Contemporary Indian Writers in English

Mahesh Dattani

Works of Mahesh Dattani

Final Solutions and Other Plays, Madras: Affiliated East West Press, 1994

Tara, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996

Night Queen, Calcutta: *Telegraph Literary Supplement*, 1996

Collected Plays, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000

Tara in Erin B. Mee (ed.) *Drama Contemporary: India*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001

(A detailed listing of Dattani's works appears in the Appendix.)

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Mahesh Dattani

An Introduction

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri

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Series Editor's Preface

Contemporary Indian Writers In English (CIWE) presents critical commentaries on some of the best-known names in the genre. With the high visibility of Indian writing in English in academic, critical, pedagogic and readerly circles, there is a perceivable demand for lucid yet rigorous introductions to many of its authors and genres. Indian writing in English, in each of its genres – fiction, poetry, non-fiction and drama – has a diversity of themes, forms and styles. CIWE titles explore precisely this rich diversity. Attention to the narrative form of the novels/poems is accompanied by a detailed reading of the central themes in the author's works. The plan of the series is to provide as complete a survey of an author's oeuvre as possible, within a manageable length.

CIWE seeks to strike a balance between providing an introductory study as well as a critical appraisal of the writer's work. The former serves the informed, non-specialist reader, while the latter suits the academic essay/seminar/assignment in literature classrooms. The theoretical approaches are wide-ranging – from structural analysis of narrative to feminist literary criticism. Every text in the series provides biographical information, close textual analysis, a survey of the author's chief thematic concerns, bibliographic information for the ones who wish to pursue further reading, and a comprehensive list of topics for discussion. The last one is meant to aid further reflection on the author or text, and is indicative of the potential every author in the Indian writing in English 'canon' possesses.

This book focuses on Mahesh Dattani, perhaps India's most important playwright in English today. Dattani blends conventional themes with some startlingly new ones in his work. His plays combine the intimate with the social, the personal and the public, often exploring the boundaries between these realms. Daring and innovative, Dattani has made Indian drama in English a major genre of social critique today. His increasing presence in college syllabi, research projects and now film adaptations suggests a growing popularity. In 1998, Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi award for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays*.

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri provides an exhaustive introduction to Mahesh Dattani's work. Chaudhuri explores Dattani's central themes – the family, alternate sexualities, other genders, morality and identity – while also examining the dramaturgical innovations in his work. This introduction is a detailed study of one of the most important voices in Indian writing in English today.

CIWE texts, it is hoped, will not only popularize the genre of Indian writing in English further, but also encourage serious critical work on it.

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1. Introduction

Modern Indian Drama

What does one mean when one refers to 'Indian theatre'? In one of the largest and most populous, and certainly most culturally diverse countries of the world, where does one begin to situate, or even, to begin with, discover – any singular phenomenon of the kind? With its fifteen national languages, and more than eight hundred dialects, the spectrum of India's cultural fabric is decidedly complex and difficult to encompass. Hence, when one talks of 'Indian theatre', one enters a vast and intricate arena, both idiomatically heterogeneous and polyglot in character. Although numerous strands show us the links, it is after all, an arbitrary term, randomly used to designate one or the other of the diverse performance arts practiced in the country, belonging to diverse traditions. It is extraordinarily inclusive – encompassing the classical (like the Kathakali, or some Bharatanatyam pieces), the ritual (such as the Raas, the Ramlila, or the Theyyam), the devotional (many of the musically dominant performances), the folk (like the Chhau or the Therukuttu) and the modern, partaking of sundry traditions, forms and lore, sometimes unique, and sometimes bewilderingly intermingling with each other. Dance, drama, mime, song, instrumentation, puppetry, the orally delivered narratives all combine happily, almost seamlessly in a performance by an ensemble of artistes working simultaneously.

Given such a situation, it is hardly possible to fit this convergence into neat categories of Western theatre and performance that a student of Western literatures is wont to do, although it is possible to find working categories within its own socio-historico-political ambit, as within its own traditions.

A closer look at theatre in India from the time of the emergence of Sanskrit drama and its traditions, or the folk performance art still current in rural India is, however, beyond the span of this study. Our attempt will be to assess the place of *modern* Indian theatre that is predominantly urban, manifestly influenced by Western traditions even as it tries to find its own feet, still evolving and searching for a distinctive identity. This drama, nonetheless, is part of the larger 'Indian theatre', decidedly influenced by, and drawing inspiration from many of its traditional forms. To narrow down our focus further, we shall look at the place of English language drama in postcolonial India, a genre that unfortunately, (until recently) retains a somewhat mongrel nature, especially so when one juxtaposes it with the flourishing tribe of Indian novelists who write in English.

Modern Theatre in India

Modern theatre in India is not a rural phenomenon. It owes its origins to the growth of large urban settlements like Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay (now known as Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai)beginning sometime in the eighteenth century, under the British, who had established secure centers of trade by the mid-nineteenth century. Around the same time, three major universities were founded in these three cities, and English education

was firmly underway. An entire class of intelligentsia was thus initiated and exposed to Western literature and drama. By the last part of the nineteenth century, drama in Indian languages, but modelled on Western lines, began to be performed, particularly in Kolkata, catering to private audiences from the upper classes. A powerful political tool, theatre quickly began to make both overt and insidious attempts to subvert the existing oppressive political order. This drama also began to look inwards and often exposed the social injustices and corruption within the greater Indian society.

By the time India finally achieved independence, theatre was struggling to survive in the face of the tremendous popularity of cinema. Modern theatre in India has however, come a long way. Many forms of profit generating, commercially viable professional drama, a whole gamut of amateur theatre with varying degrees of commitment and competence, some experimental theatre of a very serious nature that makes radical departures from convention, and a host of dramatic activities that are seen in school and college campuses are some of the truly heterogeneous terrain of modern, urban theatre. Let us look at a few of the established commercial theatrical ventures.

Professional Theatre

In Kolkata, perhaps the hub of this form, substantial employment is generated through art and entertainment. The Star, Circarena, Rangmahal, Biswaroopa, Minerva, Rangana, Bijon, Tapan and Muktangan are a few examples of theatre that is self-sustaining and active, and an audience that is faithful. In Thiruvananthapuram, the Kalanilaya

Vistavision the Dramascope Company, the Kerala People's Arts Company and the Kalidasa Kalakendra (the last two being communist groups) all perform during the 'season', after rehearsing during the monsoons. In Assam, there is a vibrant form of mobile theatre, with groups like Abahan, Kohinoor and others putting up all manner of plays in keeping with current tastes of the audience and evoking a tremendous response, as they tour around the state performing both classics and specially scripted plays. Metropolises like Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi have little to no commercial theatre.

Amateur Theatre

In fact, the scenario is such that one could easily venture to say that mostly all modern Indian theatre is amateur urban theatre. This theatre works only because those who participate in it do so knowing fully well that there would be no question of actually earning a livelihood through theatre alone. Therefore, the motivation for this kind of theatre comes mainly from individuals – directors, actors, and others – who are passionate about the art and who would manage to eke out a good deal of time for it after going about their regular occupations in diverse areas. Some, of course, do manage to make it commercially viable, but hardly in the sense of a regular income-generating employment. For most such groups of individuals, a serious concern for their art is the single most important driving force that spurs them on despite the severe constraints.

For these reasons, it is amazing to note that in Kolkata itself, there are more than three thousand registered theatre groups that perform serious plays, mostly with social

content, often satiric, and with a strong political bias. Notable among the theatre groups in Kolkata are Bahurupee, the Little Theatre, and Nandikar, amongst a host of others. The strong personal involvement of stalwarts like Shombhu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Utpal Dutt and Asutosh Bhattacharyya in the middle of the last century helped considerably in providing the creative impulse for a fund-starved theatre there.

Mumbai too, has its share of quality theatre coming from its amateur groups, over five hundred in number. The multilingual population of the city is reflected in the many languages of the plays performed in the city, leading to assorted and complex performances that accommodate the various Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, English, and south Indian elements. Founded in 1944, the Indian National Theatre (INT) brings under its ambit all of these, sponsoring plays in all languages. Funded by the central and the state governments, the institution depends, like all other theatre groups, on the leadership of a few dedicated group of enthusiasts. To mention some important names of people who give direction to the theatre in Mumbai, the tremendous contribution of the late Prithviraj Kapoor who founded the Prithvi Theatres that did remarkable work to promote Hindi theatre, may be recalled. His work was carried on by his son Shashi and his wife Jennifer Kendal, and presently by their daughter, Sanjana Kapoor. Kamalkar Narang and his wife, separately, run theatre groups that coincide with other socio-cultural activities. The indubitable Ebrahim Alkazi (who started his work in Mumbai before he became the director of the National School of Drama at Delhi) started the Theatre Group in 1953 and produced a range of works with a dedicated unit. Satyadev Dubey took over the group upon

Alkazi's departure for the NSD, and sustained Hindi theatre in Mumbai for years together. Sultan Padamsee has looked after the production of English plays by the Theatre Group. Alyque Padamsee (who will feature in a special context in the later part of this book) is another important leader of the theatre movement in Mumbai, and perhaps one of the most important directors of English language theatre in India.

Delhi, the capital of India, however, pales in comparison with the Kolkata and Mumbai theatres. About a hundred registered groups function here, and have only recently begun to spurt in terms of meaningful productions. Here, like in the other cities, the onus of responsibility remain with a handful of dedicated theatre people. A major boost to the theatre was received when the National School of Drama was set up in the 1960s and systematic workshop-based courses were devised for its students. It also started its own Repertory Company under the guidance of Ebrahim Alkazi and was able to mount some lavish productions. But apart from such institutions, there is little to write home about in terms of amateur theatre in Delhi.

Experimental Theatre

While experimental theatre is not absolutely different from serious amateur theatre, there is a slightly distinctive category that seems to have emerged with the work of a few serious practitioners. The political street theatre of Badal Sircar in Kolkata, who delineates some of its major characteristics in his book, *The Third Theatre* (1978), and that of Safdar Hashmi in Delhi have left a strong imprint

upon contemporary performances. Decidedly political, and decidedly left wing, Sircar attempted to redefine the requirements of a serious theatrical production, throwing up suggestions on how an effective theatre is possible without the peripheral necessities like theatre hall rental, advertisements, expensive lights and sound, sets and props and other paraphernalia. This theory was actually practiced by his group, Satabdi, who were able to stage remarkable performances in Kolkata as well as in Delhi. The play itself, then, would be the most important thing and would reach out to an audience that would otherwise remain aloof from both, the theatrical performance, and the issues that it generated. The other major exponent of political street theatre in Delhi, Safdar Hashmi's theatre also devoted itself to a leftist agenda that would focus on the working classes. Currently, the work of Tripurari Sharma in this area is significant.

In Mumbai, numerous experimental groups perform at Prithvi Theatres and at the National Centre for the Performing Arts. Delhi-based Mohan Rakesh's work, until his death in 1972, is extremely important. His experimental workshop traversed new ground in the production of non-realistic plays in Hindi. The emphasis was shifted from the text to performance and the body began to play a dominant role in this drama. Much of Delhi's experimental theatre runs in the basement of Sriram Centre. In Chennai, too, a few such experimental theatre groups exist and perform within their resources. In Bangalore, the Kannada plays of the renowned Girish Karnad and the work of Kavalam Narayana Pannikar in Thiruvananthapuram are significant in their binding of the traditional forms of Indian theatre with the modern. Both of them happen to be exponents of what Suresh Awasthi terms the 'Theatre of Roots' movement (Mee, 2002: 2).

In terms of playwriting, this movement was to evolve soon after independence when a group of dramatists and theatre directors began to find the need to create a theatre that did not necessarily have to follow Western models left behind by the colonial past, but would rather revert back to its roots that were deeply entrenched within the myriad indigenous forms of theatre. Thus they began to appropriate ancient traditional, classical, ritual or folk performance forms to give shape to the new, contemporary Indian drama. This was, in one sense, a strategy for what Erin Mee calls 'the *de*-colonizing (emphasis mine)' (Mee, 2002) of theatre, a politically motivated need to devise tools for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy that was not a mere derivative of the Western models.

Women's theatre in India has also seen some degree of activity, although one could hardly to refer to it as 'feminist' theatre in the given 'Western' sense of the term. Very often, women's theatre coalesces with the street theatre movement, using the same techniques in performance and production, but without the obvious political affiliations or moorings. This is a kind of a theatre of protest, voices raised in performance against the exploitative regimes that seek to subjugate women, through enactment of dowry deaths, female infanticide, domestic abuse, prostitution and a whole gamut of such issues. Sometimes traditional mythical patterns are used to get across the point in solo performances that retell the epics from the women's point of view – through Sita's or Draupadi's eyes – thus subverting existing structures. Among the important exponents of this kind of theatre are playwrights like Usha Ganguli. The plays of another Bengali writer, Mahashweta Devi–given her strong political overtones – are generally not categorized as women's theatre, though familiar elements may be traceable in her work too.

Plays and Playwrights of the Modern Indian Theatre

Modern Indian theatre has moved away from the traditional performance-predominant forms, and the play text has assumed primacy. In this, it seems to follow the general trends in the West, where the text becomes the guide to the production. A gamut of interpretations of the text can then emerge, depending on the directors/actors/designers and so on. In India, this tendency seems to have caught on, for better or for worse. Says Satyadev Dubey, among the most active directors of recent times, "Today's theatre is still play oriented and not performance oriented" (Richmond et al: 401). This reorientation shows the marked shift from the performance to the text even as modern theatre moves from rural to urban India.

Among the major dramatists who give a distinctive shape to this enormous mass of creative material are Vijay Tendulkar, who writes in Marathi about contemporary issues, and has been translated and performed in many of the other Indian languages and has become something of a household name in urban India; Badal Sircar who is one of the major theorists and practitioners of contemporary experimental theatre in Bengal; Girish Karnad, who continues to redefine the contours of modern Indian theatre with his Kannada plays that he himself translates; and Mohan Rakesh, who wrote and produced experimental, non-realistic drama that revolutionized theatre in Hindi and continues to exert tremendous influence, even three decades after his death.

In this context, who dominates the theatre in modern India remains irresolvable – the playwright or the director

or even the actor. This generally varies according to the type of the theatre that one is referring to, the professional, the amateur or the experimental. At times the reputation of the playwright would consume all else, especially if he/she also assumes the mantle of the director; or at times the actor's sheer presence would devour the play. Whatever be the case, it is true that the *literary* merit of a play would in any case belong to the playwright although it could never be seen in isolation, divorced from actual performance. Tendulkar, Karnad or the others that we refer to, work in close conjunction with the directors/performers who bring the text to life.

To this exalted list of playwrights who have shaped and reshaped contemporary Indian theatre, we must add the name of Mahesh Dattani, who became the first playwright writing in English to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award since its inception in 1955, for *Final Solutions*. But before that, an attempt must be made to situate contemporary Indian drama in English – its historicity, locations, idioms and practice – both as literature and as performance.

Contemporary Indian English Drama

In a typically reactionary postcolonial situation, to write in English – the language of the colonial ruler – in newly independent India, came to be largely considered politically incorrect. While it still had its uses for the more run-of-the-mill administrative purposes, it was considered presumptuous for it to aspire to the territory of artistic or creative expression. However, it is one of India's recognized languages, invaluable as a link language between diverse

linguistic groups, the communicative tool for people from different states. It is also the language of the upwardly mobile middle classes – or those who aspire to be part of the middle classes – with some amount of snob-value still remaining as the trace of its earlier status as the language of the masters. English is also the language of higher education, and for any Indian with a college degree, a working knowledge of the language comes as a matter of course. It is still the language of officialdom, although great efforts have been made to change the situation. Hence a grasp over the language would open up employment opportunities in all sectors. English is however, used as an everyday speech habit by only a fraction of the Indian population, mostly those living in the urban areas who are necessarily a minority.

With early novelists writing in English like Mulk Raj Anand or Raja Rao or even R.K.Narayan, the situation was extremely different and their work was received differently. In the 1960s, writers like Anita Desai, had to deal with tremendous suspicion, even resentment, in her own country. The situation we have today, especially in fiction, is vastly different, with contemporary Indian writers hogging the center- stage wherever English writing is read, not having to depend upon readership at home alone, which generally follows the international response. But to shift focus to contemporary drama in English by Indian writers, the problems become more intricate. Few Indian writers in English become playwrights. Fewer still are able to achieve literary/critical acclaim, and rarely find appreciative and faithful audiences in performances in cities and towns other than the metropolises.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were English 'plays' written by Michael Madhsudhan Dutt, Sri Aurobindo (*Eric, King of Norway, Perseus the Deliverer* and *Savitri*), and Harindranath Chattopadhyay (*Jayadeva, Pundalik* and *Raidas, the Cobbler Saint*) which were hardly 'stage worthy', indeed, such attempts can be seen as mere literary exercises; not real theatre that would draw audiences. In the 1970s came plays like Dina Mehta's *The Myth Makers*, Snehalata Reddy's *Sita*, and Shiv K. Kumar's *The Last Wedding Anniversary*. Asif Currimbhoy, Partap Sharma and the poet Nissim Ezekiel all wrote a few plays that were actually staged but had little impact. The plays just failed to relate to the audiences, who were not yet ready to accept plays in English written by Indians. Also, English theatre seemed to become associated with light amusement for the urban elite. Significantly, this was also the time that the Theatre of Roots movement was making its impact felt in terms of using indigenous material for contemporary theatre, written and performed in vernacular Indian languages.

Writing is only one aspect of theatre; the other predominant one is the performance. These plays did not amount to anything substantial like a tradition of play writing, nor did their staging lead to the emergence of a tradition of Indian theatre in English. The problems here are enmeshed with the reception of a play. A book is verily meant for the educated. Not so the theatre, because performances could be watched by anyone. Does English theatre then, exclude the majority of the populace, an audience that would otherwise have easily received a play in their own tongue? To write a text (fiction or drama) requires a degree of competence and prowess that most Indian writers possess. To actually translate the text into a

living performance that a given Indian audience is to watch and relate to is quite another thing. This is the crux of the problem that posed and still poses the major obstacle for Indian dramatic performances in English. Whatever degree of comfort that an Indian, irrespective of the part of India he/she may belong to, feels in *reading* English, the same degree of ease would never be maintained in watching a full performance with the actors *speaking* in English. The reason is simple enough. The entire spectacle rings false. The great majority of Indians, rural or urban, still communicate orally with each other in the vernacular. Dramatic performances are generally seen as a slice of, an extension of that lived experience itself. Hence, the difficulty for the audiences to come to terms with English as the language of performance. This remains the major problem that must be tackled before the playwright begins to envisage a play in English for Indian audiences.

