

NUANCES IN LANGUAGE IN THE SELECT PLAYS BY MAHESH DATTANI

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Abstract

This Paper uncovers the origins of English language theatre in India. It traces the evolution of Mahesh Dattani as an Indian English dramatist, through his academic and professional accomplishments. It illustrates the western influence on him through the pertinent instances from the texts under scrutiny. The paper showcases Dattani as an experimental dramatist and provides an exemplification of his zest and commitment for theatre. It unveils English as a link language or language of communication. It is an analysis of the characteristics of the language used by Dattani in his dramatic writings. This paper is an analytical account of the plays, Bravely Fought the Queen, Tara, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Where did I Leave My Purdah and Dance Like a Man. This paper is a demonstration of the features of language such as the following: bilingualism through switching or mixing of codes; portrayal of language as natural or indigenous, through speech patterns and vocabulary; depiction of language politics through demarcation of characters using differences in expression, accent and socioeconomic status; language as a mode of identification and self-reflexivity, through themes of marginality. This paper is an indication of the government's efforts in education sector, towards recognising multifarious languages owing to India's diverse culture. The ideas offered in this paper are drawn from literary studies and translation studies.

Keywords: language, theatre, identification, bilingualism, marginality

INTRODUCTION

English language theatre in India has had, a “mongrel nature” (Chaudhuri 2) in the postcolonial period. It originated from social milieu such as “parties, clubs and ball rooms of the English traders in the 18th century” (Multani 13).

Dattani, while delivering a lecture at “the Krishi Festival Plays to mark the 50th Anniversary of Bengali Theatre in Bangalore” claimed that “[m]an” has formulated a highly complicated “language” known as theatre. He states, “[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” (Dattani, 2002, 1). It is through this language of theatre he has been able to identify himself, ponder over his accomplishments and aspirations.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the eminent writers who has written Indian plays in English language. His dramatic oeuvre consists of more than twenty plays with a sundry of plays for, radio and theatrical performances. His professional career as a playwright, a filmmaker, a dancer, an actor and a director, spans more than thirty years and his plays have been successfully staged not only in India but also in countries abroad. He is the first Indian English playwright to be awarded by the prestigious Sahitya Akademi in the year 1998.

Dattani was associated with “Bangalore Little Theatre in 1980s” where he got acquainted with the subtleties of theatre as he was upskilled in acting and direction. He established his own theatre known as “PLAYPEN (...)” in 1984.” He was trained in ballet by Molly Andre at Alliance Franchise de Bangalore from the year 1984 to 1987. Additionally, he learned the dance form of Bharatanatyam at Bangalore from acclaimed artist Krishna Rao from the year 1986 to 1990.

Initially Greek tragedies and plays in English language by other writers were performed by the members of Playpen. Dattani directed Hindi translations of European plays and English translations of regional plays, realising that the foreign plays did not have a lasting impact on spectators due to the differences in socio-cultural context of the plays’ characters.

Regarding this Dattani states, “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, 14). It was because of the drawbacks of such translated works that motivated him to write original plays in English language. His first play of the kind for theatre, was, *Where There’s a Will*, made in 1986 for the ‘Deccan Herald Theatre Festival’. It was through the success of this play that he decided to write in English for the rest of his professional career. Dattani’s conscious choice of English as the mode of expressing his thoughts in his written works lies in his experience in the educational sphere as he was educated at Baldwin High School and St. Joseph College of Arts and Science, in

Bangalore. He claimed that, “[h]e was (...) 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, 9). His Familiarisation to the English writers provided him with a deeper understanding of the English literature, particularly dramaturgy. His schooling made English his “personal language” (Chatterjee, 2005, 9) and he started reading and enjoying English plays.

Dattani admits that over his academic years, English became the language he could best express himself in. In an interview he states, “You’ve got to be true to your expressions. English is for me a sort of given. It’s my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad” (Dattani, 2003, 2).

Mahesh Dattani has learnt a lot from the western theatre and drama but has moulded it to his convenience by innovating form and content, through “the language of theatre” as 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, Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen and Tennessee Williams, for instance, the use of multilevel stage in the play *Tara*, to produce Alienation effect in order to avoid excess catharsis in the spectators,

The lowest level occupies a major portion of the stage. It represents the house of the Patels. It is seen only in memory (...) The next level represents the bedsitter of the older Chandan (referred to as Dan for clarity) in a suburb of London. (...) This is the only realistic level. Behind, on a higher level, is a chair in which Dr Thakkar remains seated through the play. Although he doesn’t watch the action of the play, his connection is asserted by his sheer God-like presence. On the stage level, running along the cyclorama and in an L-shape, downstage right, is the galli outside the Patels’ house, which can be suggested by cross-lighting. (Dattani CP 323)

