Mahesh Dattani: Affirming English as the Language for Modern Indian Theatre

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Abstract:
The present paper explores Mahesh Dattani’s claims for English as the language of expression for his plays and for the modern Indian theatre. The paper looks into the biographical causes and circumstances that made Dattani choose English for his writing. His boldness in his choice of language has contributed a lot towards his success as a playwright and as a director; giving him an international exposure and recognition. He adapts Western theatrical techniques to the Indian socio-cultural context with his dramatic genius, enabling him to retain the original flavour of the characters and situations in his plays. The themes that he chooses for his plays are unconventional, which the other playwrights of his time avoid to take up on the stage. But Dattani through his dramatic genius handles such themes in the most successful manner; sensitising the audience towards the issues and enabling them to think on their own. He takes the Indian theatre out of the conventional closet languages and themes for new projections on the international forum – adding new aesthetical dimensions to it and making it ever rich, vibrant and dynamic.

Keywords: English, Language, Indian Theatre, Communication, Space, Stage.

Mahesh Dattani has to his credit more than twenty plays with a whole range for screen, radio and stage – establishing him as one of the most important personalities in Indian English Theatre. His career as a playwright, actor and director spans more than three decades and his plays have been successfully staged not only in India but over the entire world. He is the first Indian English playwright to be awarded by the Sahitya Akademi in 1998.

Dattani made his theatrical debut in 1980s when he joined Bangalore Little Theatre (BLT). It was here that he came to know about the intricacies of the theatre as he underwent a rigorous training in acting and direction for the first time. Dattani established his own playgroup PLAYPEN or popularly called ‘Mahesh Studio’ in 1984. He underwent Western ballet training under Molly Andre at Alliance Franchise de Bangalore from 1984 to 1987 and also took Bharatanatyam training at Bangalore from renowned artist Krishna Rao from 1986 to 1990 – making him understand art in a better way. His playgroup started performances with Greek tragedies and English plays in the beginning. He directed European plays translated into Hindi and regional plays translated into English, realising something missing in either. The foreign plays were unable to hold the audience spellbound as the socio-cultural context of the characters and the plays was different from that of the audience which failed to identify itself with the characters. It was the shortcomings of the translated works that inspired him to write original plays in English. Dattani’s first attempt to write a play of his own for stage was made in 1986 for the ‘Deccan Herald Theatre Festival’ as he decided not to take up the play of any foreign author but to indulge in his own creation which he made for the occasion in the form of Where there is a Will, with English as the medium of writing. During the festival, the play was received with “...laughter, laughter and laughter. The laughter of identification that I [Dattani] had craved for.” (Dattani, 2014, p.19) It was through the success of Where there is a Will that he discovered English his medium of writing for the rest of his career.

Dattani is of the firm conviction that English has become a commonly accepted language in India in the post colonial era of Twentieth and Twenty First century. It has become the bridging language across all the states in India who prefer speaking in the local or regional languages especially in the metro cities where people pour in from all corners of the country. The medium of day to day interaction thus becomes English, making it acceptable in all walks of life. Regarding this, Dattani comments:

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’re more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English (but...) I wanted to do more Indian plays (and that) became a challenge, because there weren’t many good translations, but they didn’t do anything for me. (Mee, 2002, p.14)

Moreover, Dattani looks at the positive side of the acceptability of English as it represents the fundamental flexible quality of the Indian culture to accumulate, include and accept; making itself so rich in variety and range, remaining unique in itself at the same time. India is one of the largest...
English speaking countries in the world. English has been absorbed and included in the culture, especially the urban culture. Its international recognition makes it all the more acceptable in the local context. Dattani affirms:

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

Dattani’s choice for English as the medium of expression for his writings lies in his childhood experiences and schooling also which was done at Baldwin High School, Bangalore. He claims that his parents were very enthusiastic regarding his school as he would learn to speak “good English” there. He was an average student in other subjects but quick in English and his school turned out to be the platform where his brain was washed of his Gujarati heritage and displaced him linguistically. (Dattani, 2014, p.9) His introduction to the English writers there laid the foundation to his thorough understanding of the English literature, especially drama. His schooling made English his “personal language” and he started reading and enjoying English plays. (Chatterjee, 2005, p.9)

Dattani admits that over the years of his schooling and of his college days, English became the language he could best express himself in. While writing an introduction to his play, Final Solutions and other plays (1994), John McRae quotes an interesting moment during a questioning session in a seminar at Bangalore which explains the reason of Dattani’s choice of English as the language of writing, “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”. (p.9) In another interview he admits, “You’ve got to be true to your expressions. English is for me a sort of medium of expression for his writings lies in his childhood experiences and schooling also which was done at Baldwin High School, Bangalore. He claims that his parents were very enthusiastic regarding his school as he would learn to speak “good English” there. He was an average student in other subjects but quick in English and his school turned out to be the platform where his brain was washed of his Gujarati heritage and displaced him linguistically. (Dattani, 2014, p.9) His introduction to the English writers there laid the foundation to his thorough understanding of the English literature, especially drama. His schooling made English his “personal language” and he started reading and enjoying English plays. (Chatterjee, 2005, p.9)