It is only in the 1980s that such a movement seems to begin, albeit in a very small way. After decades of active urban usage and in a sense, homogenization of the English language, with the audiences becoming much more at home with the many varieties of Indian English that is internalized and spoken without premeditation, Indian theatre in English begins to emerge with a distinctive and vigorous identity.

Mahesh Dattani is in the vanguard of those who have made this happen; he is an actor and director with his own theatre group and has an innate sense of dialogue that is vital, stimulating, lucid and effective. Dealing with compelling issues rooted in his milieu, he has dispelled the perception about English theatre being just gratuitous fizz. His audiences have been large and responsive, both to the spectacle and the language.

> ...people have to come to terms with the fact that English is an Indian language! ...India has this enormous capacity to absorb from all sources. ...The sooner we come to terms with that, we can get on with the rest (Ayyar, 2004).

There are a few others who have made important contributions in contemporary times. Poile Sengupta, a Tamilian married to a Bengali, writes English plays that are strong, with identifiable characters and situations. Her play, *Mangalam* has been staged to large and responsive audiences in Bangalore, Chennai and Delhi. Her recent works *Alipha, Thus Spake Shoorpanakha,* and *So Said Shakuni* address quite controversial themes. She too, is a theatre person – actor and director, with her own drama group based in Bangalore. There is Gurcharan Das, who has written three successful plays – *Larins Sahib, Meera* and *9 Jakhoo Hill.* He does not act or direct, but works closely with a theatre group, taking in its responses, sitting in on improvisations and rewriting his plays with the acquired insights. (*9 Jakhoo Hill* was rewritten four times before it was staged). Then there is Gopal Gandhi who has written a fine historical verse-play *Dara Shukoh.* Manjula Padmanabhan who wrote *Harvest,* the play that won the Onassis Award, is yet to write another, being chiefly a novelist. There is Vijay Padaki (also Bangalore-based) who writes plays with the bare minimum of plot and dialogue, leaving the actors tremendous space to work the rest out for themselves.

With decades of English education in India, both in schools and in universities, the country is home to the largest English-knowing population in the world. Thus, there is a very large potential audience for plays in English and not merely through translations. All of this, however, does not make for a substantial body of work in English theatre in

India, standing as it does, in the shadow of plays in the vernacular. But steadily the picture seems to be changing, as a distinct and definite theatrical identity and idiom evolves. Says Dattani:

> It's hard work... Not many people have that kind of time. Theatre companies have to trust new playwrights and their plays, too. ...I'm an actor, I'm a director, so I know the craft of writing a play. The craftsmanship has to be worked at... . (Dasgupta, 2001)

With the coming of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Dattani is now considered an officially recognized part of the Indian literary establishment. Countering the usual criticism that his work is hardly 'Indian' because of his medium and his use of the proscenium stage, Erin Mee quotes Dattani:

> Does [Indian theatre] mean traditional theatrical forms? Yes, they're wonderful, they're very sophisticated, they're impressive, but are they really India? ...Are they really reflecting life as it is now? ...What we need to do now is look at those forms and say we're approaching the twenty first century, this is who we are and this is our legacy, so where do we take that. That's not happening, and that's a matter of serious concern. (Mee, 1997: 24-25)

Mahesh Dattani: A biographical sketch

> [Dattani's work] probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.
>
> *Sahitya Akademi award citation (1998)*

Mahesh Dattani was born on 7 August 1958 in Bangalore where his parents had moved to from Gujarat. Studying

at Baldwins, Dattani recalls his experiences at this Christian institution, morning assembly in the 'chapel' and singing hymns. The medium of communication was strictly English and speaking in the vernacular in school was frowned upon.

> ...[U]npleasant distinctions were made between the 'vernies' and the ones who were fluent in English. Snob values were inculcated early on and you generally were made to feel privileged to belong to that school. We were taught English literature with a capital E! (Ayyar, 2004)

The family – his parents and two elder sisters would attend Gujarati plays that were often performed at Bangalore, by way of keeping in touch with their roots, and the young Dattani was struck by the aura of the stage and the illusory world of the theatre that would stay with him. Later, watching Gujarati and Kannada plays in his late teens he realized:

> I didn't know the world at my doorstep. I got involved in theatre and for a long time continued to do European plays in translation. [...Seeing] Gujarati theatre in Mumbai, I realized I had to unlearn a lot that I learnt in school. That is when my true education really began. (Ayyar, 2004)

At St Joseph's college Dattani was neither a student of literature (graduating in History, Economics and Political Science, acquiring a masters in Marketing and Advertising Management), nor did he show any signs of a literary imagination, expecting to spend a 'normal' life, helping run his father's business. Still in college in the early 1980s, Dattani joined Bangalore Little Theatre and participated in workshops, acting and directing plays. He underwent Western ballet training under Molly Andre at Alliance Francaise de Bangalore (1984-87) and Bharatanatyam

training under Chandrabhaga Devi and Krishna Rao, Bangalore (1986-90).

In 1984, he founded Playpen, his own company, and began to look for Indian plays in English, not the usual Western canonical texts that were generally performed. He was already confronting the essential problem. Dattani speaks of his choice of English as his medium as one that is home grown and Indian – a 'hybrid language' that is spoken normally and unobtrusively, in an uninhibited way, as a matter of course by his characters who are essentially Indian. "...you've got to be true to your expression also. English is for me a sort of given. It's my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad" (Menon and Prakash, 2003).

> 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 [...but] I wanted to do more Indian plays [and that] became a challenge, because there weren't many good translations – or, there may have been good translations, but they didn't do anything for me. (Mee, 2002: 14)

Dattani solved the problem by writing his own play, *Where There's a Will* in 1988 that was performed at the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. And the playwright came into being.

He has been writing regularly for the stage from then on, and in 1993, he took to scriptwriting for cinema, television and radio as well. All his plays are first tried out with Playpen, where he puts the concluding touches on his dialogue in rehearsal, using the input from his actors. His

workplace, Mahesh's Studio as he calls it houses a mini amphitheatre with three rows of semi-circular seating, spotlights, and high mud walls covered with bougainvillea and jasmine. It is here that he writes his plays using a computer, working on the performance dynamics, staging a small production, conducting a theatre workshop or even hosting an art exhibition.

> My milieu is theatre. You can't operate in isolation, ...I do want a theatre movement to happen. The major block for that is lack of sound training and professionalism. We have the talent, but theatre is more than that: it's a craft of communicating through the language of action. (Dasgupta, 2001)

Teaching and conducting workshops both at home and abroad to supplement his income, Dattani acknowledges that it is difficult to survive on playwriting alone.

Meanwhile, his plays are being staged, published, and translated in India and abroad. The range of his themes, his mandatory split level stage, and his own internalization of his craft by way of the fact that stage worthiness is never compromised upon, have all contributed to the continued growth and renewal of his art both in terms of form and content. He deals with sexuality and gender issues, religious tension, and the workings of personal and moral choices as he explores a gamut of human relationships. From *Where There's a Will*, to the matrix of gender roles in *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara*, to *Bravely Fought the Queen* that explores the shams of the upper middle class joint family, to *Final Solutions*, a gripping and sensitive play about the Hindu-Muslim conflict, to *Do the Needful*, originally a radio play that comically talks about alternate sexual choices as do *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Seven*

Steps Around the Fire, to *Thirty Days in September* which looks at incest and child abuse, Dattani has never fallen short of serious issues that need to be addressed.

How then does the Indian audience connect? Given his chosen medium of expression, the language of his plays obviously restricts a wider, more expansive, grassroots audience in India. That is not exactly the kind of audience that he is looking for, in any case, as he claims that he writes for the urban Indian upper and middle class audience and not for the working class audience:

> The more your basic needs are taken care of, the more space you have to reflect on certain things. Whereas, if you don't have that space and are concerned 24 hours about your basic needs, then you want to escape into something else [...]. (Vardhan, 2004)

Given the same criteria, however, Dattani has successfully managed to garner a very supportive audience worldwide, amongst the Indian diasporas, or even among the marginalized fringe audiences who seem to find a voice through his plays. The BBC Radio frequently commissions Dattani's plays, and he was one of the two Indians asked to contribute for the celebrations on Chaucer's six-hundredth anniversary. The reception problems here are entirely different. For instance, an Indian audience would instantly connect a play like, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* to marriage – but what about the foreign ones?

> I try and explain the context within the story line without spelling it out. There are other cultural references like 'Avaraikkai Sambhar'. ...But they also need to make the effort. If we can learn and look up French and English words thrown at us. They should also look it up. (Santhanam, 2001)

This in some sense does locate the playwright Dattani firmly on Indian soil. He would therefore write an altogether 'Indian' text like *Tale of a Mother Feeding her Child* to commemorate Chaucer's six-hundredth anniversary, mounted on that quintessentially British Chaucerian framework of *The Canterbury Tales*. Says Michael Walling, the artistic director of the multi-cultural theatre company Border Crossings in his introductory note to *Bravely Fought the Queen:*

> His plays fuse the physical and special 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. Post-colonial India and multi-cultural Britain both have an urgent need for a 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. This is in itself a political and social statement of astonishing force. (Dattani, 2000: 229)

In the larger context of contemporary Indian theatre, it is difficult to situate him as a part of a continuum in a given 'tradition' of Indian playwriting, or even as a break, within the larger framework of Indian dramaturgy. Dattani himself would locate himself as the 'change' in that strand, evolving out of his roots without needing to unnecessarily hark back to the past, or drawing from a milieu that no longer sustains him or his audiences:

> ... I do see myself as the change element of that thread. I'm not so sure even that I want to go back to my roots ...I don't need to revisit it. I'm more interested in pushing it forward. ...I am pushing, and I'm pushing the audience. (Vardhan, 2004)

Dattani shares a special rapport with two of the most important figures in the current scenario of English theatre in India: Alyque Padamsee and Lillette Dubey. Padamsee's production of *Tara* did a great deal to popularize Dattani on the theatre circuit, while Dubey has done *Dance Like A Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Thirty Days in September* all of which have gone down extremely well with audiences the world over. Dattani therefore, insists that either Lillete or himself do the first production of any of his plays. "I sometimes get itchy fingers as a director! ... The minute I write a play, the minute it's ready and finished on my computer, I want to direct it" (Dasgupta, 2001). Again he says:

> I always direct the first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instructions, which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. That way, there is no conflict' and the other directors can interpret it, as they will. (Nair, 2001)

To direct, of course, one needs special abilities, in order to clinically prune the text according to the needs of a live performance, in some sense even disown the material that one has oneself conceived. He says, "When I'm directing a play, I feel like I'm a complete human being. That makes me happy. And also when I meet people with a passion. It reaffirms all that I do" (Nair, 2001).

Powerful films can often be made through adaptations of plays. Dattani has been working with films since 1993, having written screenplays for films like *Ek Alag Mausam* for which he was also the creative consultant. As a stage director turned filmmaker he has to translate his vision and power in handling dramatic action, overtone, personal moments and emotional insight into cinematic technique. *Mango Soufflé*, the celluloid version of *On A Muggy Night*

In Mumbai revises its narrative given the different set of tools, film being a sensory medium with a strong emphasis on the visual component. Dattani here discovered an entirely new language – being, he says, at that stage of life where he would like to explore cinema, the way he did theatre and dance. The distinctions between the media are obvious, with the story and screenplay being the springboard for both.

> In theatre you can see how the script is coming through, but with film you have to plan it and postpone, and wait till the whole process is over...there is a concept of perfection [in cinema] while in theatre, there is no such thing as perfect-perfect theatre. (Menon and Prakash, 2003)

The film received rave reviews internationally, winning a few awards as well. Dattani's next film, *Morning Raaga* was an original screenplay based on the life of a classical music singer. The problem of language here remains, but as he says, "I have no choice in this matter. I could have easily done my films *Mango Soufflé* and *Morning Raga* in Hindi but the fact is it's not my language. English is the language I really think in" (Menon and Prakash, 2003).

From acting, directing, and dancing, to doing his own plays and films in a language that at least fifty million Indians have begun to identify with, or as Dattani would say, 'think in,' his corpus reads impressively.

Mahesh Dattani, then, seems to have his fingers in many pies, from acting, to writing his plays, to directing them, to retaining creative control over other productions. He seems to achieve the shifts in his position easily, like a competent actor switching roles. "The actor, the playwright and the director are all complementary to each other in a

production. It is like gardening; where a whole is made of many parts. So many conditions determine a garden's lushness, its beauty" (Nair, 2001).

At forty-five, Mahesh Dattani is at the peak of his creative powers, continuously experimenting with new forms and manners of expression. As a playwright he will never be stereotypical. The varied content of his plays seldom have his characters mouthing quotable lines, nor does his thematic material rise to extraordinary heights. But what makes Mahesh Dattani one of India's finest playwrights is perhaps his manner of speaking to the audience with complete honesty. For the moment, he seems to have found the right combination where his art is not compromised upon and yet makes commercial sense. His expectations of his audience are high, and he does not provide quick or expedient endings, only perhaps a kind of insight into their own lives.

2. The Setting

The Constructed/Deconstructed Family

> I am practicing theatre in an extremely imperfect world where the politics of doing theatre in English looms large over anything else one does. Where writing about the middle class is seen as unfashionable... I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background... in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally. (Dattani, 2000: xiv)

Dattani here maps the context of his work. The setting for all of Dattani's plays then, is necessarily embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class Indian family, and this is the context from which he operates. Working within his own time and place, and not an alien and distant westernised world, removed from the everyday ground realities with which the urban Indian audience could easily identify, Dattani was already set on a path very different from earlier attempts at staging Indian drama in English. "In drama, one explores the distortions of everyday speech, the weight and flow of everyday movement, and endeavours to bring to them a sense of music", says Dattani (Maheshwari, 2001). And this reverberates in the everyday, normally spoken English idiom that comes so naturally to him.

Dattani's early plays especially concern themselves with the apparatus of the family that is entrenched within the

middle class milieu–of which the playwright self-admittedly is a part – and would attempt to 'connect' with audiences drawn from similar backgrounds.

His characters situate themselves firmly within the family(and the society) in specific milieus and probe into the nature of their settings. I choose to refer to his settings as both constructed and deconstructed in two senses. One, Dattani unambiguously chooses his location within the dynamics of a pre-existing structure of the contemporary urban Indian family which then turns into the site of the ensuing conflict within his narrative. With newer realities piling on the older, 'acceptable' realities, his plots and subplots often work to destroy the very edifice in which they situate themselves, blasting the given stereotypes that shape the structures. And two, Dattani makes use of the available stage space to reveal these structures in concrete terms, and once again, achieves the sense of fractured reality by splitting up his performance spaces in practically all his plays into multilevel, multidimensional spaces. His characters move and speak in these spaces with voices that echo and reverberate, to sometimes consolidate and sometimes parody the narrative structures. Having said this, we shall explore how Dattani manages to achieve his effects within such a setting–to play out his plots with the issues that he takes up.

Often the issues are veiled or masked, placed behind facades that need to be penetrated, but these are nonetheless issues deep-rooted in a definite space and time and within a stimulating societal context – not merely an exercise in self-questioning. Most of his plays are constructed around social issues, though not on any specific 'message'. Dattani maintains the stance of a non-judgmental observer, and never intrudes into the plays he

writes nor attempt to sermonize. Instead he invokes that very difficult art and craft of humour. Commenting on his cra ft, Dattani once said that theatre is a reflection of what you observe. To go beyond that would be to sermonize and would cease to be theatre. However, giving this reflection a clever twist, a slight distortion to get your point across is well in order: "The function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly, but funny" (Roy, 2002).

As he says, the audiences must arrive at their own answers, as also together, in terms of a community response, because unlike TV or cinema where the viewer does not have to contribute, theatre is a shared experience:

> Audiences need to make the effort... [in] a moment of truth... people who don't know each other join in from all corners of the darkened hall to applaud and declare their appreciation of that important moment. And that's when you know a play works. (Nair, 2001)

Again, Dattani dispenses with the notion that the viewer can treat a play like a 'roller coaster ride', which, even at its most terrifying moment one knows will rapidly and happily end on safe grounds. "It's only when you are left hanging in air you start to question your own personality, perceptions... the theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began" (Nair, 2001).

But increasingly, one notices, a message hovers near. As he points out, his earlier plays were very much himself. *Where There's a Will* is based entirely on the internal dynamics

of a Gujarati family and *Dance Like a Man* came from his own several years of dance training. "I think *Final Solutions* was the turning point. I wouldn't say issues so much as a concern, a preoccupation – with gender, class, sexuality – because I'm writing for my times." (Maheshwari, 2001). He interacts with people and discusses issues to the bone– "Themes that are outside my immediate realm of experience, I research extensively. I can't just write without knowing facts, and I think good writing is all about shifting perspectives of life" (Maheshwari, 2001).

The Will's the Thing: *Where There's a Will*

Ever since his first play in 1988, *Where There's a Will*, which was rooted in the Gujarati familial dynamic, Dattani has in a sense chronicled the follies and prejudices of Indian society as reflected within the microcosm of the family unit, the most tangible and dynamic reality in middle class Indian lives. Dattani calls the play an "exorcism of the patriarchal code" (Dattani, 2000: 449) and skillfully works his narrative around the intrigues and manoeuvrings of a dysfunctional Indian family.

The play is set within the confines of four rooms – two bedrooms, the living room and the de rigueur dining room. Each room is created with specific details to set the tone for the play. In performance, *Where There's a Will* works with subtle contours that are handled deftly, notwithstanding the fact that this is Dattani's first play. With family relationships as the focus of dramatic representation, Dattani's handling of the performance space suggests to his audiences the variations in the signification allotted to different spaces.

Dattani's plot is ostensibly simple. Through the convoluled design of the will, the relationships between the four main protagonists of a joint family are painfully twisted as the play begins to come alive in performance. Clearly, the humour of the play is sheathed in layers of Ibsenesque black comedy with asphyxiated overtones that are Dattani's main tools. This is a play where 'traditional' family values clash with unexpected twists in the tale that completely subvert existing stereotypes. The story revolves around a supposedly 'self-made' industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta, the patriarch who is the supreme malcontent, with the typical problems of familial expectations; his listless wife Sonal and a colourless conjugal life; his spendthrift son Ajit; and a wily and conniving daughter-in-law Preeti; and last but hardly the least, his mistress Kiran Jhaveri. All the four belie their names. Hasmukh is a dour-faced man who seems unable to smile; Sonal hardly shines; Ajit is not in the least successful in his father's eyes; and Preeti is as unaffectionate as Hasmukh is sour. And yet they are family, yoked together with no choice in the matter, and must function as a unit under the patriarchal order. Hasmukh says, "...when I was twenty-one, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married.... The following year Ajit was born. Tragedy after tragedy..." (464). His son is a 'nincompoop'– "He has not a single quality I look for in a son! He has made my entire life worthless... It won't be long before everything I worked for and achieved will be destroyed!" (475). Immediately outside the family unit stands Kiran, Hasmukh's mistress, invisible until the patriarch dies and his will places her at the centre of the action. The highly dissatisfied Hasmukh is decidedly unhappy with the manner his life has been spent – with no one living up to his expectations, the way he had lived up to his father's. He must, therefore get back at his family; and teach them a protracted lesson.

It is only by way of the will that he would attempt to tackle all these obstacles that he has been unable to correct within his lifetime. Dattani works this out with the help of his extremely self-reflexive text, where Hasmukh speaks more to the audience, directly, than with any of the other protagonists, taking them into confidence. The play piquantly sketches this domineering patriarch who would revenge himself upon his 'avaricious' family by virtually cutting them out of his will, something they will discover only after his death. When he does die, Dattani's stage directions read thus: "*The two women start sobbing. Lights fade out on them. Spotlight picks up Hasmukh, or rather, his ghost. He stands arms akimbo. And for the first time in the play, he grins from ear to ear*" (478). For Hasmukh Mehta, the fun and games have just begun, or so he thinks.

His will bequeaths his entire assets to a trust to be managed by Kiran Jhaveri for a span of twenty-one years until his profligate son turns forty-eight. By which time, of course, the wealth would be of little use to his wife, son or daughter-in-law. In addition, they would have to put up with the mistress who will have to live in the same house for the understood period. The guarantee of an inheritance has all along held together this family. After his death it is the willful will again, that keeps the family together with the mistress (who is dramatically thrust into the scene) holding the reins. The marvelously humorous presence of the dead father deriving malicious pleasure from the utter discomfiture of his family, savouring the power of the will is ultimately subverted by the coming together of the wife and the mistress. This is crucial to the performed effect of the play.

Dattani carefully structures the play to fit in with the needs of the plot. Given that this is his very first play, he

handles the spacing out of the performance rather admirably. The play is divided neatly into two halves, one prior to the death of Hasmukh, and another post death. Hasmukh manipulatively exercises his power (or so he would like to believe) through the entire play: remaining present the whole time in the play, alive or as a ghost. The first half of the play with its resounding bickering sets the tone for the intensified trouble that is to come.

The colourless relationships between the two couples that comprise the family are developed in elaborate vignettes; portraying two singularly unexciting generations of couples, sexually insipid and loveless, who remain in a typically materialistic and money-oriented upper middle-class milieu. Notice the play on the word 'gold' – Sonal – "I soon found out what a good-for-nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud..." (473). Sonal is herself pretty much down to earth, except for her neurotic dependence on her sister Minal to prop up her self-esteem. She voices her opinion of her husband, "He thinks he is king of all he surveys! And we are his subjects... He can put on all the airs he wants to, but he doesn't fool me..." (472).

Ajit has learned to stand up to his father, taking it for granted that the inheritance is already his, and fiercely resists Hasmukh's attempts at 'moulding' him in his own model. While Sonal is proud of her son, her husband thinks he is a disaster, and Preeti, his wife is even worse. But he admits that she is clever – the only person who he is a little wary of in the play, with a measure of justification.

Kiran Jhaveri, the epitome of the Dattani woman makes her appearance in the very first play that he wrote. Smart, shrewd, calculating and worldly wise, Kiran embodies qualities that Dattani staunchly holds as positive and

strong, and necessary for a woman. Like most women who play gendered roles, Kiran is a victim too, but one who refuses to stay victimized. She becomes part of Hasmukh's life with her eyes wide open, and aware of the benefits that she will derive from the relationship. Angst is a part of her existence too, as she reveals to Ajit, "I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got... well, you know" (491).

Dattani's wicked humour is at its best in the first half, revealing itself in the acerbic venom that Hasmukh spits at everybody in general. The second half is problematic because here the dead man's perception of himself and the world that he has left behind are radically jolted. The comedy runs riot at times, ricocheting with the subversive repositioning of the stereotype; the play also hints at pathos, in the special kind of bonding that takes place between Sonal and Kiran. New power centres in place, the entire perception of the world, as it were, is turned on its head, best illustrated physically in the play by the dead father hanging upside down as ghosts are wont to do in Indian cultural belief – instances that the contemporary audiences will recognize as individuations and participate in convivial laughter aroused by a community understanding, as the play looks at the Indian middle class morality and then proceeds to parody it. Hasmukh's reality is taken apart by the two women who know him best, and his ghostly outrage goes unnoticed by the protagonists who amalgamate into a properly functioning family unit under *female* leadership. His ploy with the will has worked all too well, and he can see himself and all that he stands for, being buried once and for all. He escapes, (like many of Dattani's 'powerful' men do) to hang himself from the tamarind tree; but there is no respite yet, and the audience is told that the tree will be chopped off the next day.

The Home Front: *Bravely Fought the Queen*

Bravely Fought the Queen has been critically acclaimed all over the world, including Britain's prestigious Leicester Haymarket Theater. The play is set in Bangalore of the 1980s and 1990s and charts the emotional, financial, and sexual workings in the lives of an urban Indian family of two brothers. The brothers are the co-owners of an advertising agency, married to two sisters – women who remain mostly at home and look after the men's old mother Baa. The play dramatizes the emptiness and sham in the lives of its cloistered women and self-indulgent, unscrupulous men, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, standing on the brink of terrible secrets, deception and hypocrisies.

The script is in three acts, titled 'Women', 'Men', and 'Free For All'. The claustrophobic 'female' world of Act I is pitted against the 'male' world of business of Act II and the characters stand exposed in Act III where the two worlds clash and collapse, with the home as the site for the battle. The fissure between conventional and current cultures having thrown up a new social landscape, the play races towards a brave culmination, laying bare the gruesome truths that lie behind the pretence of conservative Indian morality. Questions of gender, sexuality and identity are raised and the unspoken is voiced, the unseen made visible. These are issues that we shall deal with in greater detail in later chapters. To focus here on the manner in which the setting coalesces with the themes, it must be noted that the trademark Dattani stage often uses the various levels to create theatrical resonance in a special way. For instance, the level where Baa is placed remains a constant in all the acts, and the time shifts that occur in terms of her memory

carries the audience back and forth in time even as the present seems to parody the past. The men play out their part in the office in Act II, even as repeat performances of what has already ensued in Act I continue at the other levels. Such repetitive devices serve to undercut the issue itself, and reveal the facade for being just that – a facade. The prosperous business family, the Trivedis, is finally stripped of its veneer and everyone stands exposed to unpalatable realities of abuse, alcoholism, adultery and homosexuality as a fallout of the war on the home front.

Michael Walling, the director of the *Border Crossings* production in the United Kingdom made some unusual innovations to suit his interpretation of the play. The playwright's intended emphasis on the split-level stage was used, he says in his note on the play,

> ...as the starting point for a kaleidoscopic approach to the text... centred on a slightly abstract inner space, furnished with three white blocks, which represented Trivedi household and the office. The only naturalistic element in this area was a bar: a glowing blasphemous shrine to alcohol, with the all-seeing eye of the television above it. Around this central area was another world: red and dusty full of torn newspapers... This is a play about performance; and uses the theatre to demonstrate how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life. Paradoxically, it is only by the overt performance of the theatre that such acting can be exposed for what it is ... . (Dattani, 2000: 229-30)

Dattani and Walling teamed up to employ a range of theatrical techniques successfully. The stage space was defined and redefined, aided by the lighting design and the actors who charted out diverse terrains, lining up the boundaries even as the analogous narrative continued centre stage. Bharatanatyam-inspired movements conveyed the shifts or the extension within the text and

the sub-texts. A large video screen was used at rear backstage, throwing up images that evoked sexuality, gender, dissent and resistance culminating in the use of footage from Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* during the last act, the explosive political tension in the film suggesting a different kind of tension within the family, in a stark manner. Dattani had to edit his original script heavily for this particular performance, saying, "Western theatre has the sophistication of filling the sacred space with silence and stillness. That is the major contribution made by Western society to our theatre" (Sen, 1996).

The multi-layered reality in the play suggested by the split stage levels move constantly into an internalized reality, as it were. Dattani writes with a dexterously veiled acidity, employing a language that uses both simplicity and serration, pressing the word to its limits, flanked by equally pungent, loaded silences.

Juxtapositions: *Dance Like a Man*

In this play too, Dattani uses the family home as the setting. The home, its tangible, physical presence becomes crucial to the very existence of three generations of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their habitation. The meaning of this space however, alters with each generation. Amritlal carries the baggage of his own times and tries to manipulate the next generation – Jairaj and Ratna – to carry it forward. Jairaj and Ratna, ironically, do the same with their own progeny, and try to pass on their preferences to Lata. In this handing down of cultural context, a number of revelations are made and several 'hidden' stories are told that begin to reveal the fissures in these spaces, cracks that widen enough to crumble the

entire structure. The structure that Amritlal passes on conditionally to his son causes irreparable harm to him and his marriage to Ratna. They, in their turn, try to transfer their own ambitions to Lata, who, however, proves to be a very different kettle of fish altogether; she is a talented dancer, but is quite happy to marry Vishwas, the rich mithaiwala's son, who for his part is suave and comfortable with his complete ignorance of Bharatanatyam – the passion of the preceding generation.

The narrative looks into the life of Ratna and Jairaj, dancers based in Bangalore, now past their prime, reflecting on the past and the way the past affects their present, and is to affect the future. Dattani here explores two key aspects – the general inhibitions of a man taking up dance, which is usually and 'traditionally' performed by women, as a career and the relationship between a husband and wife who have grown apart and have done enough harm to each other, and their daughter Lata on whom they have thrust their frusteated ambitious. Lata, meanwhile, would marry Vishwas, a man who wants nothing to do with their art and whose father owns half the buildings on Commercial Street and makes mithai. Dattani creates a range of layers in this play, in a language close to everyday speech, and humor that is easily accessible to any viewer, as the human predicament is explored subtly.

Says Lillette Dubey who has done more than 150 productions of the play with her group all over the world, making it an all-time success, "It is beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor's talent" marks it as unique, as does the "strong characterization and the "seamless" movements in time" (Sumanaspati, 2002).

Her mostly acclaimed production evoked interesting comments on the variety of interpretative modes that make itself amenable to the play. Dubey's production was "slick and fast-paced, no lingering longer than necessary in dark ambiguous places..." (Antares, 2002). The lighting was cheerful and created a warm and easy familiarity.

> Magenta predominated, giving the overall look a surreal warmth reminiscent of 1960s Hindustani movies (partly in glorious Eastmancolor). It also lent the set a somewhat sepia overtone, evoking a sense of nostalgic transition between worlds... . (Antares, 2002)

Moving effortlessly between the past, the present and the future (as past), synchronically dissolving the different time shifts, the play travels back and forth between several generations. Innovatively using Lata and Viswas to play the young Ratna and Jairaj during these shifts and the old Jairaj taking on the role of his father, Amritlal, Dattani displays the sophistication that he has by now acquired as a playwright.

Jairaj with his passion for dance is all set to undo the stereotypes that his imperious father, Amritlal, who claims to be a social reformer, carries. An old devdasi teaches Ratna the ancient secrets of her art, further infuriating Amritlal. Contradictions are torturous for Amritlal – the prostitute as an artiste, a man as a dancer, and a long-haired guru with a womanly walk – all of which he counters with money. He makes a pact with Ratna. He will consent to *her* career in dance only if she helps him pull Jairaj out of his obsession and makes him a 'manly' man. The two can then enjoy the security of his riches.

The play focuses on the merits of multiplicity, transcending mere 'tolerance' to recognition and empathy, while

situating itself historically within the context of the materialistic, acquisitive society of the 1990s. Typically, Dattani poses a few uncomfortable questions – the sexual construct that a man is, and the pigeonholing of masculinity within a Hindu undivided family – are set against the idea of the creative artist searching for artistic fulfillment within the claustrophobic constraints of the world that he inhabits.

'Twinkle'...*Tara*

The first scene of *Tara* is set in London with Chandan, a playwright, recalling his childhood with his sister, a Siamese twin, attempting to dramatize it all through a series of flashbacks. The play looks at the battles, the victories and the defeats of an Indian family coping with the trauma of freak children and their survival, while also exposing the existing patriarchal stereotypes of the Indian mindset, which has always preferred a boy child to a girl child.

Conjoined at birth, the twins have been separated 'successfully' and have one leg each. A decision needs to be taken on who shall have the third leg. The playwright Chandan tries to sort out the events in his 'freakish' life and the rare moments of happiness shared mostly with his sister. The narrative gathers momentum as the tenuous strands in family relationships begin to unravel. It is given away that an unethical and partisan decision taken by Bharati, the mother and her powerful grandfather, have left Tara crippled. Bharati's guilt drives her to insanity. Roopa, the gossipy friend and neighbour sets off the controversies within the family with her curiosity, and the drama is played against the god-like narrative of the clinical and machine-like commentator, their surgeon, who

documents and narrates his surgical achievement. The surgeon's clinical commentary of the operation is neatly pitted against the emotional turbulence brought by the medical miracle.

Tara is enthralling in that it makes use of a rather unlikely 'freak' case to lay bare the injustices in the conventional Indian family meted out to the girl child, a play that comments on a society that treats the children who share the same womb differently. And as always, the stereotype comes in a friendly garb, covering the ugly truths. The Patels, on the face of it look like the ideal parents that special children like Tara and Chandan need to survive – indeed they *have* survived because of their dedicated parents. But there are more things that need to be revealed.

That the injustice is perpetuated by Tara's own mother who professes to belong to the more 'liberal' community, rather than the father, who actually belongs to the more rigidly patriarchal social milieu, gives immense power to the play. It suggests that it is the women who continue to be willing instruments in the vicious cycle. Dattani, however, counters one woman with another: Tara herself – spirited, tough, a survivor with a sense of humour and delightful repartee – fighting against prejudices the society has against the crippled, and the female.

The doctor's role in the play, however aloof, is also suspect, as he too, becomes party to the partisan decision in agreeing to give the leg to Chandan despite the contraindications. It is only later that we learn that he had his own, mercenary reasons to go along with the decision. The social stereotypes sweep away even scientific considerations for the doctor and make a parody of his

god-like comments on his medical feats that seem to reduce human beings into guinea pigs.

Searching for *Final Solutions*

Alyque Padamsee says, directing *Final Solutions* in Mumbai,

> As I see it, this is a play about transferred resentments. About looking for a scapegoat to hit out when we feel let down, humiliated. Taking out your anger on your wife, children or servants is an old Indian custom. ...this is, above all, a play about a family with its simmering undercurrents .... (Dattani, 2000:161)

Given the fact that this is the first Dattani play to actually explore the psyche of a particular given social setup, the given constructs within which things take shape, the play that he considers to be the 'turning point' in his career as a playwright, it is deeply entrenched in the question of multiple identities that become enmeshed with familial identities – issues that we shall consider elsewhere. Nonetheless, as Padamsee points out, the play is also, to a large extent rooted in the familial as well as the individual realities that combine to form the complex whole.

Hence the stage settings are contrived to amalgamate the multiple layers of the societal, the familial, and the historical contours of such a location. The horseshoe-shaped ramp with the ever-present mob, and the two levels within the closed doors of the family where the action is played out marks the distinctive zones.

Ramnik, the father, carries with him the burden of the guilt of his father's 'black' deeds, transferring some of the resentment to his mother, Hardika. Aruna, his wife, and

Smita, his daughter, both hit out at each other for no apparent reason. The entire family is, of course, pitted against the backdrop of a riot-torn city, whereby Babban and Javed, Zarine and the other ghosts from the past make an entry via the dramatic device that Dattani uses to show his time-shifts – Daksha, the young Hardika whose voice will resonate through the play, interweaving the past with the present. The play now assumes a wholly different perspective, even as the familial tensions continue within the home and are set off by the communal tension outside. The outside (Babban and Javed) is in a sense allowed entry, after severe resistance from within (Aruna and Hardika), and then begins the exposition of the fragile familial ties. Several scenes establish the bond between Aruna and Smita, with Ramnik, the father often being made to feel isolated. But with the intrusion of Babban and Javed, Smita reveals her true sensibility and frees herself of the 'stifling' prejudices of her mother, at the same time trying to be fair to her. Ramnik, too has never revealed the guilt of the past to his mother, saving her the weight of the burden that he has had to carry all alone.

While never making the overt comment, Dattani handles the difficult contours of the play with a subtle dramatic mechanism of using the family to mirror the community, as also using the community to reveal the hidden ugliness within the family unit. While Dattani would never really offer easy resolutions, it is also interesting to see how he negotiates the terrain and the search for the solution to the core issues of the play – individual/familial/communal/national finally ends with the younger generation who carry much less of the historical burden than the scarred psyches of their predecessors. And even if individual scars do exist, as in Javed's case, they would be quick to heal.

Useful Facades: *Do the Needful*

Once more adopting the all too familiar locale of the upper middle class family, in *Do the Needful*, Dattani again manages to spring his usual surprises in the narrative pattern of the play. Considering that this was his first radio play, commissioned by the BBC, and the genre he chose was that of a romantic comedy, he manages to effortlessly take on a conventional form, firmly root it in the mechanism of two ethnically diverse upper middle class Indian families, and then go on to subvert the entire edifice that has been constructed.

This play set in India with the overt handling of the theme of arranged marriages was well received abroad – playing to British audiences that could easily identify with its wider, more universal themes. A gay man forced into a heterosexual marriage with a feisty, independent girl in love with another man are characters that easily go down with any audience, worldwide. The subtle nuances are provided by the nature of the arranged match: the north-south inter-community arrangement in itself shows up the entire episode for what it is – a cover-up, the all important facade that must be put in place if the social, familial machinery is to work.

Dattani skillfully uses the devices suitable to his medium, working within two contrasting aural backdrops – the big city with its teeming multitude and the quiet of the south Indian rural landscape. Additionally, he uses M. S. Subbalakshmi's Meera Bhajans along with some popular Hindi film tunes sung by the liftman to chart out his twin cultural soundscapes.

Gay Matter: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai/Mango Soufflé*

This is one of Dattani's best loved and most performed plays, both at home and abroad, having been adapted by the author for the film version that went on to win rave reviews the world over. Despite its offbeat subject – gay love – the play manages to convincingly show its moorings in family relationships within its chosen milieu. It is a celebration of gay life, but it also deals with the middle class virtues of family values and friendship among its themes. Like the earlier *Tara*, this is also a play that looks into sibling relationships and bonding that is at the core of the play, and creates ambiguous spaces that Kamlesh and Kiran must negotiate to arrive at the revelations that will redefine the given structures. Looking at how the society creates stereotypes and behavioural patterns that devour any aberration from the expected format, the play builds up tension within this context and ends in the classic Dattani dénouement – pulling apart the given norms that the audience has begun to expect. Notes John McRae,

> ...as the characters' masks fall, their emotions unravel, and their lives disintegrate. For the fault is not just the characters' – it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity. (Dattani, 2000: 46)

The various shades of gay are also catalogued dexterously – the overt, the escapist, the comfortable and the complete hypocrites who would have both this *and* that. "I really wish they would allow gay men to marry", says Kiran, who unwittingly enough, *is* about to marry one. Ranjit, also gay, replies caustically, "They do. Only not to the same sex" (98). The play is full of such cutting quips that make no

bones about the author's own sympathies. There is a very telling use of stagecraft here in terms of spaces. The spaces within the home are 'muggy', too hot to be comfortable, the air-conditioning breaking down, even as the interior spaces of the psyche have to be confronted. Meanwhile, the exteriors keep exerting pressure, intruding into the 'other' spaces occupied by the characters in the play perpetually reminding them of their isolation.

The fact that such a play has done exceedingly well in urban India, point towards an audience that is rapidly coming to terms with its own multiple, many-hued self – more tolerant and able to look at itself squarely in the face with humour and maturity.

In the play, Kamlesh's flat is well-furnished and situated in one of Mumbai's more privileged spaces, at Marine Drive and very much a part of the chaos of the city. The setting changes in *Mango Soufflé* where the scene shifts to the seclusion of a farmhouse in the suburbs of Bangalore. Although geographically located within the establishment, there is always the fear of the outside world which oppressively intrudes through various devices like the marriage next door, the children following Bunny, the TV star, the need to conceal and the ultimate discovery of the incriminating photograph by the children and so on, pitted against the heat and claustrophobia of the inside, the 'muggy' atmosphere that is unrelenting and suffocating in more senses than one, "...Don't want all this lovely cool air contaminated by all the muck outside" (65-66). Both the play and the film rely on the security of distance. In the play, they are on the top floor looking down at the wedding frenzy on the outside from a distance that gives them a sense of safety. In the film, the same sense of safety comes in once they enter the gates of the farm.

Whodunit? *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

Commissioned by the BBC, this radio play is a "whodunit", says Dattani in one of his many interviews. One of his many explorations of 'fringe' issues that are generally swept aside by 'mainstream' concerns of a society that would prefer to believe that they do not exist at all, Dattani here uses a scholar–sleuth, Uma Rao to rip off the veneer over the hijra community. Yet again, he uses all the trappings of a family to place Uma: she is the wife of the investigating police officer looking into the murder of a beautiful hijra, the very subject of her own case studies of the hijra community. Uma is also the daughter of the vice-chancellor of Bangalore University, and her cultural/familial moorings are located in a particular time and place within which she operates.

Uma stumbles upon some unsavoury truths and keeps notes on the murder that is politically motivated and hence hushed up. The very same politics, in the meantime, affects her husband's career. Here too, Dattani makes use of a familiar genre only to subvert it, skillfully enmeshing the modes of detective fiction with social issues.

Scarred Psyches: *Thirty Days in September*

If most of Dattani's work shows the internal fractures of the familial structures within which it first situates itself, *Thirty Days in September* works from within the psyche of the protagonist who is in some sense already alienated from her location, and is seen bereft of moorings. The author cannot subvert the cultural context (as he is often wont to do) of the already alienated character to evoke the comic. The plot however, is rooted in this very milieu,

the familial system that betrays the individual – a child – who will carry the scars into adulthood, and never trust it again. "I would see the setting of *Thirty Days* as upper middle class. I chose this setting because I did not want to give people the easy way out. I did not want them to dismiss sexual abuse as something that does not happen to people like them" (Vardhan, 2004).

Mahesh Dattani feels that *Thirty Days in September* is his most severe play till date, contravening his usual design. The seriousness has to keep going throughout the play. "...I sometimes see the funny side of even the tragic events that I am concerned with. But in this, [*Thirty Days*], I did not have that scope. There's no way you can see the funny side..." (Vardhan, 2004). To achieve this, Dattani replaced black humour, his usual mode, with therapeutic processes in the play, and in keeping with that mode, has the audience listen to the stark revelations made by a person who has suffered at the hands of a molester, who is also a member of the family. The play does not let up the intense pressures till the very end, letting raw truth speak for itself, mercilessly delivering blow after blow to the fragile construct of the family. Every other character is implicated and made party to the crime; even the mother's complicity through her silence that betrays her own child, affirms her guilt.

The play is entirely Mala's story and Dattani uses very little subplot, dealing with the memories of the molester, visualizing him, and confronting those terrifying moments that will leave the spectator feeling sickened to the core. This was Dattani 'travelling' with the character. "It's the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It's this silence that makes the abused feel betrayed" (Santhanam, 2001).

With these moorings in the basic structure of the urban middle class family established, in terms of his context and his milieu, Dattani explores and discovers, makes and unmakes the settings of his plays that will go on to investigate various other concerns that preoccupy him, such as gender, sexuality and alternate choices, the fashioning of the self in its context and the centering of the periphery – the marginalized components of these structures. The same holds good when he makes a switch in genres and enters the territory of films.

3. The 'Invisible' Issues

Sexuality, Alternate Sexualities and Gender

The preoccupation with 'fringe' issues forms an important element in Dattani's work – issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage – quite literally. With Dattani, this becomes the only way to actually push these 'invisible' issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence.

> ...you can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian, [that] doesn't happen here. You can't talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with a cook or actually having a sex life – that isn't Indian either – that's confrontational even if it is Indian. (Mee, 1997: 24-25)

Much of 'mainstream' society, Dattani believes, lives in a state of 'forced harmony', out of a sense of helplessness, or out of a lack of alternatives. Simply for lack of choice, they conform to stereotypes like 'homosexuals' that in some sense leads to a kind of ghettoisation within society, little spaces to which the marginalized are pushed. The way in which this is tackled, the struggle to be heard and seen are the stuff of the plays.

In terms of gender, Dattani's focus somewhat shifts its perspective:

> Gender is a major part of it[...] it has to do with my own comfort with both the feminine and the masculine self in

> me [...] the masculine self is very content; it doesn't need to express itself. But the feminine self seems to seek expression [...].(Katyal, 2000)

But while he trains his eye on questions of gender in plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, taking up cudgels for women, in a sense he also seems to be "fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It's subsumed, yes, it's marginalized, but it fights back" (Katyal, 2000).

As Anita Nair notes in another interview with the playwright, Dattani recurrently portrays the traditional mother figure with some degree of contempt, be it Sonal of *Where There's a Will*, Prema Gowda in *Do the Needful*, Baa in *Bravely fought the Queen*, Aruna in *Final Solutions*, or Bharati in *Tara*. The younger woman is seen as a calculating troubleshooter: Lata in *Do the Needful*, Ratna in *Dance like a Man* and others. Meanwhile, very often the men are shown to be victims suffering from a conniving woman's machinations – Jairaj, Patel, Hasmukh and so on. Says Dattani,

> It's to do with my perceptions. I don't mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry around in our minds are politically generated images and we accept them to be as true. However I don't think so and my characters are simply a personification of my perceptions. (Nair, 2001)

Only the marginalized that are actually affected can even begin to question the state of affairs. Hence many of Dattani's characters push forward this agenda, touching upon a host of taboo topics and placing it at the forefront for public discussion. But the playwright himself declines

the tag of an activist/reformer and instead chooses to top off even the contentious issues in the plays with heavy doses of humour. Having studied in missionary schools with emphasis on the 'canonical' literary texts, Dattani makes a significant joke:

> All the great writers were English or at least Anglo Irish. Shakespeare, Yeats, Whitman (I don't think it occurred to any of my teachers that the great writers they eulogized with missionary zeal were either gay or bisexual or considered completely immoral in their times!). (Ayyar, 2004)

Taboo Relationships: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

The sets are dimly lit with the tender strains of Chopin floating in, and the audience begins to discern a couple in bed, realizing that they are witness to an intimate and tender moment of love. The lights gradually grow brighter, and we are able to see a man's figure, the other – the very significant other – remains yet invisible, except in silhouette. A moment later, the man stands up and the invisible is made visible. The viewers come face-to-face with a middle-aged man – a security guard – being paid for sex. This is the 'shocking' start to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.

The narrative is set in one locale: the living room of Kamlesh, a well-heeled fashion designer living in Mumbai where he is entertaining a few guests. He needs help. He confesses that he is still in love with Prakash, a man who has apparently moved on, gone 'straight'. The gays in Kamlesh's party represent the varied faces of the homosexual community. Sharad, the flamboyant gay cares

a fig about how the world views him, Bunny, his antithesis, the clandestine homosexual who plays a happily married father on a television sitcom as well as in real life; and Dipali, the sensible lesbian, whose portrayal subtly implies that it is the woman who is sensible, even in gay culture.

These are complex people who care deeply for each other. Given the space for a sitcom-like parody, the affinity between Dipali and Kamlesh works wonderfully, often loaded with irony – "If you were a woman, we would be in love." To which Kamlesh's answer is "If you were a man, we would be in love." After a pause, Dipali shrieks – "If we were heterosexual, we would be married... Eeeek!" (65).

More shock and surprises are in store. Kamlesh's sister, Kiran comes visiting, and there is a revelation: she is set to marry Prakash, Kamlesh's former lover. The already complex situation becomes even more confusing, as the characters are pitted against exceedingly problematic issues. Kamlesh is unable to reveal the truth to Kiran and end her tenuous happiness. The play's ending hinges on a chance happening: the sexually unambiguous photo of Ed (another name for Prakash) and Kamlesh is discovered. But for this event, the play speculates on the future of the various characters who seem adrift towards another loveless, more acceptable, stereotyped relationship of the sort already presented in the character of Bunny, the 'happily' married TV star who covertly indulges in gay relationships behind the facade of his macho public image. When Ed tries to commit suicide, it catapults the play to its climax: clearly, the mask he wears is ripped apart. He has to make his choices.

Interestingly, gay literature seems to have been beleaguered by unhappy endings. Homosexuals invariably move towards death, isolation, or a sham heterosexual marriage

of the kind Ed and Kiran are heading towards. But *Muggy Night* ends on an upbeat, significantly luminous note.

A number of questions are thrown up. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* lifts the veil of secrecy that shrouds the marginalized cultures, sexualities and lifestyles. Can homosexuality change to heterosexuality? Is homosexuality an 'unnatural' aberration of human society at all? Or is Dattani himself substituting one sexual stereotype with another? What, for example, happens to bisexuals? *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* attempts to pose these questions, knowing that final answers are hardly possible.

The play is the first in Indian theatre to openly handle gay themes of love, affiliation, trust and betrayal, raising serious 'closet' issues that remain generally invisible. The primary audience comprised both gay and 'straight' people; mostly middle class. Curiously enough, a play as 'daring' as this actually proved to be an enormous commercial success in Mumbai and later on, everywhere that it was later performed.

Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make to his audience. But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatizes and peoples the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with, facing genuine, real-life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India's 'queer culture'.

The play does not altogether eliminate heterosexuality (Kiran), exploring various other aspects of sexuality as it tries to find a voice that will find empathy and resonance with a given audience. The audience too must then begin to move beyond expectations of the stereotype. Conversely, the initial shock that runs through a

conventional audience upon the discovery of two men making love in bed would become diluted, and perhaps dramatically less potent. Where traditional audiences would register shock, an audience familiar with the new stereotypes would have an entirely different pattern of reaction to the first scene of the play, taking 'gayness' in its stride, without shock or sensationalism. Then again, one must take into account the traditional celebration of strong male bonding and intimacy (purportedly sexless) in India and other Asian cultures, unlike the West. *Muggy Night* even dares to lift the facade of sexlessness from male-male intimacy, dealing openly with homosexuality.

The play also tries to dispense with conventional man/woman role-playing. When Sharad, the politically erroneous queen raves against 'penis power' and the 'macho man' syndrome, Dattani seems to be pointing at the common spaces between feminism and gay liberation where both situate a familiar oppressiveness in the 'straight' male and his assertion of phallocentric 'normal' pre-eminence – the self-delusion of their creed. Sharad is aware of the implications of his insinuations, and this part of the action acquires a deep resonance as the gay man speaks to the lesbian and both are intelligent, open and genuine people unashamed of their sexual choices.

In a post-performance panel discussion about the play in the USA, Gayatri Gopinath, a professor of Women and Gender Studies at UC Davis, said, "South Asian culture has a new visibility in the West.[...] This is also coinciding with a new interest in gay life. South Asian queer culture is slowly coming out of the closet" (Mallik, 2002). Gopinath however, considers this recent surge of interest in gay and South Asian culture as a mixed blessing. "What is India striving for? Will we have our own *Will & Grace* or

Ellen? And if we do, is that it? Is that the measure of success for the gay community?" (Mallik, 2002).

Bravely Fought the 'Manly' Queen

Like *Muggy Night*, this too is a play that concerns itself with alternate sexuality, although the approach is more oblique and perhaps secondary to the more overt theme of gender differences and the rupture between the world of men and that of women. While the play also looks closely at the politics of the Indian joint family as the setting, it constantly points at the gender divide and the dominance of the one over the other. This is made obvious in the names that Dattani gives to his three acts: Act I is called 'Men'; Act II is 'Women' and it is a 'Free for All' in the third act.

As usual, the performance space that is used is spare and functional; a useful and telling resonance is created in the mise en scène utilizing the same set structure split into multiple levels in all the three acts. The level occupied by the silhouetted, ever tortured/torturing presence of Baa is common to both acts.

The audience is ushered into the women's world, with the mellifluous thumri by Naina Devi in the background and the focus is on Dolly who sits filing her nails abstractedly. Enter Lalitha, the emissary from the male world, and immediately throws Dolly into disarray as she (for the men) upsets Dolly's plans for the evening. After a tense argument, Dolly exits and Alka enters heading almost immediately for the bar. Lalitha has had to answer Baa's urgent summons and as she meets Alka, Dolly's sister/sister-in-law, they start a conversation and share a drink.

Dattani uses his very keen sense of dialogue to generate subtle undercurrents that now begin to slice through the tension-filled atmosphere as Dolly re-emerges, ready to go out for a party that has been cancelled. Dolly and Alka exchange hurtful words at times, each trying to score over the other and barely drawing the line at the dangerous zones in the references to Praful, their brother who manipulated Alka into marrying Nitin and Daksha, Dolly's daughter who turns out to be a spastic: a painful reminder of the violence wreaked by Jiten, Dolly's husband. Even as the bitterness in the sisters' relationship stands exposed through their apparent need to be one up on the other, Lalitha, the outsider, tries to discuss a masked ball that the men have arranged. Dolly resists the intrusion for sometime, warding off the pressures of the male world that bear down on and attempt to devour the women's spaces. The other constricting reminder of the male world is Baa, who insistently rings the bell to summon her daughters-in-law, rupturing the slowly evolving sense of intimacy among the three women.

Lalitha, the interloper begins to belong in this world, with her revelation of her own emptinesses that she fills up with her obsessive love for her bonsais. Through the small talk that the women make, Dattani puts in an element of self-reflexivity – they make small talk *about* how to make small talk. The immensely significant semiotic referent – the bonsai – is introduced via this subtext and goes on to become the single most important metaphor in the play. The stunted growth, the bizarre shape, the grotesque reality of the bonsai becomes resonant in the existence of all the characters that people the play. This is especially torturous for Daksha's mother – Dolly – to whom Lalitha actually presents a bonsai. All the three women try to

escape the confines of their claustrophobic world in various ways: Alka with alcohol, Dolly with her fantasizing about Kanhaiya and Lalitha with her obsession with bonsais.

After Dolly's chagrined acceptance of Lalitha's presence, the women discuss the masked ball. The connotations of the mask is impossible to miss – the introduction of the world of make-believe, of untruths, of paste-on realities and of the need to hide behind a facade to survive. "*Khoob ladi mardani thi woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi...*" The analogy straddles both worlds; underscoring however, that it is the female who fights braving all odds, but behind the garb of the male – a 'manly' queen. The phrase will acquire unexpected connotations at the end of the play when the latent homosexuality of Nitin (and Praful) is revealed. Once again Dattani points towards the spaces that are shared by the concerns of the female and the gay male.

Act II'Men' transforms the sets into offices with the common component of the bar and Baa, and in a sort of parody, the entire sequence is enacted again, this time from the perspective of the men. With Jiten dominating the scene with his overbearing, egotistical and corrosive presence, Nitin seems almost ineffectual while Sridhar tries to be assertive in various ways. Apart from the repeated motif of the cancelled party, Baa's delirious ravings provide a sense of movement back and forth in time. Meanwhile, the men discuss the psyche of women and the 'ReVaTee' brand of lingerie that they are to market. Even as Jiten argues for a male perspective on the item they are trying to sell – women's underwear – Sridhar tries to argue for the female. One set of stereotypes is contested by another. Jiten forces Sridhar to fetch him a prostitute. Sridhar gets back at him by giving him his 'leftovers'. Nitin remains neutral, always. The reference that is made to

Praful creates a matrix of significant suggestions that carries forward the play with increasing tension towards the 'Free for All' of Act III.

The men too, would escape: Jiten seeking to hide his weaknesses behind violent aggression, Nitin concealing his homosexuality behind the sham of his marriage, with Praful as his collaborator, and Sridhar, who covers up his own chauvinism with a politically correct exterior that he projects. While the women do it to create their own spaces, the men use escapism as a means to avoid unpalatable disclosures. Baa, the mother, partakes of both situations – she is both the persecutor and the victim. Abused by her own husband, she goads her son to hit his pregnant wife; but selectively – "No! Jitu, hit her on the face but not on the ... stop it Jitu! On the face, only on the face! Enough! Stop!" (311). Naturally, her escape is into senility and delirium and a complete divorce from reality.

When the two worlds converge violently in the last act, all the characters stand exposed, the sham and facade ripped apart. There are pointing fingers everywhere, the past and the future collapse into the present and the space of the stage is suddenly constricted and unable to accommodate the burden of the suddenly unloaded baggage. Dolly somehow emerges here as the strongest character, supporting a drunken Alka and roundly revealing the torturous truth about Daksha. Jiten, the aggressive oaf, is driven to guilty tears and he implicates Baa in his abuse of a pregnant wife before he finally drives off, crushing the old ragpicker in the driveway, to death. Sridhar, who has already revealed himself to be every bit as egotistical as Jiten seems now to don the mantle of the stereotypes as he prepares to leave with Lalitha. The play ends with Nitin finally revealing his 'gay' relationship with Praful, and the

closing spotlight falls on the pitifully huddled figure of Alka in her drunken slumber before darkness envelopes the stage.

Exorcizing Patriarchy: *Where There's a Will*

The preoccupation with gender and gender roles becomes apparent from Dattani's first play itself. *Where There's a Will*, is embedded within the mechanics of the middle class Gujarati family; Dattani has often referred to the subversion of patriarchy in the play as one of its major concerns. Interweaving his narrative around the scheming and plotting of the family members who apparently have been put in a fix by a dead man's will, Dattani explores the dichotomy between the male/female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman takes over.

Where There's a Will works with clever dialogues, replete with direct-to-audience addresses by the dominating patriarchal presence (both dead and alive) of Hasmukh Mehta. Through the mechanism of the will, the patriarch assumes that he has finally won the battles that he fought when alive. As his ghost returns to watch with perverse pleasure the discomfort of his family, however, it is in for quite a few surprises.

The archetypal picture of an overbearing father and domineering husband, unpleasant and even nasty, Hasmukh is unequivocally unhappy with everyone around him – with no one having lived up to his expectations, the way he had fulfilled his father's. He makes a list of categories:

> Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? No. There's more to it than that. No. What?

> Maybe he needs a faithful companion? No. If that was it, all men would keep dogs. No. No, I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name? (474-75)

The list holds good, and yet, he says that this son had made his life worthless. Meanwhile, Ajit fiercely resists Hasmukh and will not kowtow to his father's wishes, wanting to be his own man. Dattani brings in references to three successive generations of the male line, and indicates the compulsions under which Hasmukh behaves in the way that he does: on him lies the onus of perpetuating patriarchy and its stereotypes. "You are raw! Under all the pressures in the office, you will bend. You will break. That's why I'm toughening you up. Somebody tough has to run the show" (460). Ironically, it is through his diktat later, that the tough person who is to run the office is to be a female. And as Dattani never fails to point out, women deal with things very differently. And Sonal has brought up her son differently. Hasmukh says, "I gave him a strong forceful name, Ajit. It means 'the victorious'. A strong powerful name... It didn't take her long to change 'the victorious' into 'Aju' " (497). Ajit refuses to be another extension of his father, and says resignedly, "All right. I can't fight him now. He has won. He has won because he's dead. But when he was alive, I did protest. In my own way. Yes, I'm happy I did that. Yes. I did fight back. I did do 'peep peep' to him! That was my little victory" (501). Men like Ajit reiterate Dattani's position on questions of gender – and he creates the space for such 'different' men.

His wily wife does not agree – she would rather that he had bowed to the system in order to arrive at the legacy without trouble. Preeti is one of the few female characters

who evokes little sympathy from the audience. Preeti, as Hasmukh says, is "Pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake" (456). For once, Dattani does not seem to contradict this perception of a woman. Chameleon-like, she changes her behaviour towards Sonal and comes out in the open about her reasons for marrying Ajit. Hence, mercenary and material concerns has her subscribing to patriarchal structures. Sonal remarks, "She frightens me. Sometimes I think she is capable of doing anything for money...there is something wrong in desiring money with such ...passion" (506).

On the periphery of the family unit stands Kiran, Hasmukh's 'mistress'– on the margins until the patriarch dies and the will throws her right into the centre of the action. She is to manage the entire estate for twenty-one years – until Ajit's child turns twenty-one – and live with the family for the said period. Dattani's perception of gendered strength is invariably that of a woman like Kiran Jhaveri, marginalized, almost invisible, suddenly thrust into the action and pluckily accepting the challenge for what it is worth. She is nobody's fool and wields authority with the sensitivity that is perhaps peculiar to women.

> I learnt my lessons from being so close to life...watching my mother tolerating my father...beating her up and calling her names! ...My father, your husband – they were weak men with false strength. ...Hasmukh was intoxicated with his power. He thought he was invincible. That he could rule from the grave by making this will. (508)

These are the confidences that Sonal and Kiran exchange, much to the dead man's horror. His self-congratulatory posturing and preening is punctured and all the air let out. The bonding of the wife and the mistress who tear him apart ultimately undermines his wonderfully entertaining and malicious power.

The power centres are turned on their heads, with a *female* ably assuming authority and smoothening out the previously dysfunctional family. Hasmukh is more successful with his devious will than he had imagined – only, even his own presence is exorcised by the new order, and his machiavellian intentions are laid to rest as the ghost hastily beats a retreat.

Strange Bedfellows: *Do the Needful*

Another play where Dattani simultaneously explores the twin issues of gender and alternate sexuality is *Do the Needful*. But here, Dattani makes use of the same stereotypes that he emphatically rejected in *Muggy Night*, to subvert existing structures with a delightfully tongue-in-cheek dénouement. Originally a radio play, this is apparently a 'romantic comedy' set around the theme of the Indian system of arranged marriages. It begins with a montage of sounds that juxtapose all the major characters and locate them in heterogeneous settings at Mumbai and Bangalore, as also in terms of their orientation. Two sets of families, one Gujarati (the Patels), the other Kannadigas (the Gowdas) are negotiating a match between their offspring. Alpesh Patel is "thirty-plus and divorced" and "Lata Gowda is twenty-four and notorious" (121).

The situation is curious, as anyone familiar with the Indian milieu would immediately grasp, for rarely does one come across inter-community arranged marriages. It gets curiouser as it is revealed that both parties are themselves wary of the situation, and highly skeptical of each other, and yet condemned to the arrangement because of social pressures. The audience is let into the 'thoughts' of both

Lata and Alpesh that resonates with yearnings for Salim and Trilok respectively, and realizes that while the prospective 'bride' is involved with another man, apparently a 'terrorist', the 'groom'-to-be is gay. And hence the desperation of their respective families to set them 'straight'.

Dattani once again points at the shared spaces between women and gay men, both under the tremendous hegemony of 'mainstream' patriarchal society that forces them to conform and live lives that are alien to their nature. As he is wont to do, Dattani also finds an ingenuous solution to address, the problem at least symptomatically. Lata is resolved on running away when she discovers Alpesh with the Mali in the cowshed. Her initial and expected disgust gives way to a gleeful sense of freedom: she would not have to sleep with this man if she marries him. Both will be able to give each other ample space and do their own thing, also keeping the families and society happy- 'doing the needful'. The mutual agreement comes in the form of a Hindi phrase that Alpesh offers: "*Teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup*" (142).

Whereas in a play like *Muggy Night*, Dattani takes on a more radical stance in dealing with the sexuality as a given, rejecting hypocrisy and sham, while in *Do the Needful* it is suggested as the answer to maintain peace and status quo. The compromise that Lata and Alpesh make in marrying is however, a clever and conscious choice, almost tailored to suit both the characters as well as the larger milieu; indeed, a 'forced harmony' as Dattani would put it. The crux of the solution also suggests that the spaces between two marginalized groups is now truly shared. The forced harmony has actually brought in a sense of liberation, not guilt.

Dattani wrote *Do the Needful* when commissioned by the BBC to write a 'romantic comedy', and a comedy it certainly is, with no overtone of morality or shame – merely a sense of glee at having achieved one's purpose that typifies the genre. At the same time Dattani manages to enmesh the dominant issues of homosexuality and gender, arriving at an ingenuous solution that finds liberation in the teaming up of two subversives (Lata/Alpesh) with different agendas (Salim/Trilok) against the hegemony of a common oppressor – the family/society.

Neutralizing the Neutered: *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

> A brief note on ... the origin of the hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications.... There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable – marriage and birth – ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature.
>
> Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons'. (11)

Seven Steps Around the Fire is another radio play commissioned by the BBC, where Dattani uses an unusual genre – that of a whodunit – to explore themes that once again focus on the 'invisible' zones of social behaviour. This time the play revolves around the 'third' gender – the community of eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu.

The play is word-intensive, working within relevant soundscapes, given the generic necessities of the radio play. The play premiered on stage in Delhi in July 2004. To adapt a radio script for stage, the playwright had to necessarily bring in the physicality of the visual, whereas on radio, like in cinema, each scene changes rapidly to the next. Asked whether he considered himself a lone speaker of gender issues in the current Indian dramatic scene, he replies, "I wish more people would explore aspects of sexuality rather than just sex; to that extent, I'm alone" (Phatarphekar, 2004).

Uma, a PhD scholar in Sociology, wife of the superintendent of police Suresh Rao, and daughter of a vice-chancellor, is researching the community of eunuchs and is following up the murder of a beautiful eunuch, Kamla. Constable Munswamy assists her, set to the task by his boss in order that he may keep her out of trouble in her sleuthing. The central concerns of the play are set on uncertain ground that are hardly well-documented, given the stigmas attached to them – hence making Uma's academic exercise plausible while being sensitively humane. The eunuch community that inhabits tiny pockets of Indian cities treads areas that are generally brushed aside to the fringes, the margins of society, as it were. This is literally a no man's land in many senses of the term, and no woman's, either. The correlative of these grey zones is, of course, another of Dattani's pet concerns: homosexuality.

The play opens with the chanting of Sanskrit marriage mantras that fade out to the sound of the rustle and hiss of a fire. This in turn is pushed to the background by a piercing scream. The sound of the fire resumes and engulfs the setting. After a significant pause, the action begins.

Uma is in the police station, to visit the cell of Anarkali, a hijra – an accused who she is to interview. Munswamy is highly amused at Uma's reference to Anarkali as 'she', himself preferring the neuter 'it'. Dattani has immediately entered into questions of gender assignations from the second line of the play. Munswamy piously declares that a lady with antecedents like Uma should perhaps look at more acceptable cases like "Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother... dowry death cases. ..." Marginalized even in crime, the community Uma focuses upon and tries to investigate has grown around itself thick and impenetrable walls of incomprehensible myths and superstition so that it may survive in its isolation. Like Munswamy points out, it would be 'simpler' and more 'honourable' for Uma to study 'mainstream' crime.

He menacingly informs Anarkali and her cellmates about Uma's background – "the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and the wife of our Superintendent" (7). Deftly problematising the components of identity for a woman in a given patriarchal setup, Dattani pits this against Anarkali's reaction whose own neutral ground has taught her to be wary of these very components. She is immediately on her guard and inaccessible – spitting venom and abuse, and in the process laying bare a number of unpalatable truths. Then she changes tactics and decides to use the operating power situation to her own benefit by manipulating Uma to obtain her freedom, money (and even cigarettes!). The conversations that Uma has with Anarkali reveal many of the veiled truths that lie shrouded within the multiple layers of myths and cultural beliefs and at the same time problematising relationships within accepted norms. While Suresh howls with derisive laughter at the idea of a 'sisterhood' of eunuchs, "They are all castrated degenerate men. ..." (10), Uma actually offers

her own sisterhood to Anarkali, who pounces upon the idea to manipulate her way to freedom, and also, in turn, exposes her:

> ANARKALI. You are the daughter-in-law of the DCP and you ask me what you can do to save your sister?
>
> UMA. Look, I am here to gather some information for my thesis ...
>
> ANARKALI. Then say that. Don't pretend to be my sister. (12)

Anarkali, the accused and Champa, the head hijra are symbols of the ambiguous spaces they occupy in terms of their suspect sexuality. Champa snickers at Uma's reference to her as 'madam', at the same time declaring that she was the mother/father of Kamla, the beautiful eunuch who was burnt alive. Their voices fill up much of the playing time without ever empowering them or arriving at any resolutions: the plot only thickens, as it were. Meanwhile it is the absent presence of the dead Kamla that haunts the entire play. Dattani actually manages to infuse a sense of tenderness and romance between Subbu and Kamla through the narrative of the eunuchs that arrives at the climax in the sensational suicide, of the dénouement.

Uma Rao, the woman/academic/sleuth/daughter/wife straddles many worlds and simultaneously plays many roles. In fact, it is difficult to accord primacy to any one of these roles as she pluckily goes about her self-imposed academic task of 'studying' a particular marginalized community. Availing all the resources and 'connections' at her disposal, she utilizes the positions of her husband and her father-in-law, both custodians and enforcers of law and order and that of her father, in terms of academic and

monetary support. The dialogues at night between her husband and her suggest a conjugal intimacy that she is willingly party to; yet these are interspersed with references to the eunuchs that however, suggest preoccupations at variance to her role in her husband's bed. She has no compunctions about her surreptitious and unconventional methods that leave Munswami in a frenzy, following her from the 'invisible' places where the eunuchs reside, to the hallowed portals of the local minister. She borrows money from her father to bail out Anarkali, bribes Champa with it and relentlessly pursues the minister's bodyguard, looking for clues.

The play ends in Subbu's suicide using, strategically, Suresh's gun and the final revelation by the hijras. Uma's discoveries, are, however, to come to a naught, with the world simply resuming where it had left off, with the subversives firmly pushed back to the margins and made 'invisible' again. Uma, wife and daughter/daughter-in-law of respectable society will go back to her established world order with a telling comment.

> They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people... . (42)

Dattani cleverly enmeshes twin gender issues in the play, the woman as a fighter, in multiple roles and yet empowered only derivatively, constantly using all possible means to achieve her ends, juxtaposed with the extremely marginalized, 'invisible' groups of eunuchs of undefined sexuality who she tries to make contact with. Dattani, as usual, also puts in a male marginalized character in Subbu,

whose homosexuality ultimately results in his violent end as the sounds of the fire and the marriage mantras once again engulf the play.

Dance Like a Woman: *Dance Like a Man*

Dance like a Man is a play that deals with one of Dattani's pet concerns – gender – through one of his principal passions, dance. The automatic assumption, when one refers to gender as a principal concern, is that the exploration would be of women's issues. Says Dattani of this play: "I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid twenties. [...] a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women..." (Ayyar, 2004). Characteristically, Dattani raises a few unlikely questions about the sexual construct that a man is. The stereotypes of gender roles are pitted against the idea of the artist in search of creativity within the restrictive constriction of the world that he is forced to inhabit. Jairaj with his obsession for dance is all set to demolish these stereotypes. This is the twist that the playwright gives to the stereotypes associated with 'gender' issues that view solely women at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society. The play dispels this notion and explores the nature of the tyranny that even men might be subject to within such structures.

Jairaj and Ratna live within such a structure: the domain of the patriarch Amritlal, Jairaj's father. His antipathy to a great many things that concern the activities of his son and daughter-in-law draws the boundary lines for their behaviour within his sphere of influence. Dance for him is the prostitute's profession, improper for his daughter-

in-law, and absolutely unimaginable for his son. He forbids Ratna from visiting the old devdasi who teaches her the intricacies of Bharatanatyam; he cannot tolerate the sounds of the dancing bells that ring through their practice sessions; is aghast at the long-haired guru with an effeminate walk and cannot, most of all, stomach the idea of his son – a man – becoming a professional dancer. The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him 'womanly' – an effeminate man – the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned. And hence Amritlal must oppose, tooth and nail, Jairaj's passion for dance. He makes a pact with Ratna. He will consent to her career in dance only if she helps him pull Jairaj out of his obsession and make him a 'manly' man. The two can then enjoy the security of his riches.

Through the seamless movement in time and space, Dattani weaves in the intricate web of gender relationships and the givens of societal norm spanning three generations: The minimal use of characters maximizes the staged impact of the stereotypes through time. Amritlal and the old Jairaj; Vishwas and the young Jairaj; Lata and the young Ratna are to be played by the same actor. As they shed/put on different characters, the resonating sense of time and change illuminate and give newer meanings to the issues that Dattani raises. Amritlal, the frustrated patriarch changes into the equally frustrated and alcoholic Jairaj who interviews Vishwas, the prospective groom for his daughter. Meanwhile, Vishwas, the son of a rich mithai-walla, an alien to the world of dance, transforms into the young Jairaj who is consumed by his love for the art form. Lata, the most pragmatic and level-headed of the characters also plays the insecure, calculating and scheming young Ratna who has to survive despite the few choices that are offered to her. She will be haunted as the older Ratna by the ghosts

of the past that nonetheless do not daunt her determination to realize her own unfulfilled ambitions through Lata, her daughter (and, as the audience would identify – herself). Like the characters, the stage iconography too helps to consolidate and reinforce these strong reverberations. Amritlal's house moves through time, changes character along with its owner. The old cupboard, the shawl, the rose garden and the rest of the stage set all leave their impact in the juxtaposition of the stereotypes.

Slowly, we realize that at the receiving end of the politics of gender is not Ratna so much as is Jairaj: kept on a leash by his father, eclipsed by his wife, a failure as a dancer, and an alcoholic. His father and wife have colluded to achieve their own selfish ends, to perpetuate the old stereotypes and reinforce their own sense of security at his expense. The tragedy for Jairaj is that he has chosen to pursue a career that is considered 'right' only for women. That is why Amritlal is willing to have Ratna as the dancer and not Jairaj. Amidst these resonances is played out the angst of Jairaj and Ratna who are obviously holding back a deep, dark secret, which will be revealed towards the end of the play. Like in all battles, a completely innocent individual becomes the victim: the baby son of the dancing couple. Dattani refuses to assign the blame or the status of the 'wronged' party to any one: "I refuse to have protagonists in a fixed role as victim. If you have a victim, it implies that there is a persecutor and it also implies that you will eventually have a rescuer" (Ayyar, 2004). Ratna is not, as many would suggest, depending upon the interpretation of the production, the negative presence in the play. Dattani has often been taken to task (mostly by Indian critics) for being a 'woman hater' of sorts because

> [My] women protagonists fight, scheme and get a piece of the action albeit at great personal cost. These are seen as 'negative' qualities, sadly by some women too [...] but really we have yet to see feminism find expression in Indian society. (Ayyar, 2004)

Jairaj, being present in the house when the double dose of opium is inadvertently administered to the baby is equally culpable and shares the onus of the blame, something Dattani never tries to shift to Ratna. However, it is perhaps this death that binds the two together in shared tragedy. The last lines of the play reverberate – "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God" (447).

Separating Selves: *Tara*

One of Dattani's best loved plays the world over, *Tara* addresses questions of gender in many ways, though not necessarily through hackneyed stereotypes of 'bias against the girl child', although that is the generally accepted interpretation of the play in India. With Dattani, it is never a situation that is cut-and-dried, absolving one or squarely laying the blame on the other. And that is why he would prefer to say that this play is more about the 'gendered' self, about acknowledging the female side of oneself. The tale is, after all, narrated by Chandan, the male half of the whole of which the 'other' is Tara. On the usual split-level stage that is a Dattani trademark, the realistic level is the bed-sitter of Chandan, now 'Dan', in London. The set below is the stark zone of memory, where the past is played out, and the god-like Dr Thakkar occupies the one on the highest level throughout the play.

Tara and Chandan are born conjoined, Siamese twins who must be separated to survive. The dichotomy between the twin 'gendered' selves is recognized, and a physical separation is made through surgery. "Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... And separated" (325). The problems begin when the it is recognized that it has been an unequal, unfair operation, with the mother, Bharati, her father and the surgeon collaborating to afford the male with better chances: physically – the second leg. Dr Thakkar, the god-like 'life-giver' is aware that the third leg would adhere better to the female half, and yet becomes party to the decision. God, it may well be observed, is male. In a sense he prolongs their lives through the surgery, but also leaves them physically mutilated and mentally traumatized, gaining notoriety as phenomenal freaks of science. Dan tries to define his other half, the feisty Tara: "She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. Maybe God never wanted us separated. Destiny desires strange things. ...But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life" (330).

Their father goes about trying to push his male and female children into separate grooves, into the stereotyped gender roles that would help them fit into society, at the cost of hurting them both, since their own preferences seem contradictory to these expectations. Chandan would prefer to be a writer, while it is Tara who seems more inclined to go into a career like her father's. He is furious with Bharati, accusing her of "turning him into a sissy – teaching him how to knit!" (350). The altercation that follows this exchange suggests to the audience that all is not yet revealed as Bharati teeters on the brink of sanity and hysteria. Patel, meanwhile seems much beleaguered

"Yes, call me a liar, a wife beater, a child abuser. It's what you want me to be! And you. You want them to believe you love them very much" (354). Again, he tells Tara: "Tara, please believe me when I say that I love you very much and I have never in all my life loved you less or more than I have loved your brother. But your mother..." (354). But Tara has always been led to believe that it is she who has been discriminated against by her father, and always gained the extra bit of affection from her mother.

This is why the play generates a death-like response from Tara when she learns the truth: she was discriminated against, because of her gender, but not by her father – it was Bharati's decision that deprived her of what she wanted more than anything else in the world – a second leg. It is a shattering discovery for the naturally ebullient Tara: "And she called me her star!" (379). This is the crucial moment in the play that practically kills the female and tears her apart from the male, and Chandan moves far away, never to return, forever incomplete.

Interwoven into this complex web of relationships and gendered selves is the constantly shifting stance of the dramatist, who makes no simplistic reductions as to the nature of the guilt and the perpetrators of the wrong that has been committed. All the involved parties are affected in some measure, and are unable to survive the strain. All but the surgeon in his god-like splendour sitting at the top of the stage levels, whose utterly unethical complicity in the affair has actually benefited him in many ways.

The bereft, divided self of Dan renders its final apology to its significant other – Tara: "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (380).

Numbness is all: *Thirty Days in September*

Dattani's most recent play was commissioned by an NGO called RAHI (Recovery and Healing from Incest) that helps survivors of child sexual abuse. At their invitation, Dattani spent a few days with about eight survivors of child sexual abuse and listened to their experiences. "I was completely exhausted at the end of it all. Felt very drained. In fact I did not go back to the material for a long time. I couldn't bring myself to" (Santhanam, 2001). After a long gap he went back to that basic material and started working on the play after putting himself at a reasonable distance to be objective.

Thirty Days is by far the most sombre of all his plays, with a weightiness that is maintained throughout the play. Given the seriousness of the problem that it addresses, a malaise that can at no level be taken lightly, Dattani tackles it with raw emotion, and the stark realities are dramatized vividly.

"... it was a challenge to break away from my regular form, where I sometimes see the funny side of even the tragic events that I am concerned with. But in this, I did not have that scope. There's no way you can see the funny side... ." (Vardhan, 2004). This is also Dattani's shortest full-length play, using little subplot, intensely focused on Mala, sexually molested by her uncle as a child and her relationship with her mother who knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle but chose to keep quiet, voicing no protest. Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the abused.

There is a lot of movement in the play in terms of time and space shifts. The dialogue is terser and pregnant with

raw emotion barely held on leash. Dattani makes extensive use of monologues in the play to intensify the empathy of the audience with Mala, the victim who is slowly recovering from her tortured and abused past. The audience is quite literally dragged into facing the molester and made to confront him; it is given no choice. The action is presented starkly and undiluted, as Dattani 'travelled' with the character without exegesis and let her narrate her own story, as nakedly as possible.

Notably, Dattani sets his milieu in the upper middle class, despite the general perception about the prevalence of child abuse predominantly in the working classes, choosing this setting because he did not want them to shrug off child sexual abuse as something that did not happen to people like them.

In a sense, he has recurrently used subjects that touch upon the zones of experience that the 'normal' middle class society would rather sweep under the carpet and happily imagine did not exist. This is exactly how Dattani would penetrate below the surface, subvert the complacent beliefs that everyday reality is constructed with, and make visible the invisible issues that haunt so many of his plays.

4. Identity

Locating the Self

The basic premise with which one would go to see English language theatre in India would be that this theatre is necessarily exclusivist, with a tendency towards 'elitism'. This was the case, until Dattani's foray into the scene changed the entire situation, homogenizing the audience with his theatre, and his theatre with the tastes of his audience. Like his repeated assertion that despite the fact that he is himself rooted in the Gujarati milieu, where his own familial context is concerned, because the family itself was displaced and resettled in Bangalore, he had to constantly search, as it were, for this sense of identity in a place where the linguistic community was alien to his own. English education, and the constant need to use this third language as the vehicle of communication, then somehow made itself an integral part of his own identity. Hence, the 'natural' ease born out of necessity and the sheer habit with which Dattani uses his chosen tongue, being comfortable in no other.

In creating and locating the self and constructing the identities of the characters who people his theatre, Dattani seems to contribute to the matrix of the processes that Erin Mee refers to as "a way of decolonizing the theatre" without, however, resorting to "a politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy" (Mee, 2002: 2), that motivated the writers of the Theatre of Roots movement. Using the dramatic tools left over from the

colonial era such as the proscenium stage and other paraphernalia along with the language itself, which, he declares is an English developed in India, a "hybrid language that is spoken in a unique, uninhibited manner" (Vardhan, 2004), Dattani begins to simultaneously subvert the borrowed structures with his almost subconscious use of accents, clothes, music, cultural moorings and beliefs specific to the context of his plays. The emerging drama is rooted profoundly in the location where the playwright chooses to implant it. And it is from this location that the issues are explored.

> I really feel that people have to 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. (Ayyar, 2004)

This was the mechanism that helped the Indians survive colonisation, unlike the American Indians. "We may claim to be rigid and pure, but we are the most flexible and impure of all races! The sooner we come to terms with that, we can get on with the rest" (Ayyar, 2004).

As Dattani chooses to deal with themes relating to the complex workings of the modern/urban Indian family, his protagonists search for their identities within the often oppressive structures of custom, tradition, gender, and sexuality within this location. In a dramaturgical sense, these structures and identities often become enmeshed in Dattani's use of the split stage, with the interior movement of the plays collapsing with the exterior, fragmented locations.

Much of his work is built around a social issue that in a sense helps to locate the moorings of his characters within

the religious/national identities embedded within the individual/familial identities, "I am not interested in characters asking existential questions in a limbo. My characters exist in a definite space and time, in a social context that's what stimulates me. I don't focus on a message but the context is important" (Santhanam, 2001). It this context that is enmeshed throughout his work that evokes a distinctive sense of place, of location and identity, that is nonetheless never a fixed or rigid concept, but is forever making and unmaking itself.

But while history and cultural components are important in the construction of identity in his plays, equally important are the underlying, often repressed parts of the self that are allowed out of the closet to add the hitherto peripheral dimensions to his characters, as also to the context which reshapes itself. His plays reinforce the experiences and narratives of the marginalized in a society where stereotypes always hold center stage; ridden with prejudice, guilt, and dishonesty, survival is not easy for the 'misfits'. These are some concerns that go into the exposition, exploration and refashioning of the self and the society in Dattani's works.

Us and Them: *Final Solutions*

For the Indian, the most important battle for the establishment of a distinctive identity within a territorial location lay in the partitioning of India. National identities were conceived and took shape in accordance with the ideologues that formulated these on the basis of religious (and later, linguistic, ethnic, caste) identities. The gruesome rioting and communal/religious disharmony that took seed

in 1947 has continued to throw up countless such incidents in independent and secular India. Such unrest and communal violence in India between Hindus and Muslims was underscored emphatically by the brutal bloodshed in Gujarat in 2002. These were some of the issues that Dattani had actually dramatized in the form of *Final Solutions* earlier, dealing with the recurring rhetoric of hatred, aggression, the monetary and political exploitation of communal riots, the chauvinism and parochial mindset of the fundamentalist, in the context of the India of the 1940s interspersed with the contemporary India.

In confronting and negotiating responses to the post-Babri Masjid demolition and the post-Godhra Hindu-Muslim communal violence in Gujarat, through varied discursive frames of history and theatre, Dattani subsequently explored issues of identity, memory, suffering and loss, and the resulting 'other'- bashing, either/or terms of reference within the larger political context through the various productions of this play.

The mob/chorus comprising five men and ten masks on sticks (five Hindu and five Muslim masks) is the omnipresent factor throughout the play, crouching on the horseshoe-shaped ramp that dominates the space of the stage which is otherwise split up into multilevel sets. The masks lie significantly strewn all over the ramp, to be worn when required. Dattani carefully uses the same five men in black to double for any given religious group when they assume the role of the mob, which they do in a stylized fashion. The living area is not furnished except for the realistic level that functions as the kitchen and the pooja-room, and another period room suggesting the 1940s where Hardika/Daksha are to revisit the past.

The play, in fact begins with such a visit, through the opening scene where Daksha sits, beginning the process of recording lived history: "Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages.... 31 March 1948" (166). Criss-crossing a whole gamut of memories that are to construct the character that she is to become – Hardika, "After forty years... I opened my diary again. And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl's childish scribble. An old woman's shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed that much" (167). Things have indeed, not changed much. The space of the stage is thick with ominous cries that reverberate and the same hatred and intolerance for the other still rents the air. Stones had come crashing down on Daksha's records, shattering Shamshad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya, "Those beautiful voices. Cracked..." (167). Like her friendship with Zarine.

Forty years hence, her son Ramnik attempts to right a few wrongs, taking in Babban and Javed and protecting them against the fury of the mob (now in Hindu masks). Meanwhile, the audience witnesses the dialogic rationale of both the sides. "Should we be swallowed up? Till they cannot recognize us? Should we melt into anonymity so they cannot hound us? Lose ourselves in a shapeless mass? Should we? Can we?" (196); "What must we do? To become acceptable? Must we lose our identity?... oh what a curse it is to be less in number!" (208); "Why did they stay? This is not their land. They have got what they wanted. So why stay? They stay to spy on us. Their hearts belong there. But they live on our land" (176), and so on, until the distinctive identities vanish in the ambiguity of the maskless mob asking for blood, a threat to all parties. The work of Frantz Fanon, the influential thinker on the effects

of racism and colonisation may be found relevant here. In his analysis of the struggle of the Algerian population against their French colonisers, Fanon put forward the idea of phobogenesis (Fanon:151), where he explores how mechanisms of 'othering' influence the self. How does phobia, the irrational fear of the other, grip one's mind? The inclination is to detach oneself from the other. Such a distancing is achieved through objectification – reducing the other to an object, upon which it is easy to inflict violence. At many places in the play, Dattani would seem to suggest that the only way to get a grip on this fear that would have us inflict pain on the other would be to look within oneself and recognize the fear for what it is, and hence resist the need to displace it.

In the play, Javed gives voice to the individual participating in such riots :

> To shout and scream like a child on the giant wheel in the carnival. The first screams are of pleasure. Of sensing an unusual freedom. And then...it becomes nightmarish as your world is way below and you are moving away from it... and suddenly you come crashing down, down, and you want to get off. But you can't. You don't want it any more. It is the same feeling over and over again. You scream with pain and horror, but there is no one listening to you. Everyone is alone in their own cycles of joy and terror. The feelings come faster and faster and they confuse you with the blur created by their speed. You get nauseous and you cry to yourself, 'Why am I here? What am I doing here?' The joyride gets over and you get off. And you are never sure again. (204-5)

At this point we could also consider the possibility of competing versions of history and the tensions between different communities. While the hatred is all too real, it

is also true that brutality and compassion co-exist and give resonance to one another. The riots saw people assaulting each other, but they also jeopardized their own safety to save the others. Within these intense and remorseless pressures of clashing cultures are embedded pressures of a different kind. Time and spaces merge and intermingle, as histories are relived. The mercenary gains that one party derives from the communal riots of the past is the baggage of guilt that Ramnik has carried for long; this is revealed to a crushed Hardika, who seemed secure in her hatred of the other party, shattering her sense of being in the right. It also explains the reasons for Ramnik's extreme tolerance. The smug and often parsimonious Aruna is shaken out of her complacency through Smita's outburst against her rigid and restrictive practices that have for long choked her. Dattani here manages to intricately interweave the individual strands of familial identity into the larger picture:

> It stifles me! Yes! ... I can see so clearly how wrong you are. You accuse me of running away from my religion. ...Would you have listened to me if I told you you were wrong? Again, Do two young boys make you so insecure? Come on, Mummy. This is a time for strength! I am so glad these two dropped in. We would have never spoken about what makes us so different from each other. We would have gone on living our lives with our petty similarities. (211)

The diminutive Smita suddenly gains stature and individual identity, unafraid to speak up for what she thinks is right, maintaining that she had kept her silence only to remain non-partisan, to both her parents. So does the initially unassertive Bobby (Babban), who hides behind a name that conceals the identity into which he was born, and with

which he has always been uncomfortable. Playing the role of a pacifist between Ramnik and Javed, Dattani eventually has him performing the ultimate act of liberation – handling and caressing the Hindu god, subverting all the stifling structures of his given social identity. Dattani barely stops short of actually suggesting the possibility of a continuing romance between Smita and Bobby (Babban) as the final scenes make the viewer feel positively light-headed in the frolicking of the three young people after the unrelenting, tension-filled atmosphere of the play.

A play of this nature, simmering with the undercurrents generated by recent events, was translated and performed in Hindi at various venues scattered across northern India and in Gujarat, to tremendous response. Mahesh Dattani readily acknowledges that while he writes in English, adhering to his personal compulsions and problems of identity, "A play and its content live in performance. The play can best be used in production. When the play was done in Hindi, it had a greater impact than when it was performed in English" (Ayyar, 2004).

Hegemonic Death: *Where There's a Will*

While Dattani has himself noted that the crucial 'turning point' for his work comes with *Final Solutions*, where he scrutinizes the questions of identity via multiple frameworks of the individual, the family, the social milieu and nationalities, it is also true that he begins to locate the self in its context from the very first play that he wrote – *Where There's a Will*. Amidst the

complicated confabulations that are necessary for his comic design of the play, the protagonists begin their search for the self, and seek to constitute their identity within the ambit of the setting.

Hasmukh Mehta excercises hegemonic power over the rest of his family to perpetuate his own conception of the self, which, he has in turn, received from his father. He meets with resistance at all points from the other members of his family, "You still want to play Big Boss. And you can do it through me. In short, you want me to be you" (460), says Ajit, and Hasmukh devices the means to continue this hegemony even from the grave. The will, here, becomes the iconic instrument to power (through wealth), and shapes and reshapes the destiny of the family/familial relationships after his death. But the irony is that Hasmukh, to give the devil his due, transfers this controlling power to a woman and changes the entire fabric of the monolith that he is trying to preserve; immediately opening up the spaces for the individual identity that he has all along sought to deny.

Death eases the pain of living. Says Hasmukh's ghost, "It feels good to be dead. No more kidney problems, no backaches, no heartbeats..." (479). Dattani does explore some existential angst here, "What's this? A sandalwood garland? ...When my father died, I used to put fresh flowers everyday for a whole month...(*takes a final look at his picture.*) So that's it. That is how the world will remember me. Until my son locks me up in a trunk..." (487–88).

His own sense of self remains undefined until the women sit together and do it for him.

"Hasmukh Mehta was living his life in his father's shadow" (509). Interestingly, it is in the process of dismembering the man that the woman find themselves, and bond, and perceptions of the self are redefined with the change in the centre of authority. Sonal comes into her own, moving beyond the influence of her sister under whose shadow she has lived. She tells Kiran, "You have made many things clear to me. I am glad you are living with us. I hope you'll stay with us forever" (511). The hegemony of the will is finally cast off, life continues and the ghost goes and hangs himself upside down from the tree, utterly displaced, both physically and symbolically.

Stunted Growth: *Bravely Fought the Queen*

The play zeroes in on an Indian joint family, with the eldest male as the undisputable head, raising a gamut of questions on the nature of the relationships between the brothers and their wives (also sisters) and the manner in which identities form and firmly entrench themselves within these structures. Following some of the discussion on the family in the preceding chapters, we have noted the location to which the women are tied down, following the diktat of their men folk – they remain at home most of the time, with their chief duty being to care for the men's ageing mother Baa. As the enclosed, cloistered female world of Act I clashes with the male world of wheeling and dealing, corruption and adultery of Act II, it becomes obvious that both the men and the women have assumed roles that ill-suit them, and hence all the characters have to seek solace in fantasy and the unreal. The veneer is ripped apart and the revelation is made as to the nature of their true selves in the confrontation of Act III, and the realities of their lives emerge.

