

## **Mahesh Dattani as an Experimental Playwright**

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**Abstract:** Mahesh Dattani is a renowned contemporary playwright. He is also considered as the first Indian playwright in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award. He represented thematic shift in English drama. He moved drama away from nationalist and mythological themes to the contemporary issues and social realities. His plays represented gender discrimination, homosexuality, child sexual abuse and communal tensions through experimental dramaturgy. His experimentalism not only depends upon subjects of the play but also in form. He uses fractured narrative, chorus and silence as the language of stage. Mahesh Dattani makes visible the lives and voices that were otherwise erased.

By analyzing his major works like *Tara*, *Dance Like A Man*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* this paper argues that Dattani is an experimental Playwright in both content and form. Dattani in his plays criticized patriarchal structures and advocates for gender inclusivity and equality. This study also explores that his experiments were deliberate strategies to engage audience in self reflection.

**Introduction:** Mahesh Dattani is a distinguished figure in Indian theatre, his arrival in 1990 has completely transformed it. While other playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad focused on mythology, folklore or political stories, Dattani chose a different path. He focused on what wasn't being said in the middle class families and what was hiding behind the closed doors of middle class urban houses. His plays are all about uncomfortable truths. He talks about how women were suppressed, he questioned about sexuality that families avoided. He showcased religious prejudices that and spoke for people who were struggling for who they really were. He didn't just write the plays he showcased issues that were faced by real humans. Dattani was bold in experimenting with the ways the stories were told or how the audience experienced the overall play. This study explores how Dattani instead of sticking to conventional and safe methods searches for new ways to express ideas. He deliberately broke familiar patterns to show what was hidden.

Dattani's experimentalism has two levels. The first is thematic. Where he gives voices to the voiceless and speak about the unspoken. He talks about the issues that mainstream media and Indian Drama have ignored for decades. He even talked about queer issues that were considered



taboo till then. He challenged patriarchy and showed not just women but even men are also affected by toxic patriarchy. He spoke for those who were suppressed. Second is Formal. He used theatrical techniques to break realism. He used fractured time schemes, chorus and even silence.

By studying his works *Tara*, *Dance Like A Man*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* this paper seeks to analyze Mahesh Dattani as an experimental Playwright by examining both his bold themes and formal innovative strategies.

**Keywords:** Dattani, Modern Indian playwright, Post colonial Indian theatre, Thematic experimentation.

**Illustration:** Mahesh Dattani is a dramatist, director and mentor. In 1998 he received Sahitya Akademi Award. He is from a background where literature was hardly present. Some of his plays are even considered as part of curriculum in many universities in India and abroad. He was born on 7<sup>th</sup> of August, 1958 in Bangalore. His mother tongue was Gujarati but learnt English as a second language.

Dattani writes plays that are relevant to today's society and portrays the struggle of middle class urban families. He sheds light on the problems that are veiled by society. He addressed gender discrimination, child abuse and patriarchy. He even touched taboos that are not allowed to be acknowledged such as homosexuality and the plight of eunuchs and he also talks about communalism and religious prejudices.

His genius lay in choosing controversial topics and turning them into plays that audience can relate to. He fearlessly explored the taboo subjects and marginalized India. There are multiple themes layered in his single works. He innovated themes that were never explored by mainstream. He revealed the hypocrisies of the society.

In *Tara* (1990) he addressed the issue of gender discrimination in modern India. A woman in a patriarchal structure is only valued for her beauty. She is not considered worthy in any other aspect.

As Halder says "the image of the woman holding the mirror to her face is the typical feminine image. In a male dominated society, a woman is valued for her beauty and sex appeal. She is always afraid of her beauty withering with time and therefore she holds up the a mirror which tells her of her youth, beauty and sexual attractiveness remain intact." (Satwana Halder, 62)

Ever since the dawn of civilizations women are considered as very fragile and vulnerable objects. And it has been seen that boys are given more chances to live than girls. Whenever opportunity comes to choose between a girl or a boy society always favoured a boy. Society has always given supremacy to males and subjugates the females.

*Tara* is the story of two twins who were joined from hips and had three legs. And only one of the two could have two legs. Tara had a better chance of survival if she had two legs. But patriarchy



favours the boy. And the mother of the twins was also involved in taking the decision. Although she was a woman but he still favoured the boy. It's said that in patriarchy brain washed women are worse than misogynist men because they believe that just because you are born as a female and we endured pain it's your job to endure as well. For them it's the duty of the women to endure silently whatever is being done to them. Or else you won't be a good woman and would ruin the family name.