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Dattani takes up urban themes as English is the preferred language in urban India. His theatrical context constitutes urban middle class individuals that are in conflict with the self and the society. That is why the characters do not look or sound unreal when they speak English on stage. The setting is typically urban, mostly with the divided stage, signifying the divided self, family,
relationships and the society. The inner self is brought to life on the stage; employing various theatrical techniques that Dattani is master of. He has learnt a lot from the western theatre and drama but has moulded it to his convenience by innovating for the Indian cultural context. His themes and handling of the problems have the reflection of the western theatre especially that of John Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. His point of departure from these western playwrights is that he adapts the western treatment of the realism in the Indian perspective. Michael Walling in ‘A Note on the Play’ of Bravely Fought the Queen says:

His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It is a potent combination, which shocks and disturbs, through its accuracy, and its ability to approach a subject from multi perspectives. Postcolonial India and multicultural Britain both have an urgent need for cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through this fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. (Dattani, 2000, p.229)

And of all the popular art forms, this space can only be produced in theatre. The fusion of poetry, music, dance and performance is possible only in theatre. But it takes the expertise of the playwrights like Dattani to handle such multidimensional fusion as he is well versed in art, music, dance, direction and performance. Dattani once commented in his talk delivered at Krishi Festival Plays to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Bengali Theatre in Bangalore:

Man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical. Through this language of theatre he has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be. (Dattani, 2002, p.1)

Dattani takes theatre as the most dynamic art form capable of stretching the artistic limits of playwright to the maximum. His mastery of this form has given him a worldwide recognition. He was assigned to write plays for BBC Radio that was presenting a series of plays to commemorate the 600th anniversary of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in 2000. His plays like On a Muggy Night in Mumbai and Dance Like a Man were produced at the Tribeca Arts Centre, New York and the script of Morning Raga has been archived by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, USA. His radio plays are frequently broadcast on BBC and have been appreciated by international critics and audience. His international theatrical productions have collaborations with renowned companies like Border Crossings comprising of Chinese, Swedish and English actors. With such a vast experience and exposure, Dattani has evolved as a playwright over the decades accumulating the changes that have taken place in this field in India and abroad. His contact with the international theatre companies has kept him a step ahead. Reflecting on his secret of success as an accomplished playwright, actor and director, he says:

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

Dattani employs new ideas in writing and direction; innovating on and off stage. He makes much use of technological tools and technical knowhow. He innovates new possibilities for the stage and for the themes. An important thing regarding Dattani is that he takes up new ideas for the themes of his plays that the majority of the playwrights maintain their silence on. He takes up taboo issues which the other playwrights avoid writing about and handles them in a unique manner. He has successfully projected on stage the controversial issues regarding the gay identity, hijras, sexually abused children, fanaticism, communalism, gender bias and the crisis faced by the HIV positive patients. He has enacted the conflict within the minds of the characters on the stage. He brings to life the issues that simmer under the surface and which people avoid discussing in open, but such issues cannot be evaded as they concern the entire society in one form or the other. Sahitya Akademi award citation declared him as a dramatist who “... probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender ... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.” (Agrawal, 2011, p.184-85) His representation of ideas on stage has the realistic touch. That is why he never tries to
moralise or preach. He sensitises the audience regarding the issue and then the audience is let free to ponder over it on its own. That is why it said regarding Dattani, “He aims not at changing society but only seeks to offer some scope for reflection in the hope that his plays will give the audience some kind of insight into their lives.” (Nair, 2001, p.2)

Dattani never indulges in metaphysical or spiritual issues. He writes of common people of the middle class urban Indian society who crave for a space and place of acceptance. It is the conflict between the desires of the inner self and the denial by the surrounding society. This conflict creates problems, and focusing the problem constitutes the themes of Dattani as he tries “... to supply an interpretation of his (man’s) anguish and aspirations.” (Collins, 1964, p.1) The themes he often selects are regarding the common man caught up in uncommon situation of daily life. His ability to make the audience identify with the characters and the situation has given his plays the power and ability that they stand apart from the mundane theatre and that is what makes his theatre alive. (Mohanty, 2005, p.171)Through this, he adds new dimensions to the Indian English Theatre letting the theatre critics affirm:

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

He has refined the aesthetics of writing that will stand in a good stead in taking the Indian English Theatre to new heights. His contribution will be remembered by posterity for adding new scope to language, concepts, characterisation, settings, situations and themes to Indian English Theatre. Alyque Padamsee acknowledges his achievement saying, “At least, we have a playwright that gives sixty million English-speaking Indians an identity. Thank you, Mahesh Dattani! (Dattani, 2000, Cover Page) His writings have made their mark all over the world in theatre, cinema and on radio. What sets Dattani apart from the other playwrights is his ever hungry heart that looks for something new every moment. Through a quote of Nazia from the play *Where Did I Leave My Purdah?*, he reflects on his attitude towards theatre saying, “I want more dances. Dances that nobody can take from me. Oh! This van is too small! It can't take my dancing. Your cinema is too small for me. My life is BIG and GENEROUS. Only the theatre deserves me!”(Dattani, 2014, p.44)

It is this enthusiasm, this passion, this obsession with theatre that has enabled Dattani to ever look for new potential possibilities thereby making theatre and this world a richer place.

Works Cited:


