



## Redefining socio-familial conflict: “Individual” in the plays of Mahesh Dattani

Kirti Soni

Research Scholar, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani in his plays has thrown light on the carnal issue prevailing in Indian society. He is evidently dexterous in representing society as well as individual with all its weaknesses and strengths. His plays cover crucial and key areas where individuality is murdered by social demands. However, Dattani has attempted to redesign the roles of individuals. His notion of individual social roles is not based on gender but the inner instincts of an individual. Dattani's every plays address a different issue faced by an individual character and that particular character finds him/herself in a tug of war between the social demands and his/her inner instincts. This paper investigates and will try to spell out the conflict between the social demands, familial duty and an individual's inner instincts.

**Keywords:** individuality, social demands, gender roles, inner instinct, conflict

### Introduction

#### Mahesh Dattani and Context of Indian English Drama

Mahesh Dattani was born on 7th August, 1958 in Bengaluru in the Indian state of Karnataka. He got the prestigious National Sahitya Akademi Award for Final Solutions and Other Plays in 1994. Born and based in Bengaluru, he studied dancing, worked as an advertising copywriter, and ran the family business, while forming his own English-theatre group named Playpen in 1984. He became a full-time writer in 1995 and set up his own intimate performance venue in 1998. He also acts and directs for Playpen, and composes radio drama and screenplays.

Dattani wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will*, on family inheritances, in 1986 followed by *Dance like a Man* in 1989 on the problems faced by a male dancer. He directed and acted in both, then directed *Bravely Fought the Queen* in 1991 in Bombay. Meanwhile, Alyque Padamsee had directed his third play, *Tara* in 1990, a touching domestic drama, and invited him to script a work on communalism. Thereupon, the product *Final Solution* was rejected by the Deccan Herald Festival in Bengaluru for dealing with a sensitive issue, though they had sponsored his first two productions. Playpen finally staged it in 1993. The delicate theme led him to create perhaps too perfect a Hindu-Muslim equilibrium, almost consciously free of any perceivable bias.

Gay presence in Dattani's work increases with the play *Do the Needful* in 1997. This was written for BBC Radio 4, the plot centres on the negotiations for an arranged marriage between Alpesh, a Gujarati man, and Lata, a South Indian Kannada woman. As the play progresses it is revealed that the woman is not agreeable to the marriage because she loves Salim, a Muslim man, while the prospective groom is in love with a man named Trilok. Although she tells Alpesh about her love for another man, Alpesh keeps quiet about his homosexual relationship. Alpesh's homosexuality is revealed to Lata when she surprises him and the gardener of her family having sex in the cowshed, just as she is about to run away to Salim. At first horrified, she subsequently decides that the best way to deal with the situation is to marry Alpesh, so that they can lead separate sexual lives yet

keep up the appearance of a happy couple. This is a clear example of a common compromise in a society that has criminalized non-procreative sex since 1862.

The joint family forms the core of Dattani's theatre, which has a strong sense of social and domestic history. Yet he also has an unforced, appealing wit. All the plays bear witness to his imagination. Dattani moves freely back and forth in time, typically between generations, occasionally requiring performers to act both in order to stress the links within the generation gap. He constructs interesting spaces with split sets, hidden rooms, and lit passages revealed behind scrims. Mahesh Dattani was a representative of the new Indian who is not defensive about using English.

### Review of Literature

Angelie Multanis *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives* is a critical anthology that explores and reevaluates the aesthetics of Mahesh Dattani's plays not merely in terms of his deft constructions of the contemporary, urban, middle class India, notations of gender and class discriminations, familial affiliations and discords, communal politics and violence, and the dilemmas of the gay and the lesbian; but equally in terms of his use of the (now) legitimized Indian English and its subtle variations, enhancement of audience-participation, and re-invention of text as performance.