Tara is a girl born in an educated family. And the grandfather was a rich politician who wanted an heir for his property. Although Tara had better chance because the major part of the blood supply for that third leg was provided by Tara. But Bharti's father, Bharti and Doctor had a secret meeting where took bribe and agreed to do the surgery the way they wanted. Tara's father was against it but he couldn't do anything.

"....maybe if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with Bharti it wasn't right and that even doctor would realize it was unethical! The doctor had agreed, I was told. Only later I had come to know of his intentions" ( Dattani, 57) This line shows the whole theme of the play. The leg had to be amputated. Ultimately Tara died. Bharti's actions show how deeply patriarchy has affected society that the maternal love also bows down in front of it. Tara's physical inability is symbolic of how society cripples down women. The way Tara was denied wholeness, women are denied opportunities, and freedom.

Chandan in adulthood is not happy at all. He has an internalized guilt that everything that happened to Tara was only because patriarchy favoured Chandan. For Chandan, Tara has made cripple and she dies. His character portrays the how patriarchy privilege burden men as well. Thoughts kept haunting Chandan throughout his life. It shows that inequality actually harms both in one or another way. "The idea of complete girl child over an incomplete male child that is so shocking that the sacrifice of girls is accepted than a handicapped male child." ( Dattani, 69). Tara's death is the symbol of how society always silences women. This tragedy reflects how a system of injustice kills and ruins the lives of innocents. Neither society nor hard family was fair with Tara. Women always have been marginalized by society and treated as an important and vulnerable members. A girl's life is sacrificed just because of her gender. She got murdered because she is a woman. Even today most females have no control over their lives and their decision. Everything is controlled how they walk, how they talk, how they sit and how they stand. Society created rules for almost everything but for men they could do whatever they want to do. Society was never fair with women and it never would be. Chandan and Tara were physically separated but mentally they are inseparable.

In *Dance like a Man* Mahesh Dattani critiques the rigid gender constructs. The play portrays the story of Jairaj and Ratna. They both were very passionate about Bharatnatyam but patriarchy clashed with their ambitions. The father of Jairaj named Amritlal Parekh is a very conservative



man. For him dance is only for men and dancing makes a man less manly and more feminine. “A woman in a man’s world can be considered as being progressive but a man in a woman’s world is pathetic. (Dattani 42)

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* argues that social power lies in the hands of patriarchy. The theme of gender runs so deep throughout the play that whole identity of Jairaj is in crisis. He fails to understand his son he believes that dance is the art of Devdasis. Amritlal’s character was very pathetic in the play. He robbed his son of his dream. He played a dirty gender politics where he makes Ratna to fall into the trap he created and Ratna also started to talk like Amritlal. She also had same ideologies as Amritlal. She says that audience come to watch the dance of a young beautiful woman and not a man’s dance. Jairaj is completely dominated by his father and even his wife. His wife comments “ You, you are nothing but a spineless boy who is afraid of leaving his father’s home.” (Dattani, 21) . Ratna’s character portrays how women in spite of being the victims of patriarchy, they also enforce the very norms that subjugated them. She leveraged Jairaj’s love for dance to advance her career. Ratna also supports her father in law and dismissed Jairaj’s dance as a threat to masculinity. As Jairaj say “ You used me ....to gain what you wanted.” ( Dattani 54) Dattani’s character Ratna shows that patriarchy is not simply a system imposed by men but women also help to sustain it.

Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”

This can be extended to the experience of men in Dattani’s play . The way women are confined to specific gender roles men are also confined and they also have to follow certain behaviours that define their masculinity. This shows how both the genders have to suffer societal pressure and follow certain norms. This play is a powerful critique of how gender identity is shaped by cultural norms. Jairaj’s choice of becoming Bharatnatyam dancer is not just passion but it’s an act of rebellion. It’s standing against the patriarchal society and system that dictates how men and women should behave. M.K. Naik says “*In Dance like a Man*, Dattani challenges the traditional notion of gender and occupation by portraying a male dancer who defines the culturally prescribed boundaries of masculinity .”( Naik, 123)

The play is a powerful portrayal of how masculinity is socially constructed. He beautifully weaved the themes of gender, identity and cultural resistance and criticized the constructs of masculinity that govern the societal expectations. Through Jairaj Dattani showed the internal conflict a man has to go through if he wants to pursue passion. The character of Ratna is very complicated and it shows how women also support the very system that limits them, subjugate and oppress them. This play showcases how societal expectations affects both men and women. This play encourages audience to reimagine cultural narratives and embrace individuality.