The braggart and wife-beater, Jiten is revealed to be another pathetic escapist and a weakling who literally runs away from the scene of confrontation in tears; Nitin's homosexuality becomes apparent in his revelations about Praful, the absent manipulator of the entire situation, and even the apparently 'correct' and 'sensitive' Sridhar shows himself to be one of the many male chauvinists in the play in his game of one-upmanship with Jiten.

Sridhar's wife, Lalitha fills her vacant existence with her husband's work, writing poetry, making small talk and neurotically fussing over her bonsai. These bonsai are strategically introduced into the play, and become the dominant metaphor for Dattani, in his exploration of the self and identity in the play. The grotesque looking tree is deliberately acclimatized to its environment and adapts its growth accordingly, even bearing fruit (that are, however, inedible) and turns into a dwarf, stunted in every way and yet surviving. All the characters in the play are introduced to the bonsai, in a deliberate attempt at drawing parallels. Lalitha explains, "...you stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and ... stunt them" (244); and again, "I guess you can't call them fully grown – but when they've reached their dwarfed maturity, they really look bizarre.... Anyway, you plant the sapling in a shallow tray – you've got to make sure the roots don't have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming them as they grow" (246).

Alka is presented as a confirmed alcoholic and hence an utter misfit in the family, her case gains a certain kind of poignance in the fact that she has been used by her own brother as a veil behind which surreptitious homosexual relationships may continue. While Dattani is never judgmental in terms of sexual choices, we are able to trace

an indictment of the subterfuge that results in the victimization of the unwitting Alka. It is the refusal to acknowledge one's true identity that comes under the scanner. Dolly is the only character that emerges unscathed and strong in the play, even as she willingly lets go of her brutalized reality to enter the life-generating fantasy that offers some comfort. Mother to the spastic Daksha, and nearly a mother to Alka, Dolly, however does not need an exterior support system to prop up her own sense of selfhood. Even in fantasy, she is aware of her own truths. Meanwhile, all these identities seem somehow merged at the locus that is Baa, whose continued assertion of her presence by ringing the bell, acts as a reminder of the echoing patterns of behaviour and the perpetuation of stereotypes in the uneasy world that the characters inhabit. The play tries to establish the rapidly shifting values and structuring of the self in a locale where the traditional and the contemporary clash, but do not fuse to create new social landscapes. In such environments, only bonsai may thrive, at great cost to itself.

What Constitutes a Man?: *Dance Like a Man*

Postcolonial India, having undergone a long-drawn-out period of linguistic bewilderment and cultural recoil after independence, remained undecided on whether to revert to the vernacular or continue to develop anglophonic literature and theatre, but with a different focus and indeed, a new identity. Dealing with a colonial hangover, it was some time before local accents could become amalgamated into stage productions but not without a measure of self-conscious embarrassment. It required some truly confident and self-assured playwrights and

directors to make this phenomenon a workable reality in terms of the English language theatre in India, reflecting local realities.

This sense of local colour in *Dance Like a Man* predominates in the numerous productions of the play, thus, becoming an important subtext. The strong flavour of a Bharatanatyam household, the opulent saris, the sounds in the background often accompanied by Carnatic background music together build up the intense sense of space that is integral to the shaping of the characters.

Lillette Dubey points out that one cannot possibly miss the fact it is Indian, at least in her production, with an overtly accented speech. "In India, the accents are important – they almost place you socially, economically, culturally[...]then we stuck with it, whether we performed Off Broadway in London or in festivals in France..." (Sumanaspati, 2002). Obviously, the question of reception of such heavily accented speech abroad was debatable. "People said nobody would understand this English. I said, look, I want to be liberated from this yoke of having to speak with a 'BBC' accent" (Sumanaspati, 2002).

Exploring and juxtaposing the contemporaneous and the early history of India in personal terms, the play probes into three generations of conflict. Pitted against the background of classical dance and drawing upon centuries-old traditions, to stage such a play in English is hardly a mean achievement. Having done that, Dattani goes a few steps further to work out a critique of the social mores and attitudes within which his characters evolve and situate themselves. In the materialistic society of contemporary India, Dattani in his typical style, raises important questions on the very constituents of a man's identity – in terms of

sexuality, as the head of the family and as an artist. The play reflects on the self and the significance of the other, through the frameworks of gender and gender roles: the prostitute as a dancer and an artist; the man as a dancer; the guru who sports long hair and has an 'effeminate' walk – categories that the older generation, fed on its perception of the self cannot come to terms with. This clash brings about the play of property and money in deciding and manipulating the construction of identities that would conform, but the result is tragic. Perhaps, the resolution is suggested in the third generation, where the earlier sets of categories collapse and Lata is seen as a successful dancer and a mother, happily married to Vishwas, the son of a rich mithaiwala.

The Split in the Self: *Tara*

We have discussed in the preceding chapters the familial setting of all the plays that Dattani has written till date. It is not very often that he constitutes his family with cross-cultural, hybrid identities, nor does he talk often about inter-community marriages, unless he would like to scratch somewhat below the surface to explore the social/political/economic frameworks within which such unions take place, and their fallout. In *Tara*, Patel, a Gujarati, is married to Bharati, a Kannadiga and indeed, their marriage is hardly free from the ramifications of their social context. "My father had to leave his parents because of the marriage... my mother's father, was a very influential person. But my dad didn't take any help from him. Today my dad is the general manager of..." (338). While Patel's family disowned him, Bharati's rich and powerful father is responsible for the terrible mistake that compleely

changed Tara's life, and ultimately drives Bharati insane in her efforts to make amends. Even as the audience begins to feel the oppressive strain, Dattani inserts little gems in reference to the crossover cultures in the different metropolises, "Oh, we have a Kannadiga for a neighbour in Bombay. How refreshing! Specially since we had all those Gujarati neighbours in Bangalore" (339). Never one to lend credence to stereotypes, Dattani plays with the idea of female infanticide that is prevalent among the Gujaratis through the various insinuations that Roopa makes, and also suggests Patel's hegemonic patriarchy when he insists that 'proper' division in the gender roles be made – with different sets of plans for the boy and the girl. Tara herself is totally taken with her mother. After establishing the tenuous nature of Bharati's mental state, Dattani finally has the unwilling Patel reveal the truth, subverting all the assumed cultural stereotypes.

Dattani's deep preoccupation with gender issues leads to the emergence of the idea of the twin side to one's self – quite literally embodied in one body and the separation that follows. The 'gendered' self, as Dattani refers to it, must in some sense always partake of the 'other' in order that it is complete. The male equality with the female would be the ideal song that Dattani, a la Whitman, would also like to sing. But the world deems otherwise.

The twins are separated, physically at first, and later, emotionally. The first separation is required for their survival, and the all powerful, god-like doctor performs the operation. Dan declares, "Yes. You will be pleased to know that I have found my beginning" (330). The two identities have come into their own, have begun to reformulate themselves. But other considerations also come into play and unfair decisions have been made. All this is kept a

carefully guarded secret. The twins seem to share this wonderful rapport that makes for great theatre, especially in the scenes that involve Roopa, the nosy neighbour, when the twins gang up, strong and sure, almost a single robust identity. Separately, however, they appear weak, deformed and desperately in need of each other's support.

With the well-guarded secret exposed, Tara is shattered and the narrative fades away, back to Dan who has escaped to the anonymity of London where he lives without a personal history, unable to make any progress with his writing career, alive but divorced from all his realities, and Tara dead.

> Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move. Without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget I had a sister – with whom I shared a body. In one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... and separated. (379-80)

Dattani ends the play with the projection of the 'whole' identity, together again, without the limp or the disabilities, locked in an embrace.

In No Man's Land: *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

For a writer so deeply concerned with the issues relevant to his contemporary context, in writing specifically for a British audience for BBC Radio, there are several problems that must be negotiated. Even the title, for instance, of a play like *Seven Steps around the Fire* is significant. An Indian audience will immediately catch on, and understand the

reference to marriage, and realize the significance of the chanting of the marriage mantras, the sounds of the fire and so on at the beginning and the end of the play. The same would hardly be true with an English audience. During such negotiations, there is the danger of reductionism and oversimplification in trying to explain the cultural context, especially so if the medium happens to be radio drama where one is required to create the correct ambience and the context within the narrative through sound only.

Of course, the problem would be further compounded in the hidden narratives of the play. Dattani's reference to marriage here is two-fold – one a 'normal' arranged marriage where the bridegroom will shoot himself; the other is the reference to his earlier, 'hidden' marriage to the beautiful eunuch, Kamla who is burnt alive by hired goons. These are resonances that must not be missed in the play. The other most important missing visual item would of course be that of the eunuch that is so central to the play. The generic requirement of demarcating the special category of the eunuch in terms of the voice alone is equally problematic – it would after all be merely another male voice, unless the added dimensions to it were subtly/strongly emphasized.

On the other hand, there is also the special connotation to what it means to be a eunuch in the Indian context, and the strong identifying marks revealed in how they speak, walk, clap or sing. These are unmistakable marks that the eunuchs assume to formulate a distinctive identity that sets them apart as a community in India and are easily recognized by Indians. Some of these are bound to disappear in terms of the genre of a radio play; leaving only

'male' voices heard by the listener. In a special sense, this actually works for the play. Dattani's emphasis on the unseen, invisible and even unspoken nature of such identities; on issues that are swept under the rug and presumed non-existent by the majority begins to work in conjunction with phenomenological/bodily absence as his female protagonist Uma Rao begins her investigations on the community.

Already discussed in the preceding chapters is the question of the gendered self. Uma draws her identity in multiple ways, firmly (and perhaps happily) tethered to mainstream society and the establishment, she also moves beyond its 'safe' boundaries to negotiate with the hijra community through several clever, calculating, manipulative and even mercenary devices, using all the resources at her disposal, much to the comic discomfiture of Munswamy, her constable bodyguard. Not much is to come of her discoveries, she realizes, but she continues her machinations nevertheless, for 'academic' advancement.

Dattani sketches in Uma, the prototype of his female identity, plucky, courageous, unafraid to undertake risks and working from within the establishment, undeterred by its limitations or boundaries. In contrast, the male characters seem insipid, cowing down to authority, self-effacing and even inconsequential, in spite (or because) of the fact that their identities are the stuff of what the Indian system is constructed with.

Gay Identities: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai/ Mango Soufflé*

Moving on from the neuter and the female, we come to the configuration of the gay/lesbian entity already commented upon in detail in the earlier chapter. How does this identity evolve as a distinctive type? *Muggy Night* begins with the assumption that such character types are an established (though still invisible) fact, and have been very much a part of the Indian milieu for centuries. This is evident in the ease with which each character, within the 'queer' commune, operates, or even the language that each speaks.

Dattani works out the problematic identity of the gay man who begins to doubt his own reality, whose visits to a 'straight homophobic psychiatrist' (69) to rid himself of depression seem to help, until "he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself..." (69). Sharad is the most upfront about his identity, "If any one of us can be straight, I am Madhubala" (85). Bunny suggests, "Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can't find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage" (70). This being, the typically Indian manner of constructing an acceptable identity as a cover for the true self. The other way to 'be yourself' would quite simply be to run away, or as Sharad would put it, turn into a 'coconut' like Ranjit, who boasts of having a steady relationship with a man abroad where his sexual identity ceases to be a problem; but other problems of racial identity – "you are brown on the outside and white on the inside" (71) – manifest themselves.

Bunny accuses Ranjit of being ashamed of being an Indian. But speaking for himself, "I am [not] ashamed of being a Sardar. I am proud of it. I believe in my faith. My children learn from the Guru Granth Sahib... But because if I had a turban, I will end up playing a stereotypical Sird in all those movies..." (89).

The intricate web of identities embedded within the diverse frameworks does not appear in the play only in terms of sexuality but as complex and multi-dimensional cultural/racial/social/sexual polyphony. Having said that, it would be interesting to note here how these invisible identities deal with their male/female biases. Sexuality apart, the gender war remains intact, it would seem, when Dipali says, "I'm all for the gay man's cause. Men deserve only men!"(60), and "I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman" (66) or when she takes on Sharad:

> SHARAD. If I had a lover, would I be such a bitch?
>
> DIPALI. Don't – don't use that word. (Clenches her fist at him.) You can call yourself a dog, call yourself a pig, but never never insult a female. (59)

The one heterosexual in the play is a woman Kiran, who initially presents us with the picture of a naïve, victimized and weak character, but turns out perhaps to be one of the strongest, basing all her ideas of the self on openness and truth. She seems naïve in her suggestion of gay marriages, but Dattani makes a definite case for the simplicity and strength in her recognition of diversities as diversities, and not aberrations.

In the adaptation of this play into *Mango Soufflé*, Dattani broke new ground in his explorations of these complex

structures of identity and such related issues. This obviously required adjustments in the narrative as well, but the phenomenal international response to his film requires us to look at how such subjects are handled in terms of audiences abroad, gay or otherwise. Kimberley Jones in her report on the Fifteenth Annual Austin Gay & Lesbian International Film Festival where Dattani's film was screened to rave reviews, points out that films of this genre (queer cinema) are no longer confined to stories of 'coming out' or coming under the spectre of AIDS, the two definitive subjects of the 1990s, when the site of popular culture was utterly different (Jones, 2002). Now, mainstream viewership everywhere accepts these 'queer' identities without batting an eyelid, with the evolution of the new prototype of the gay individual. Would that then indicate a swallowing up of the gay audience, reducing it to something of a 'sidekick'? Herein lies the relevance of a film like *Mango Soufflé*, the first Indian feature film to explicitly address homosexuality, addressing gay issues within the territorially distinct identity of its subject.

Shared Spaces: *Do the Needful*

The play traces the coming together of heterogeneous linguistic and ethnic groups within the larger category of the Indian system of arranged marriages. Dattani makes simple and dexterous use of dialogues, thoughts spoken out loud for the listener and sound patterns that are richly evocative of different spaces as the play travels through the soundscapes of Mumbai and Bangalore to the Kannada countryside and back. *Do the Needful* is another radio play that has been adapted for the stage by Dattani with his

usual flair for bringing in unlikely twists in the most mundane of situations.

Culturally a given, arranged marriages are actually never – so to speak – 'arranged' between ethnically/linguistically/racially divergent groups because that would belie its very raison d'être: to perpetuate and strengthen these very differences to maintain distinctive identities. Instead what we have here are the Patels travelling all the way from Mumbai to meet the Gowdas of Bangalore to 'fix' a match between their progeny. This is indeed a desperate measure, and as we discover, the locus of the conflict is Lata's involvement with a Kashmiri terrorist, and the divorced Alpesh, who is gay. The exploration of the shared spaces common to women and homosexuals is put to active use here with the identities of its protagonists. The common oppressor in the picture is the patriarchal structure that refuses to allow any space for the growth of individual identities beyond its periphery.

The negotiations between the two parties begin with games of one-upmanship, and the gulf between the two sides reveals itself in more ways than just those of language and ethnicity. Categories of class, literacy, wealth, power and politics make their obvious statements of difference. Food habits, non-vegetarianism and other little nuances occupy as much space in the conversation as do the bigger issues of land-ownership, business or heritage. In spite of the laying bare of the separateness of their existence, the families move inexorably towards the pre-ordained destiny: the marriage of their subversive children. This is obviously preferable to the anarchic damage that will annihilate the identities of both families should the young have their way.

Dattani's cheeky dénouement ensures that the two parties seemingly at war with each other end up on the same side, both appeased. Lata and Alpesh marry and carry on with their respective partners, even as the Patels and the Gowdas heave huge sighs of relief at having averted cultural disaster and ruin in their own context. Dattani's mastery over his material must be commented upon as he deals with complex questions of identity and cultural diversity, with mischievous ease, using relevant local data available to him to dissolve the categories in his audacious ending.

Thus, we see the interesting sense of movement in the plays that at first 'find their feet' as they try to locate themselves; then go on to face hard facts that have been conveniently pushed under the rug. In this process of laying bare, speaking the unspeakable, and taking nothing at face value, Dattani arrives at the point where the identities have begun to take on specific contours and colours, but are never unequivocally 'constructed'. The progression remains one where identities make and unmake themselves, adding or shedding newer perceptions, never complete, but always in the process of becoming.

5. Reading the Stage

The Self-Reflexivity of the Texts

> I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of a production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium (Nair, 2001).

This is the whole point in the distinction between a playwright and a 'writer' using any other mode. The entire exercise of putting on paper the script of a play is only one of the many necessary ingredients in the genesis of a play, in the birth of drama. It is, perhaps, the beginning, but merely one element in the complete theatrical experience. Two distinct phenomena, though inter-related, can be seen here: the written text and the performance, the concepts of the stage and the page. If one is to prioritize the text in hierarchy, does the performance become redundant? And where would that place the audience? Theorists like Julian Hilton would leave out both audience and text in the consideration of performance:

> ...in the theatre any plot or action exists only in the moment of performance and has no stable meaning or identity outside of the performance process... . There is no single or necessary definition of what plot or action is, even in the case of a play with an authoritative source 'text', for every performance redefines, however marginally, the nature of the performed. The purpose of performing this becomes the one of generating an

> intensified experience for all who participate in it rather than the representation of some pre existing action or state of feeling according to some immanent ideal in its poetic textual source. (Hilton: 7)

The genre of dramatic literature has certain embodied peculiarities. The texts of plays can be read, as distinct from being seen and heard in performance. The term dramatic literature implies a contradiction in that 'literature' originally meant something written and 'drama' meant something performed. Many of the problems in the study of dramatic literature stem from this paradox. Even though a play may be appreciated solely for its qualities as writing, one must remain alert to the volatility of the play as a whole. From the inception of a play in the mind of its author to the image of it that an audience takes away from the theatre, many hands and many physical elements help to bring it to life. It is this phenomenological 'livedness' that seems to lie at the core of the problem that we presently struggle with.

Theatre is perhaps not essentially a *literary* art, though it is mostly taught thus in universities and schools. It is often assumed that reading the text of a play can assimilate the theatrical experience. In part, this is a result of the influence of theatrical critics, who, as writers, tend to have a literary orientation. While reviewers in the popular papers may give greater credence to such elements as acting and dancing, critics in the more serious journals are interested in textual/thematic/structural values. Then is drama a literary type at all? Various theorists have often called this to question, because without the necessary reference to the *extra*-literary institution of the theatre, it would be seen to lack the very vehicle of its reception.

