

The Thespian Art of Mahesh Dattani

¹Dr. Roomiya Manzoor, ²Dr. Mohd. Yousuf Khan

¹The Author teaches English at Govt. Degree college, Bijbihara Anantnag

Abstract: - India has a rich heritage of drama from ancient times. In India, drama starts its journey with Sanskrit plays. The origin of Indian theatre is still obscure. It is certain however that even in Vedic period dramatic performances of some kind were given passing references in early resources point to the inaction of festival of religious legends perhaps only in dance and mime. Indian English Drama has got a unique place in the field of Indian Literature in representing the human life on the stage. Drama is basically a performing art which rarely more on performance than on verbal expressions. A drama can be enjoyed in three ways reading, viewing, and listening. It helps in breaking the web of illusion and ignorance developing the understanding and perception of the audience.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani- a Bangalore based versatile personality has infused new life in this area. He is the first Indian dramatist to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to Indian English Literature. Dattani is withering tree of Indian English drama has started taking its roots and growing rapidly. Besides being a best known dramatist, he is also a reputed and accomplished actor, director, scriptwriter, and dance teacher.

Dattani bares life to the bone and acts as spokesman of the unprivileged section of Indian society. He has examined and analyzed the problems of women, children, eunuchs and minorities in his plays. His works offers a fine study from socio-psychological dimensions. He presents socio-political realities of our time. He does not write on conventional subjects of life. His plays deal with religious tensions, sexuality and gender issues. He courageously takes up the gay themes of love, thus becoming the first one to do so. He has been described as “one of the India’s best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English” by Alexandria Viets in the international Herald tribune. He uses Indian mythology, Indian tradition, Indian dance, Indian English and Indian social problems-yet speaks of themes which touch any audience, the search for individual identity inside and outside the family; the need for happiness, love, sexual fulfillment, security, the loneliness of superficially successful lives, belonging and not belonging and the pain and pathos of keeping up appearance.

Dattani’s first full length play “Where There’s a Will” revolves round a supposedly self made industrialist Hasmukh Mehta who is the supreme of male-content with the typical problems of familial expectations, his restless wife Sonal and a colorless conjugal life; his spend thrift son Ajit who is not victorious least in his fathers eyes and Preeti is loveless. The play is divided into two halves pre and post death of Mehta. The first half sets the stage for the later shenanigans. He is ever present through out the play even as a ghost in the second half. The sour relationship between the two couples is developed in elaborate vignettes. Hasmukh and Sonal were natural in their roles as a sexless and loveless couple is engaged in a typical middle class milieu. The conjugal relationship of Ajit and Preeti is a forced one. The anxiety of Preeti is evident in her eager anticipation of his death through a simple scheme of death convoluted to say the least the relationship among the family members are painfully wrought. It is wonder that such an alliance actually take place. Hasmukh the dour faced personality decides to play a trick to his family. He leaves the entire assets to a trust to be managed by his mistress Kiran for 21 years when his prodigal son Ajit would be 48 the wealth at that time would be of little use of his old wife, spend son and his daughter-in-law. They would have to put up with the Kiran as per the will.

Dattani’s next play “Tara” shows the least preference and love to female child. It revolves round the two conjoined twins who later came to know that their mother and grand-father manipulated their separation to favor the boy. The play revolves round the theme of favoring the boy frowning upon the girl with exceptional originality of conception. The play shows the evil of gender discrimination kills all other bonds of familial relationship and how socio-cultural myths and conventions control and construct the course of human life.

“Dance Like a Man” reveals humor, which can be understood by the spectators. Beyond this there is pathos of human predicament which he explores on a subtle fashion. There are two aspects through this play: the general inhibitions of a man taking dance as a career and that too a bharatnatyam which is usually performed by women; the relation between the couple have contrary to all public impressions of being a happy and well suited couple grown apart and have done enough harm to each other; how their own thwarted ambitions and frustrations affect their own daughter who is in love with a person who has no sense of art.

Dattani is a spokesman of the unprivileged section of our society. He has examined and analyzed the problems of women, children, eunuchs and minorities in his plays. His works offers a fine study from socio-psychological dimensions. He presents socio-political realities of our times. He has redefined the tradition of Indian English Theatre with his innovative art and craft. Dattani frequently takes family as his locale. His plays are powerful and disturbing up to the extent of shaking and frustrating the very cultural base of India. This is as good as slow poisoning which has already entered the metropolitan cities of our country. The play “Bravely Fought the Queen” shows the boredom of suburbia, the emptiness of their lives caught up in the lives of capitalism. The play revolves around the Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Niten and their wives Dolly and Alka (who are sisters) there is Baa (the mother) Praful is a brother of Dolly and Alka. Niten is a homosexual and that too with her wife’s own brother. Praful is the person who arranges her sister’s marriage with his homosexual partner Niten, to precede his relationship.

The homosexuality of a brother crippled the wife of the other. The play is a plea for humanity and for tolerance. It is equally a cry for the acceptance of Indian values that are always shifting at an alarming pace, where traditional and modern clash, confuse and create a new social landscape. He writes with the pungency that is skillfully disguised employing a sharp language, one that pushes the limits of a spoken word along with the pregnant silences in between. It evokes feelings that are both funny and sad but ultimately human and moving.

The gay character of the play “Do the Needful” go to the extent of questioning the necessity of marriage and heterosexual love. “Seven Steps Around the Fire” reveals an unusual theme of unraveling of the secret marriage of a wealthy ministers son Subbu and a beautiful eunuch Kamala. The Kamala was burnt by minister and he arranges his son’s marriage where Subbu committed suicide. All the play of Dattani depicts the deterioration of genuine emotional relationships among the members of a family and society in general.

Dattani cares about his characters and his actions. His roles are rounded, juicy and full of challenges for an actor or actress. They are complex, ever changing and rich in background. He works on his plays in the theatre, suiting his material to the space, reshaping and fine tuning his texts constantly. His plays speak across linguistic and cultural divides. They will work equally effectively in India or abroad. They are in the very best of the sense of the term well made plays using tension and climaxes, gradual revelation and careful timing to tell their stories. There is no substitute for this kind of craftsmanship.

To conclude Dattani aims not at changing society but only seeks to offer same scope for reflection in the hope that his plays will give the audience some kind of insight into their own lives. This insight will help the society to prepare mentally to confront the reality so that it won’t to be a shock for the coming generations. Dattani’s plays are healing rather than destructive, the mode is comic rather than tragic although the concerns are deeply serious. His plays do not have pat endings. Their problems are not insuperable nor the human spirit ever crushed. They reveal the consequence of the changing attitudes and perceptions of the family members. Quest for identity and the growing tensions and stress due to the patriarchal society have been his thematic concerns. These tensions lead to an unhappy, frustrating world of despair affecting all the members of the family. The gay culture which was once alien to the Indians is fast growing and undoubtedly, shatters the whole concrete setup of our Indian culture of which we have a false pride in the contemporary world. The proverb ‘Appearances are often deceptive’ goes very well with the characters of Mahesh Dattani.

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