Dattani’s stagecraft is also as experimental as his themes. *Dance Like a Man* is not only famous for its bold themes but also for how beautifully Dattani breaks the Aristotle’s unities of time and



space. The play is non linear in structure. It shifts from present to past and from past to present. Audience can see Jairaj and Ratna as parents of middle age but they can also see Jairaj and Ratna very young fighting against patriarchy. Instead of showing typical linear drama Dattani uses flashbacks to show how past has affected present. In linear narratives play moves from cause to effect but *Dance Like a Man* uses memory fragments. Both the characters remember the trauma and past incidents with their own biases. As Daya says “If I had not agreed with him, we would have lost everything. At least this way we could dance.” (Dattani, 41) Memoirs here are fractured. They offer partial truth with biases. Dattani shows three generations on a single stage. But the play offers an unresolved closure. Lata moves forward in life but Jairaj and Ratna stay the same fractured and hurt. Dattani’s innovative techniques make the play both formally and thematically experimental.

Mahesh Dattani brought in themes that were almost unthinkable on stage in India in 1990s. *On a Muggy Night* became India’s first play that portrayed struggles of gay man and problems faced by homosexuals. Dattani gave voice and visibility to marginalized identities in our homophobic society. The characters fight with internalized shame, secrecy and homophobia. He experiments how identity is not only self constructed but also socially policed.

There are only few ways gays people could in our Indian society. It’s not a new thing that suddenly appeared. Gay people have been living in our society since ages. But no one talked about them openly or discussed their plight. They have to hide their identities in order to be accepted. The play is set in a posh Mumbai flat of Kamlesh. Prakash was his lover who left him to become straight and marry another woman. Kamlesh was heartbroken. “I would have understood it if he would have left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship. I was very angry. I left my parents and my sister to come here, all because of him ...” (Dattani, 69) The gays that Dattani represented in the play are all living different life from one another. Prakash is coward. He is sure about his sexual preferences but decides to choose a life of hypocrisy and deception. Rather than coming out and marrying Kamlesh he chose to marry a woman. Bunny is a closet gay. He portrays himself as a middle class happy man with wife and family. He looks and behaves happy in the society. He admits his homosexuality to his friends but denies it publically. He is leading a double life of homosexual and of heterosexual. Unlike Bunny Ranjit is living a happy life with his English lover for past twelve years not in India where such relationship are seen as illegal and unnatural but in Europe where homosexuality is accepted. He says “can’t seem to be both Indian and gay.” (Dattani, 88) There he is at peace with himself and with his identity. Whereas Sharad is very comfortable with his identity he doesn’t really care about what the world thinks of him. He is very critical of Bunny’s hypocrisy. He asserts his identity as gay “No, Im not a bisexual; Im as gay as a goose” (Dattani, 100) Deepali lives a happy life with her significant other ‘Tina’. She is comfortable with her sexuality. With the help of the character Kamlesh Dattani portrays the problematic identity of the gay man who visits psychiatrist to get rid of depression but





psychiatrist told him that he “would not be happy as a gay man. It’s impossible to change the society, he said but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself.” ( Dattani, 69) This is so heartbreaking because psychiatrist are supposed to be the ones who understand human psychology like no other and yet he also gave this unrealistic suggestion to an already depressed person. Kamlesh desperately wanted to patch things up with Prakash. But Prakash wanted to marry Kamlesh’s sister Kiran with his new name as Ed. He wanted a normal life. Even Kiran also supports Ed to accept who he is and be happy with himself. But he hates himself for being a gay. The play ends with Prakash’s heartfelt comment “I am .....sorry, I didn’t means to harm you, I only wanted to live.” ( Dattani, 110) This statement of Prakash is very disturbing and bluntly true. Because in our homophobic society members of LGBTQ+ community are treated with shame and disgust. They don’t get equal opportunities just because of their sexual orientation. They are treated with no respect and dignity. They have to hide their identities to be accepted. Maybe it’s high time we understand that these people are also human. And they also deserve to be accepted and treated with respect.

In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani didn’t just bring new themes but he also used Formal techniques to make the play more relatable. The play is taken place in largely one apartment. It’s a bit claustrophobic. This portrays the suffocating environment and suffocation in everyone’s lives. And here Muggy Night is not just weather it’s the metaphor of the lives of the characters . It shows how characters lives are filled with sadness and melancholy because of the society.