Bijay Kumar Das *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays* has examined issues of gender inequality, social exclusion, fundamentalism and the impact of the dreaded disease HIV/AIDS on people's mind. What distinguishes him from other playwrights is his courage of conviction in depicting the innovative themes like portrayal of sex preferences by men and women which were until recently considered to be a taboo in Indian society. His realistic portrayal of human nature evokes both sympathy and empathy in the minds of readers. The book analyses with insight and precision various themes in Dattani's plays. As drama is a performing art, it also highlights his techniques of stage production. It will be useful to students, teachers and researchers in Indian English plays and those concerned with stage craft.

Dr Nirmala Shivram Padmavati's Socio-Cultural Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Plays is a collection of twelve research papers by different scholars on the contemporary themes and issues in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. He is a modern Indian playwright who is still living and writing. His plays deal with the certain subtle, ignored, unspoken and hidden issues that are generally encountered in the present day family and society and are usually brushed under the carpet to protect individual identity, family name, and social honour/ prestige. The research papers included here, take up and reflect upon those vital issues as delineated in different plays of Mahesh Dattani.

Feminist Concerns in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad is a comparative study of Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad by Dr Alka Jain. Feminism as a movement grew in the West because of the absence of the principle of equality between women and men. Western Feminism was a revolutionary act. In India, Feminism is a movement of evolution, an attempt to remove the social evils. India cannot talk about feminism in the same tone as the West, because equality has always been an intrinsic value of Indian culture. Literature has always been a tool for exploring gender equations and feminine sensibility. This book seeks to make a comparative study of the feminine sensibility in the plays of two major Indian dramatists, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani. Taking a close look at the socio-cultural scenario and literary trends during the authorship of Karnad and Dattani, it describes in detail the ancient traditions and values regarding Indian women. Highlighting the changing trends and modern sensibility, it examines the issues of restraints, constraints and dehumanization of women as depicted in the plays of Karnad and Dattani. The myth of women weakness and the question of identity are also dealt with in the book.

Gender Discrimination and Parental Authority in Mahesh Dattani's Play "Tara" by Nivethaa Ramanujan is an examination of Mahesh Dattani play "Tara" that revolves around the separation of conjoined twins. Gender discrimination is the reason for the separation and the exercise of the parental authority is also observed in the course of the play. The research focuses on how parental authority and gender discrimination lead to the death of the daughter Tara and deterioration of Patel family. The gender discrimination and parental authority account for the death of the innocent girl, Tara. The paper also looks into the aspect of society playing an invisible role in the separation of the twins.

### **Individual, Family, Society and the "Individual" in All This**

Family and society as social institutions stand at the center of Mahesh Dattani's plays however both family and society has individual at its center. Dattani creates not social units out of individuals but individuals strikingly stand out in the raucous fiasco of society and family. Dattani depicts in his plays that the interests and identity of an individual are completely different and opposite to the interests and identity of society and family. If we have a glance at the characters created by Dattani, we find that these characters are not mere portrayal on stage but living individual who have an identity of their own, they have an emotional self and passion for something. The passion of these character bring them straightly into head-to-head clash with family and society.

Where there is a Will demonstrates the conflict of interfering family and society into one's life thereby overshadowing and corroding individual personality, dreams, desires, ambitions and stream of thought.

Dance Like a Man deals with the dogma of being a man in Indian society. The play deals with a couple that is emotionally attached with dance. But a man dancing for a hobby or profession is not accepted in Indian society in 1940, the time play is set in. Jairaj dances over the tune of his family and society and he has to give up his dance. The play shows a strong conflict of family and society with individual.

In Bravely fought the Queen individual sexual orientation comes in direct conflict with the cultural sexual orientation of society, and family the violence of the family over the individual members. Here, women a special fight against the family and society to form their own lives.

Final Solution revolves around the communal tension between the Hindus and Muslims. But Dattani dexterously sticks to the art of a professional playwright not creating any good Muslims or Bad Muslims, or good Hindus or bad Hindus. Dattani portrays individual caught in the web of society, family and past experiences. Here again the action of the drama unfolds through family.

In the true sense, Mahesh Dattani, the most unorthodox and contemporary playwright of Indian English drama has used the medium of stage to present the invisible issues faced by the individual at the cost of creating a society which is intensely focused on traditional and customary social values rather than the emotional need of the individual. Dattani creates it over the stage for the audience as theatre is the mirror of real life. Alyque Padamsee calls him "one of the most serious contemporary playwright".

But Unlike Girish Karnad who lays emphasis on history, myths and puranas, Dattani raises the voice of contemporary urban Indian society and the fast changing scenario of the modern society and his excellence as a playwright lies in the very fact that he writes what he knows, deals with and ponders over i.e. here and now of modern contemporary urban Indian society. He himself remarks during a conversation: "Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe ... I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium."

Dattani's characters are Indian and have some problems which are not socially acceptable. Dattani's characters are living individual who are in a consistent conflict with the family and society. For his character there is on the one hand, their own internal-emotional self, on the other hand, social demands of conformity. Dattani's strongly individualistic characters come on the stage and show how the society and the eccentricity of individuals work in a conflicting arena with clash of interests and behaviors.

Dance Like a Man the title itself suggests that a man is not supposed to do the work which suits a woman and not pursue their career in anything else which makes them less of a man. In this play, Jairaj has gone against the will of his father to become a dancer and dedicate his life to dance. Amritlal, the father, thinks that the dancing is a feminine occupation and suits only to women rather than men. There emerges a strong conflict between Jairaj and his father. On the one side there is individual the individuality of Jairaj and on the other side there is social demand of Amritlal who represent the social pressure of conformity. The play dramatizes a strong conflict between the individual and

society. In addition to it, literally the title means to say that the protagonist's father doesn't want his son to become or behave like a woman and that he should not pursue his career in dance.

"Where There is Will" is a play where individuality of all characters clash with each other and with society. Hasmukh Mehta is the main character of the play who dies in the first scene of the play. In his life time, he has ruled his household and does so even after his death by a will which installed his mistress in his household. Hasmukh Mehta remains present on the stage all along in the form of a ghost. The play depicts that the clash between Hasmukh Mehta and his daughter-in-law results in hastening his death when his daughter-in-law replaces the blood pressure pills with vitamin tablets. Hasmukh remains present in the play and the lives of his family members throughout the play. After much annoyance to all family members, Hasmukh is dismissed as no more than the projection of an image, a creation, a prisoner of somebody else's needs rather than an individual of his own making.

### Conclusion

Dattani in plays shows us the emptiness of lives of people living in a traditional or an orthodox society. Each of the characters faces conflict internally within her/himself and externally with society and feels emptiness and meaninglessness in life. However, the women have a special fight on their hands, a fight to structure their lives with a meaning and fulfillment. Furthermore, Dattani's plays raise the questions that whether they fight like men or create their own individuality, a feminine space. The undercurrents of the individuality conflicts with the demands of society and family and it is witnessed that individuality becomes the victim of social forces. Mahesh Dattani demonstrates individual and social conflict at many levels, for him social conformity and individual inner self are the two opposing poles.

### References

1. Ayyar Raj. "Yaraana: Gay writings from India", Book review, online available at GayToday.com
2. Dattani, Mahesh. Collected Plays Penguin book, New Delhi, 2000, 1.
3. Multani, Angelie. Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspective. Pencraft International, 2007.
4. Das, Bijay Kumar. Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays. Self published, 2011.
5. Prajapati Ram Avadh, Sandhya. Tripathi. Perspectives on the Plays of Mahesh Dattani: Themes and Contents, 2015.
6. Padmavati, Nirmala Shivram. Socio-Cultural Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Plays. Notion Press, 2021.
7. Jain Alka. Feminist Concerns in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad. Writers Choice, 2019.
8. Chakraborty, Kaustav. Indian Drama in English. Prentice, 2014.
9. Goldman, Emma. Foreword. The Social Significance of the Modern Drama. Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914.
10. Vardhan, Manisha. "I'm no Crusader, I'm a Theatre Person" Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction. New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd. Cambridge House, 2005.