



Role of Mahesh Dattani in reviving Indian English drama

Dr. Parul Yadav

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Manesar, Haryana, India

Abstract

Literature, being a mirror of society, is expected to depict the plight of margins and also the socio-cultural paradigms which bring about the process of marginalization. Coming to the literary genres in the Indian context, drama has been relegated to a marginalized status and for that matter Indian English drama itself stands marginalized further. Not many practitioners of this genre treat the margins in their works, fearing to be labeled as non-conventional. They are mostly content to ignore such individuals as a challenge to the heterosexual or hegemonic normativity which is central to the mainstream culture. It is felt by a few critics that the detachment of the Indian playwrights from the classical traditions and myths is primarily responsible for the general neglect of drama. The present paper attempts to study the reasons for the downgrading of Indian English drama and Mahesh Dattani's role in reviving it.

Keywords: margins, Indian drama, language barrier, non conventional

Introduction

"In a multicultural society people are forced to mix, they have to because of constraints of the space, but they do not necessarily combine as they like to retain and cling to their own religion, culture, habits, language and of course, identity." (Handa 117)

Most margins would simply wish to be left alone to themselves, allowed to carry on with their way of life rather than wishing to change the society according to their ways. But they at least want their breathing space under the sun along with the mainstream rather than being pushed mercilessly to the corners and being scoffed at by the centre. Not many practitioners of this genre 'Drama' treat the margins in their works, fearing to be labeled as non-conventional. Where most writers shudder to take the plunge, there are a few daring stalwarts like Mahesh Dattani who enter the lists to direct public attention to the dismal and gloomy lives of the margins. Diving into the hitherto unexplored realms and the invisible zones inhabited by those who are "different" and unacceptable to the mainstream culture, Dattani makes their presence felt. And so does he make his own impact felt through the master strokes of his bold and incisive pen. Dattani emerges as the only playwright writing originally in English who highlights the condition of those sections of Indian society which have been blatantly ignored by most of the litterateurs. Then there are others like Vijay Tendulkar, who, too, has produced great works showcasing the lives of the margins in his plays originally written in Marathi and then translated into English. Both these dramatists have explored the condition of the marginalized while keeping themselves detached from their works standing true to Eliot's words, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality". (Eliot 29)

The end of the 19th century saw a transition of a different sort, with drama flourishing in vernaculars as well. The modern Indian drama had the melange of romance, tragedy, history, allegory and melodrama. Pillai, Tagore, Kailasam and many other dramatists wrote plays in regional languages, chiefly Bengali, Marathi, Telugu and Oriya. In the early nineteenth century some plays were written in English. In 1871 Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote his first play in English -Is This Civilization? Later many plays were written in English by Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, A.S.P. Ayyar, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharati Sarabhai. However, these playwrights were not performance- focused and did not write for the stage, with the exception of Tagore whose plays were staged at Shantiniketan. After India became independent, a number of playwrights emerged with a few writing in English, including, Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma and Gurucharan Das whose plays got an international stage and were performed in Europe and USA. Asif Currimbhoy came to be regarded as a playwright with a difference who wrote for the stage and the theatre in English. He has been eulogized as "India's first authentic voice in theatre." (Bowers xii) He wrote as many as thirty plays with each play depicting some social, political, religious issues. *The Hungry Ones*, *The Captives*, *The Doldrums* and *An Experiment with Truth* are some notable ones. Largely known as a poet, Nissim Ezekiel also wrote many plays replete with wit, humour, irony and a keen perception for the social issues.

The reason for the marginalization of Indian English drama can be largely attributed to three main factors. It is felt by a few critics that the detachment of the Indian playwrights from the classical traditions and myths is primarily responsible for the general neglect of drama. Moreover, performing a play on stage is a cumbersome process which acts as a hurdle in its growth. Some critics also opine that English language has acted as a barrier to the growth of this genre. Critics like RK.