Mahesh Dattani experiments with themes by going beyond traditional social plays. Unlike other dramatists who avoided the theme of communal violence, Dattani portrays it openly. He boldly stages Hindu- Muslim tensions after the partition and prejudices that people hold for each other till date. He has portrayed communal prejudice is not external but internal and runs through generations. The play starts with Daksha, she is called as Hardika after marriage. She is the oldest person in the family. She reads and excerpt from her diary. The diary portrays her true feelings . She loved to listen songs of Noor Jehan so she befriended Zarine. And used to visit her. But during the riot Hardika’s father was killed by muslims. So now she had made her mind that all muslims are the same. And she started hating Zarine. Her granddaughter Smita is a broad minded girl. She has Muslim friends but she is afraid her family wouldn’t accept it. She has a liberal mindset. . Her mother Aruna Gandhi thinks Hindus are superior than Muslims. Her father Ramnath also portrays to be liberal but is not. The Gandhi family faces crisis due to the communal riot in the city. Two Muslim boys named Bobby and Javed were running away from the mob and take shelter in Gandhi house. Smita recognized the boys but her mother threatened to prohibit her from going outside. She says “ Stop her studies! From now on, she can stay at home! (Dattani, 188) Mother off Smita is a typical Indian housewife and a God fearing woman. She dislikes the decision of her husband. Her husband allowed 2 Muslim men stay with them under the same roof. Aruna although had sympathy for them but she was scared of them too.



Ramnik Gandhi is the son of Hardika. And head of the family as well. He helped two Muslim men who were in need of protection. His good trait is that he encourages his family to treat the boys with sympathy. He hates it when his mother keeps talking about her path showing Muslims in a bad light. But he also has some flaws. He quickly developed superiority complex over many things. He offers Javed one of the refugees a job at his own shop. Surely he was sympathetic or maybe he wanted to atone for the crimes his father and grandfather committed. He has concealed some information from her mother. Her mother believed that Zarine's family refused to join hands out of false pride but in reality her husband was responsible for burning down Zarone's father's sweet. At the end Hardika feels guilty for hating on Muslims throughout her life.

One of the Muslim boys who took refuge in Gandhi house is Bobby. His real name is Babban. He hides his Muslim identity. He is about to marry Javed's sister Tasneem. Tasneem is a good friend of Smita. Bobby is calm and composed. He can handle social situations gracefully. He is good at communication. He is the one who saved Javed from Ratha Yatra. He even helps Aruna, the wife of Ramnik to understand that God doesn't differentiate between people. For him everyone is equal.

He says " You can bathe him day and night, you can splash Holy waters on him. But you cannot remove my touch from His Form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attarsand fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes and respects and tolerates what other human beings believe. This is the strongest fragrance in the world! (Dattani, 224) He believes in believing one another. He believes in respecting one another's religion and beliefs.

Javed is the another refugee. He became a victim of a propaganda spread by a politician for his political advancements by the name of Islamic Jihad. Such politicians spread hatred in the name of religion and naïve people like Javed blindly follow them. Which results into the loss of both the sides. Without knowing real meaning of Jihad and Islam they kill innocent people. Rather than studying islam and Quran on their own they follow so called muftis and religious leaders who have taken the thekhas of religion and spread false narrative and exploit people who blindly follow them. Javed was assigned by the terrorists to kill the pujari but deep down he knew this is wrong and his knife fell down.

In the play neither Gandhis not Javed was innocent. The crux of the matter is that whenever there is a communal riot both the sides are equally involved. People need to stand against communal hatred and should trat eachother like human beings.

For this education is must. When people are educated they start to see others as humans as well. They start to respect differences and understand that not everything that media or tv shows is correct. Because the only people that get benefits from the riots and killing of innocents are the corrupt politicians of both the sides. The common man no matter of which side always loses.



This play is not just thematically experimental but formally as well. Dattani used Greek chorus in this play but he gave it a twist. The chorus is the mob behind. Sometimes they are Hindus and sometimes they are Muslims. This shows that hatred has no face or religion. It's interchangeable. The chorus is the voice of prejudice and violence.

He uses non linear narrative as well. The play started in 1948 and then moved in 1990. Flashbacks and memories of the grandmother are mixed with present. This shows how past reflects in present.

The play ended on an unclear closure. Usually plays end with a proper closure either with a moral or a reconciliation. Dattani although gave the title as *Final Solution* but didn't give a final solution. He made audience to think how will this problem be solved.