This stage presents major themes of the play like gender abuse, the nexus of nature and technology and the difference between illusion and reality. The reference to the mask ball in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, is a marker of western influence. The mask puts forth the themes of gender-based violence and the sham of middle-class morality. Dattani adapts the western treatment of the realism in the Indian perspective. Michael Walling in ‘A Note on the Play’ on *Bravely Fought the Queen* says,

His plays fuse the physical and spacial awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour 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. Postcolonial India and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through his fusion of forms and influences, Mahesh creates such a space. (Dattani CP 229)

Dattani as a dramatist, experiments with new forms and content as a director he has the script of his play enacts bit by bit by the performers before writing the final version of it. “I always direct first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instruction, which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. There is no conflict, and the other directors can interpret” (qtd in Singh, Monisha 154).

English has become a language of contact or communication in India in the postcolonial period specifically during the twentieth and twenty first centuries. It has become a link language for people across all the states in India who prefer to converse in English, rather than their local or regional dialect, especially in the metropolitan cities where people travel from all parts of the country. This language is a medium of day-to-day communication regarding which 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” (Mee, 2002, 14) India is one of the countries in the world which uses English as a lingua franca. English has been absorbed in the Indian sociocultural fabric particularly, the urban culture. Its international recognition indicates its inclusive quality. 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. (Singh, Jaspal 31)

The following features of the language are used in Mahesh Dattani’s plays- The language used in his plays is “natural” or “indigenous” (Multani 19). The characters are differentiated by the patterns of speech and lexicon. The characters are also demarcated by “code mixing” (Ennin 427) as is visible in the play *Tara*, ROOPA. (...). They are, you know, (...) wandh tarah.

(...)
ROOPA. Odd types. (...) (Dattani CP 339).

The characters are also distinguished by “code switching” (Ennin 427) as is evident from the utterances of Kamlesh to the guard, in the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, where he tries to seek sexual gratification from the latter. The conversation between these two individuals also suggests the socioeconomic disparities between them, through the use of language,

KAMLESH. Tum kya . . . yeh sab . . . paise ke liye karte ho?

(...)

KAMLESH. You do enjoy it. What you do to me, what I do to you. Don’t you? (Dattani CP 51)

The language used in these plays has the, “cadences of the bilingual speaker” be it “Gujrati” or “Kannadiga”. The characters are differentiated by the use of “accent or language politics” (Multani 19) as is visible in the play *Tara*, where Roopa plays an important role in the power dynamics evident through the divide between her and the twins, Chandan and Tara,

CHANDAN. Two peas in a pod. That’s something we aren’t

(...)

ROOPA. You know – two peas in a pot. Isn’t that funny?

(...)

ROOPA. Well. I didn’t think it was *that* funny. (Dattani CP 337)

Change of expressions is a significant element of the language in the plays of Dattani, for example, in the play *Dance Like a Man*, Ratna’s frustration of not being permitted to provide a justification to her father-in-law of her dance practice with Chennai amma, “I have always been taught to speak to my elders with respect, but since I haven’t done anything wrong there’s no reason why I shouldn’t speak up” (Dattani CP 419). This frustration changes to a mockery of her husband’s career as a dancer,

RATNA. Oh, he told you?

(...)

RATNA. That he is planning to grow his hair long? It would enhance his abhinaya. (Dattani CP 417-418)

This is suggestive of the way prejudices are camouflaged under the facade of humour,

RATNA. (...) In Kuchipudi, the men dress up as women! (Dattani CP 422)

Furthermore, the language in Dattani’s plays is a medium for the identification and self-reflexivity not just for himself but also for the spectators of his plays, through the themes of marginality, for instance, homosexuality in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, or sexual abuse in *Where did I Leave My Purdah*. The viewers are made to contemplate on their personal issues or their follies through the existential crisis faced by the characters in the play. Language also reveals Dattani’s zest and commitment towards theatre as he uses unconventional forms and subject matter for

his plays. This is conspicuous from the assertions by Nisha in the play, *Where did I Leave My Purdah*, “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, 44)

To conclude, Dattani’s plays present the “multiple realities [that] coexist” (Gargava 60) in the world, through the variations in language, using the themes of marginality. Similarly, the National Education Policy has made an attempt to recognize multilingualism in India, by changing the language of instruction from English to “mother tongue” or other regional languages at the school level.

“The National Education Policy, 2020 has advocated, that ‘wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language’ for both public and private schools” (Karwal *et al* Ex55-57). Furthermore, “The course material, including text books and teaching resources for Grades 1-12, are available on DIKSHA portal not only in 32 Indian languages but also in Indian Sign Language. NISHTHA 3.0 has incorporated a teacher training module on multilingual teaching in early grades” (Karwal *et al* Ex64-67).

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