Dhawan believe that the first two reasons mentioned above are largely responsible for the marginalization of Indian drama in English. Says Dhawan:

It is generally felt that Indian playwrights in English have failed to draw upon the rich and varied Indian dramatic traditions, as also to make creative use of the rich fund of Indian myth and Indian historical heritage. Yet another important reason given for stunted growth of Indian drama in English is its unsuitability for production on the stage. (13)

Highlighting the significance of stage performance, another critic Martin Stephen says:

In some respect reading a play is similar to being an archaeologist who tries to decide what a dinosaur looked like with only the evidence of its bones in front of him. The words of a play are its bare bones, and the crucial thing about it, but they sorely need to be brought to life by actors, scenery and music if the full experience is to be realized. (32)

Noted critic K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar also stresses upon the performance in a play. "Indo-Anglican Drama, isn't it like talking about snakes in Iceland? Not quite- -but the problem is there, for while poetry, novels and non-fiction prose can be read in the silence of one's study, drama can come to life only in the theatre." (730)

The candid words of playwright Girish Karnad can be cited in this regard:

Why should any young person write plays? ... It's a thankless job. First, you might never see your play staged, second, you will never earn a livelihood from writing for the stage, and third, with the life that we lead in the metros today, who can blame people if they don't come to the theatre to watch plays? If a writer's choices are writing for stage, television or films, only a great obsession for the stage would make him or her choose the stage. (60)

This sampling of critical opinion accounting for the relative unpopularity, if not outright marginalization of Indian-English drama as a literary genre, derives primarily from its generic peculiarities which call for elaborate apparatus for stage-enactment, which in turn requires deep forays into the pockets of producers or playwrights -which are generally not so well-lined.

Coming to the language barrier, it is pertinent to quote the views of Dhawan who differs in opinion about English language acting as a hurdle in the popularity of drama. "It is generally believed that we have very few actable plays mainly because a dialogue between Indians May not sound convincing except when the characters are drawn from an urban sophisticated milieu". (14) Dhawan then refers to Naik who gives the examples of Shakespeare and Shaw who use English very convincingly for their different characters and we don't question their authenticity. Dhawan rightly goes on to say, "Therefore the Indian English playwrights need not

have any qualms about making their Indian characters speak in English. If they can take sufficient care to create convincing characters in live situations, perhaps, the language would take care of itself." (14)

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the lack of English-speaking audience is one of the major reasons for the lack of the growth of Indian drama in English with only a very few dramatists in India like Mahesh Dattani who write originally in English. Emerging as a doyen of theatre, Dattani has the distinction of being the first Indian English playwright to be honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award (1998), the award citation reading." [Dattani's work] probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender. a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English." (2000)

Dattani is one of the very few contemporary dramatists who have most successfully negotiated the language barrier. His copious literary output animated by variegated themes voicing the contemporary issues with a unique boldness, unmatched literary prowess and theatrical skills, has earned him worldwide acclaim though his contribution to Indian drama is far more outreaching than the acknowledgement received. His dramatic oeuvre comprising sixteen plays ranges from the stage plays to radio plays and films crafted with equal finesse. He enjoys the honour of having been commissioned by national and international bodies to write plays on social issues. His versatility as a master of dramatic craft is evident from the range of dramaturgical moulds employed by him as also by the variety of characterization and concerns in his plays. He is also a proficient producer and director of plays. His ownership of the theatre company Playpen adds cubits to his stature as the practising dramatist in the country, drama for whom is not just bread- and- butter but his very life and soul.

Even Dattani, at times, has to face hostility at the hands of literary figures who regard drama as an inferior genre. But Dattani is not to be cowed down by such antagonism. He talks of the attitude of people towards drama in the Preface to his Collected Plays. He says, "... I am met with open hostility in parochial universities. Where in literary circles, I am seen as inferior because I am a playwright But it has been a glorious decade of fun and games for me simply because I didn't let all this come in the way of my creativity" (xv)

Regarding Indian drama, M. K. Nayak and Shyamala A. Narayan say that it is a "Cinderella still waiting for her prince", "yet to establish itself as a viable genre." (26) However, with the advent of such doyens of theatre as Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar, one may safely add that Indian drama has at last found its Prince Charming in the form of these dedicated dramatists whose works are there to stay for good, inspiring and sensitizing the discerning generations for all times to come. Both these playwrights in their own creative signature styles persuade the readers to rethink over the self-created arbitrary ideas according to which man expects everyone to behave within the prescribed modes of existence. The present study is made with the hope that it may impel some sensitive minds to redefine the set paradigms of society which do not allow the margins to lead a meaningful and progressive life without thwarting their desires, passions, dreams, nay, and their very urge to live.

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