating the dreams and dilemmas that people face, especially when they live in the make-believe atmosphere of theatre.

One significant trajectory that this dissertation has explored is that an intensive study of his plays leads us to an interesting
study of stage craft in Indian theatre. The settings introduced by Dattani in Indian theatre are more complex and at the same time innovative. There are multilevel sets so that whole interior of the house is visible to the audience. The Italian director John MacRae says:

Mahesh Dattani is always adventurous in his way of using the theatrical space at his disposal: multilevel, breaking the sounds of proscenium, wondrously inventive use of lighting to give height, breath and depth.

( CP 2000: 45)

In the plays under study Tara, Where There’s a Will, Bravely Fought the Queen and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai Dattani’s blending of social commitment with linguistic innovation was particularly studied. It was observed that Dattani spares himself rhetorical expression of embellished languages: the language spoken by his characters is the language of their routine lives. That itself is a big success for a dramatist in the matter of effective usage of conventional language on stage in theatre. He uses brief and subtle ‘dialogues’. He places his characters in a natural and setting and widens a scope for a dialogue process to take place. Dattani’s characters are hence remarkably ‘realistic’. To invent the dialogue technique, his unyielding drive for innovation and experimentation prompts him to reveal a character’s first reaction and the forced reaction sacrificing the conventional and traditional
dialogue pattern. In this process he invents ‘double dialogue’ technique, to decode the interior and exterior behavior of his characters. In this kind of dialogue process, Dattani has made a bifurcation of the dialogue of his characters into two groups: ‘thought’ and ‘speech’ so being a realist _Dattani expresses reality through ‘thought’ device and what his characters speak is circumstantial, known as ‘speech’. Besides, the use of ‘double dialogue’ Dattani also uses ‘injected dialogues’. For example in chapter II in the play under study _Where There’s a Will_, there are two different remarks about the same characters. This commendable experiment with dialogue device has revolutionized many theatrical devices in order to bring themes home to an audience. This dialogue mechanism is very comical at the same time ironical. It’s a novel technique used by Dattani alone in Indian English theatre. In this way, Dattani has tried to liberate himself from language politics. His ability and understanding to present, emotional the upheaval of his characters without using poetic language is an achievement. He profusely uses words from Indian languages like Gujarati, Kannad and Hindi, in English sentences. It makes his dialogues sound authentic, appropriate and original. Hence, making the characterization expressive and communicative.
Secondly, this dissertation observed also attempted to study the paramount space in Dattani’s dramatic firmament which is occupied by ‘family’ as a unit almost in all his plays. Dattani employs multifarious techniques and devices for bringing themes and ideas home to the audience. In this way, audiences are able to connect and link their own selves to his plays. As all his stage plays are entrenched in a family locale. Dattani proves his deep understanding of human relationships which helps him to achieve a compact dramatic structure. And it is this that is his essence a powerful conception of plot and a minute delineation of character. These innovative dramatic qualities by Dattani have put Indian English drama on the theatrical world map.

Mahesh Dattani is a man of multiple roles, managing his audience to sit up and listen, and listen with such an involvement that they are able to link themselves to his stagecraft to an extent that they even begin to forget that they are in fact, watching a play in an ‘alien’ tongue. It is against this backdrop that this dissertation has evaluated the work and achievement of Mahesh Dattani. To him goes the credit of carrying forward the tradition of Indian theatre through a necessary and dynamic change as well as innovation required for artistic reform.
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