And play here doesn't give a protagonist and an antagonist. The play has many voices. Everyone is right in their own perspective but somehow no one is innocent. The experiment is a polyphonic drama. Where no single truth is present just different perspectives.

Mahesh Dattani's another play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is very unconventional. It's written for BBC Radio and as it was written for Radio there would be no visuals. It stands out because it shows the silenced voices of hijra community. The story is narrated by Uma Rao. She is the wife of SP Suresh Rao. She became interested in the investigation of a murder case. A beautiful eunuch named Kamla was burnt to death. While doing research she uncovers the prejudices people hold against this community. As she digs deep she realized that Kamla loved the son of a powerful minister. Subbu even marries Kamla secretly. But this relationship wasn't accepted in the minister's family. So to prevent the shame they burnt Kamla alive. And erased her existence. And Anarkali was arrested. She was another eunuch. Anarkali states "I didn't kill her and she was my sister" (Dattani, 9) Uma was shocked but knew justice will never be served. Because the perpetrators are privileged and have political powers.

The title *Seven Steps Around the Fire* shows the Hindu marriage ritual called as Saptapadi. But Hijra community are not allowed to take part in these rituals. They are denied traditional marriages. Although they are invited for blessings at marriages and childbirths but they themselves are denied of such rituals. Uma discovered that in the world of heterosexuals hijras are meaningless. The hijras have no faith that someone could actually help them. Champa knew no one would care about what happened to Kamla. And the case will be closed and silenced. Because no one wants to hear or take stand for the plight of eunuchs. They are treated with no respect. But Uma treated the hijra community as though they are her sisters with respect and dignity. Subbu the minister's son got into rage and shoots himself. But the murder mystery is still hidden. And no one cared to look from the angle of Subbu's death. "The matter was kept quiet and newspaper didn't mention it. Champa had a point. Police didn't make any arrest. The suicide of Subbu was dismissed as an accident. The image was obliterated." (Dattani, 282) The drama exposes the shamefulness of our





society and cruelty towards marginalized. In the drama the light is shed on the gloomy settlements of hijra community. They are hidden from the judgemental eyes of the society. Dattani intentionally does this to bring attention to the plight of eunuchs. And to create social awareness. The drama emphasizes how society discriminates against transgender people and how they are treated suspiciously. It's clear that all they yearn for is little acceptance and self respect. In this play Dattani called eunuchs as "invisible minority". After being released from the prison she asks Uma "So now that you know who killed Kamala what will you do?"

"Uma: I'll ask my husband to call the police.

Anarkali: your husband is unconcerned by the loss of one hijra in the world." (Dattani, 272)

It shows how no one is interested in the presence of hijras in society. Everyone wants to stay away from them. Dattani questions that simply because biologically they are not capable of bearing children they are treated as the third class citizen of the society. The murder brings up the problem a group of people who lacked a platform to advocate for their lives and dignity. The drama sheds light on the inhumane treatment of the prisoners as well. Anarkali was housed with male inmates and was called as "it" which shows that they are neither considered as masculine nor feminine. And are simply beaten like animals.

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is not just experimental because of its themes but also because of its unusual style and form. It's not written for the stage but for Radio. The play completely depends on sound and narration. And the play is narrated by Uma Rao. In traditional plays the story unfolds through dialogues but Dattani mixed storytelling with drama. The play initially shows a murder mystery but eventually turns into social critique. It shows the plight of hijra community and how their voices are suppressed. Mainstream dramas never gave hijras a central stage. By giving Kamla a central stage Dattani breaks the traditional patterns of the play. The title is also very experimental. The title although talks about a marriage ritual but hijras the main characters of the play is denied of the very institution. Unlike normal detective stories justice is served in the end here justice is denied even though the truth is known. This unfinished ending shows the harsh reality of our society.

**Conclusion:** Mahesh Dattani is a pioneer of Indian English Drama. He shaped Indian theatre with his experiments. His dramaturgy doesn't really aim to entertain but to speak for those whose voices are suppressed. And stand for those who have no one by their sides. By showing unconventional themes and fractured timelines, non linear narratives and using chorus he broke the traditional approach. By addressing the theme of gender inequality in *Tara* or showing communal tensions in *Final Solution* to showing reality of gayman in *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* to showing plight of eunuchs in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* he touched the sufferings of marginalized. And gave them a stage to speak. He aimed to change the society for better. He decided to make people believe in



humanity. He took action to reform the society. He stood for humanity and expects the audience to do the same.

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