Is a play what its author thought he was writing, or the words he wrote? Is a play the way in which those words are *intendedly* embodied, or is it their actual interpretation by a director and his actors on a particular stage? Is a play in part the expectation an audience brings to the theatre, or is it the real response to what is seen and heard? Should the text then remain unalterable? Dattani would be the first to disagree, as it would seem to deny the very raison d' être of theatre, the negation of its reason for existence. Once out of the playwright's hands, the text of the play will immediately acquire a life of its own. Interpreted by the director, enacted (and again interpreted) by the actor before a *live* audience, the dynamics of the theatre is, needless to say, resonantly polyphonic, with each voice adding its own reverberations to the play-in-performance.

Since drama is such a complex process of communication, its study and evaluation is as uncertain as it is mercurial. All plays depend upon a general agreement by all participants – author, actors, and audience – to accept the operation of theatre and the conventions associated with it, just as players and spectators accept the rules of a game. The script of a play is the basic element of theatrical performance. In the case of many 'masterpieces' it is the most important element. But even these dramatic masterpieces demand the creative co-operation of artists other than the author. The dramatic script, like an operatic score or the scenario of a ballet, is no more than the raw material from which the performance is created. The actors, rather than merely reflecting a creation that has already been fully expressed in the script, give body, voice, and imagination to what was only a shadowy indication in the text. The text of a play is as vague and incomplete in relation to a fully realized performance as is a musical score to a concert. It is in a performance that the text reveals its

meanings and intentions through skillful acting in an environment designed with the appropriate measure of visual drama. It is only when the script of a play assumes a disciplinary control over the dramatic experience itself that the student of drama gains measurable evidence of what was intended to constitute the play and dramatic literature is discussed as such.

Drama is the most wide-ranging, the most polyphonic of all the arts: it both represents life and is also a way of seeing it. It can never become a 'private' statement – in the way a novel or a poem can – without ceasing to be meaningful theatre. As a play is staged, a multitude of signs are unleashed for the audience to react to, requiring considerable agility on their part. The performance is forever in flight, and in the wealth of signs and the perceptive capacities of the spectator.

It is in the field of semiotics that a significant amount of work has been done to chart reading strategies both in terms of the written and/or the performance text. The semiotics of drama reconciles itself to the text/performance intertextuality as Elam (1980) points out, whereby each is to be read *through* the other. Anne Ubersfeld (1977) refers to the written text as one that has 'holes' to be later filled by the performance text. Patrice Pavis (1982), another semiotician, contends that in the text-performance dialectic, it is the mise en scène, the system of association or relationships that unites the diverse stage materials that are forged within a performance. Marco de Marinis (1978) approaches the spectacle as a sort of 'text' with its own signifying systems, separate from the written text. To be taken into account, however, are the actor's body and its unreliability that has set itself the task of interpreting the written play script. This again leads to

the endless proliferation of texts and meanings. Marvin Carlson, having traversed the gamut of performance-text relationships, settles for 'supplement' over 'illustration, translation and fulfillment' (Carlson: 5-11). This is, because, he says, quoting Derrida, it 'adds', is a 'surplus' – a plenitude to enrich another plenitude (Derrida: 144-5). Such aggressive dichotomizing between the ontological paradigms of the text and performance would leave no room for mutual co-operation, and would also set itself against the pluralist agenda of the postmodernists.

Bert O. States, in his book on the phenomenology of the theatre, explores the phenomena of the body itself:

> From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior document; it is the animating current to which the actor submits his body and refines himself into a illusionary being. ...it is by virtue of the absent text that the actor becomes a real living person... . (States: 128-29)

Vesna Pistotnik redirects the critical focus elsewhere, to stage history itself – that would encompass issues such as the author's freedom of choice, theatrical conventions, material-man availability, censorship, the commercial factor, practicality, patronage, repertoire, audience, rehearsals and so on (Pistotnik: 677-87). Pavis also adds, "... a performance text is only decipherable in its intertextual relationship with social discourse" (Pavis, 1982: 139). Both suggest that the way to go for theatre theorists is not just through text or performance, but the audience and its associated pragmatics that need further investigation. Reader-response theory and even semioticians like Umberto Eco (1979) have set out detailed criteria for the 'model reader'; Wolfgang Iser's (1974) 'implied reader', or Stanley Fish's (1980) theories

have all prioritised the reader of the printed word, and have very little to say on the 'reader' of drama, much less of the spectator. Drama is conspicuously absent from their arena. Reception by the spectator seems to have been totally neglected, except for the famous instance of catharsis or the Brechtian alienation effect. This is the paradox of theatre criticism: more than any other art, theatre demands, through the connecting link of the actor, an active mediation on the part of the spectator confronted by the performance; this happens only in the event of aesthetic reception. Nonetheless, the modalities of reception and the work of interpreting the performance are very poorly understood. Benjamin Bennett has shown in his book how the dramatic text suffers from a certain ontological defect:

> ... our sense of exclusion, as readers, from the beckoning world of a novel's fiction, is a normal and expected feature of the genre... . Our exclusion from the theatre as mere readers... is *not* a normal feature of the genre. [It is] ... an ontological defect of the text. (Bennett: 62)

This basic defect separates the drama from the other genre by "not a boundary but by a gulf"(Bennett: 62).

Let us consider the ramifications of such dichotomies once more from Dattani's position, where the problems seem to ease out a little, given that he writes, directs and sometimes also acts in his plays. In fact, the distinctive factor in his case was that he started out as an actor and dancer, but went on to become a writer because there were no plays in English on contemporary Indian issues. "I'm a reluctant playwright. I would choose to direct first before I write. But I wanted more plays written primarily in the English language for Indian audiences" (Nair, 2001).

It is interesting to note that there are hardly any playwrights who have actually begun with roots in the theatre or have come into play writing from acting and directing. As Dattani says, "I think that's the tragedy. I think that's what they lose out on. They have to have a theatre background. ...you should begin by getting involved in a production. Because there's nothing like that experience" (Katyal, 2000). And the notion of group work is vital in theatre for the director who is putting together the show. Then where does the playwright come in? "If you look at my plays, you would find that each character, every character has, you know, his or her space in the play, which an actor can develop" (Katyal, 2000). He explains that the playwright has to realize that he is not writing to be read and that the actors are going to take away the script and do other things with it. Beginning precisely from basic entries and exits, to the justification of a character's presence on stage, these are things that may be found wanting in the work of playwrights who do not have a background in theatre.

> I write **to do** plays. [emphasis mine] ...that is probably where my strengths lie, because [...] as productions they work. [The content is]... definitely a part of my world [...] what I see around and within me [...] I think its craft. Craft first and craft next. That's what theatre is about. (Katyal, 2000)

In another interview (parts of which I have already quoted in another context), Dattani responds to a few important questions – Does the actor in him battle with the playwright who battles with the director? Does he find himself making compromises torn between the three roles? The actor, the playwright and the director, he says, are all necessary for each other in a production as in the

process of gardening; where a whole is made of many parts and affected equally by the conditions that would determine a garden's verdure and beauty. Rather than write to pander to what he calls "vanity actors", Dattani would write for an actor in "the true sense of the word" (Nair, 2001). No theatre is possible without an actor or without an audience.

> Everything is geared towards 'rasa'. Which is why I always direct the first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instructions, which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. That way, there is no conflict. (Nair, 2001)

Having quickly traversed some of the stage/page problematics, and also how Dattani himself deals with them would be in order to look at a few of his plays that actually take into account the art and the craft of writing a play, and of staging it. The fact that Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person, rather than a writer, is evident in the way he is able to structure the stage mechanism effectively and how he, at times, allows the texts to speak for themselves, and look at their own workings and methodology. He employs a language that is often pungent, clear and sharp, pushing the spoken word to its limits, and interspersing them with pregnant silences that only someone with an intimate inwardness with theatre can. In a play like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, for instance, the realities that he deals with are multiple, and while the house and office are incorporated in the stage directions, the play moves from without to within, into a sort of internalized terrain. Directors like Michael Walling use this in tangible stage terms; with naturalistic treatment as only one of a wide spectrum of technical modes to be employed. [cf. chapter 2] The stage space in Walling's production was

defined and redefined by lighting design and by the actors' bodies which chart diverse terrains on the boundaries, even as parallel narratives continue centre stage. Dance-inspired stylized movements convey shifts or extensions within the text and the sub-texts. When Dolly makes her revelation, she begins to dance as Daksha would dance uncontrollably, jerkily, with mounting agitation, till she collapses. There is a profound inwardness to this act, a moment of pure theatre. The actor is to perform Dolly; Dolly will perform Daksha; and Daksha will perform the dance. This is a play, says Michael Walling,

> ...about [emphasis mine] performance; and uses theatre to demonstrate how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life. Paradoxically, it is only by the overt performance of the theatre that such acting can be exposed for what it is... By exploiting layer upon layer of performance, of unreality, Mahesh allowed his actress a route to emotion in its rawest form: the pain, the anguish in the blood-knot of the family, which is his constant theme. 'Isn't that the way she dances?' It seems an innocuous line on the page. But this is writing beyond words: this is theatre. (Dattani, 2000: 230)

Dattani had to edit his original script heavily for this production, once again revalidating the value of theatrical interpretations in concrete terms.

The same holds good for Lillette Dubey's productions of *Dance like a Man*, which I had occasion to quote elsewhere in a different context, "...it is an amazing script [...] beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor's talent, and how seamlessly all this is done..." (Sumanaspati, 2002). She replaced Dattani's mandatory split-level stage, playing the entire play

downstage, single level, spanning the stage with suspended picture frames to demarcate the 'sitting room' from the hallway and from the dance room where Jairaj would become Amritlal. The antique furniture (suggested in Dattani's text) with drapes weaving in and out created the perspective, and suggested doors and stairways, that led out into the garden.

Dattani's own use of stagecraft as distinct from Dubey's is extremely intricate in this play, with the text echoing with multiple connotations. The same character turns into his own father effortlessly by the simple act of putting on the older man's shawl, or bells on the feet while lights and music help in evoking the appropriate time/space shift and the back screen moves away to reveal a lush garden.

Things change, they remain the same; memory and contextual suggestions fly around with the deliberate use of such devices that are also to be noticed in *Final Solutions*, with the same play on the characters of Daksha and Hardika to self-consciously bring in old memories and the sense of history into the mechanism of the play. This play is replete with various stylistic devices such as the 'mob', which doubles up as the chorus and wears/sheds masks to give it the required religious colour. The setting is overpoweringly dominated by a ramp that has the mob running intermittently over it, as the action in the levels that stage the interiors continues, complete only in relation to the outside and the fury of the mob.

Apart from stagecraft as interpreted by various theatre directors, it is important to refer to what the plays say about themselves, *within* the body of the texts. The best example of course, would be *Tara*, with its protagonist Dan

also assuming the mantle of the narrator/dramatist in the process of writing a play, and (failing for personal reasons) starting off right away with a self-reflexive text:

> In poetry, even the most turbulent emotions can be recollected when one is fast asleep. But in drama! Ah! Even tranquility has to be recalled with emotion. Like touching a bare live wire. Try distancing yourself from that experience and writing about it! A mere description will be hopelessly inadequate. And for me... . (323)

The mode switches over to the personal, seamlessly. The teller and the tale merge, throughout the play. The play he writes is called 'Twinkle Tara' – a play in two acts. His progress is nearly nil, on paper. He proceeds to drop his various masks – another obviously metatheatrical device – "The handicapped intellectual's mask. (*Mimes removing another mask.*) The desperate immigrant. (*Mimes removing yet another*) The mysterious brown with the phoney accent..." (324). Then the memories flood in and the other levels on the stage are activated to play them out.

In a telling use of an almost choric voice, Dattani uses the god-like doctor's commentary that runs parallel with the memories, wherever required the introductions being mockingly performed by Dan, now an interviewer on television. There is another effective reference to drama in the parallel that is drawn by Dr Thakkar between the surgical procedure that he orchestrates and the theatricality echoing through it, putting to good use the suggestion in the word 'operation theatre': "We had had about six rehearsals with dummies to make sure that every detail was considered. In terms of the physical movements of the surgeons during the operation as well as surgical procedure" (363).

When Dan finally gets out of the act of the interviewer, he says,

> Yes. The material is there. But the craft is yet to come. Like the amazing Dr Thakkar, I must take from Tara – and give it to myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world, in anger. (379)

The finger he points at the artist is perhaps an indictment, perhaps merely a revelation to the self, but the point Dattani is making clearly shows one of the least considered, 'invisible' issues in art – making artistic 'capital' out of angst, sorrow, or feelings of the subjects. Dan, however, tears up *his* play and the play ends with an apology – "Forgive me Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (380). It may well have been Dattani saying it.

There are many specific examples of the play text looking inwards, and at the processes of their own making, taking the audiences into confidence. The direct addresses by Hasmukh Mehta in *Where There's a Will*, both alive and as a ghost, owe their effectiveness to this employment of the peculiar craft of theatre. This is because a play lives in its performance, and performance can derive its life only in complicity with an audience that shares the entire exercise. The play's almost rollicking comedy comes as a result of such shared confidences: "(*Puffs on his cigarette.*) At the rate I'm puffing, I should be dead in forty minutes" (456). And true enough he actually dies in less! In trying to fill the 'empty spaces' in his son's head with some sense, the exasperated Hasmukh cries, "Son, how do I start explaining to you? (*To the audience*) Yes, How? You tell me. Well, I'll try" (459). He waits for his wife to discover his death as he watches with glee. While Sonal thinks, "Of course, he's asleep. He just has to lie down on the bed

and he is dead to the world!" Hasmukh's ghost responds, "She has a way of saying things" (476). This is a clever device of the ghost who acts as a commentator on the action, albeit a very biased one, whose statements evoke laughter from the audience that meanwhile has learnt more. The culturally rooted idea of ghosts hanging from a tamarind tree is used to bring in more fun, even directly poking fun at the audience:

> HASMUKH (*to the audience*). Have you ever swung on a tamarind tree? Upside down? You should try it some time. You can see the world the way it really is. It's important to get a good grip on the branch with your legs. Then you can relax your hands and head. Like this. (*Demonstrates by lying on his back and letting his head and hands dangle over the side of the table.*) How do I look? I don't know about me, but you all look peculiar. (*Points at someone.*) Your shoes need polishing. (496)

The smug Hasmukh is later reduced to someone who would seek refuge in the tree, but would forfeit even that, like he has forfeited life itself.

Dattani's delightful and quick repartee is an absolutely indispensable part of his style, and the wit is never lost on the audience that is comfortable with the language as well as with the milieu. Words and phrases like "ogler", "combatible", "peas in a pot" and other such gems abound and are a source of much entertainment. From his first play onwards, the wit never sags or loses its charm; and though some of the plays are gag-a-minute structures, they never lose sight of the seriousness regarding the thematic content of the play, ultimately returning to address the issues that have been raked up.

Mahesh Dattani, from his years of being a "reluctant" playwright to a highly successful (and celebrated) one, has

carried on the business, as he says, "of holding a mirror up to society" (Dattani, 2000: xv) through an art that is both entertaining as well as issue-based; self-aware and rooted in its milieu.

6. Film

Alternate Performances, Shifting Genres

A lot has been said on the schism that exists between live theatre and film/television performance: that the natural affinity of film is with the narrative art of the novel/epic rather than drama/theatre. The film reaches the audience only after active tampering of mise en scène by the omniscient director, through the eyes of the cinematographer and severely 'mutilated' by the editor. The audience-actor interaction and its dynamic life is lost, and so is the immediacy of the stage. On the other hand, theatrical performance would consist of the explosively *there*, the presence before one's eyes. The 'vibe' as it is called colloquially, works wonders if the audience-actor communication gets ignited. And again, there is no predictability about a play in performance: if an actor happens to sneeze, she/he would radically alter the entire play.

Critics like Bernard F. Dukore have shown that there are advantages to the situation wherein drama/film provide helpful alternatives, and says that the affinities are seen to far outweigh the differences, and that all the major living playwrights have written for the medium, not having remained exclusively attached to theatre (Dukore: 171-79). Adaptations, and televised versions of major dramatic works are a genre on their own. Pinter, Beckett, Albee, Stoppard, Karnad, Tendulkar have all written for both media.

Film screenplays (Dukore cites Pinter's *The Proust Screenplay*) can also be read like drama scripts, once one is accustomed to the jargon. While language, or 'wordiness' is often cited as a theatrical medium – non-verbal images as its counterpart in film – we may easily substitute the one for the other (the dialogue in film; the stage movements, props and so on in theatre). Both media are collaborative artworks and work in polyphony.

Martin Esslin makes use of semiotic theory to trace drama on both the stage and on the screen. Drama, he says, is multimedia – including both film and television in its scope – "the most hybrid... or the most complete synthesis of all the arts..." (Esslin: 28). While film has its own distinct language of montage, of editing, travelling, panning shots, zooming, the close up and so on, there is a neglect in the area of the actually spoken dialogue, the actors, designers, sets, costumes and the rest – the dichotomy between mise en scène and film direction (that decides which bit or fragment of the mise en scène is to be filmed). Likewise, theatre for its part does not assimilate film aesthetics that would seek to diminish its potency. Film critics like André Bazin have, however, recognized the underlying categories of drama that is perhaps the very raison d'être of film making, which could be re-energized:

> [...] Certain dramatic situations, certain techniques that had degenerated in the course of time, found again[,] in the cinema, first, the sociological nourishment they needed to survive and better still, the conditions favourable to an expansive use of their aesthetic, which the theatre had kept congenitally atrophied [...]. (Bazin: 121)

Given some of the generic affinities between theatre and film, it is hardly surprising when many important theatre directors make a relevant shift in their art, often adapting

plays into films, or even doing films with originally written screenplays/scripts. As an illustration of one of the most successful adaptations (though not by the author) of plays into films, one may cite the case of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Extremely successful on stage, it is the film version that seems to have etched itself in the collective memory of the audience over time. Arguably, this was largely due to the presence of 'stars' like Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in the film. A wary Albee is said to have commented that the commercial success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (the film) meant that it was probably seen by more people than have ever seen all his plays:

> It's nice to reach to a large audience, but that always reminds me of what kind of information is reaching an audience that large all the time. We are a film and television culture, not a theatre culture. And film and television misinform. (Anderson and Ingersoll: 169)

Incidentally, Dattani's men and women exchange typically heated verbal duels that are self-acknowledgedly influenced by Albee's play – "I read Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* when I was in my teens: it unleashed in me an ability to set up my male and female characters against each other" (Dattani, *Outlook*, 2000). It is also interesting that in spite of the fact that he would choose to make a shift in performance genres, he would retain authorial/directorial control over his material through a strategy of casting, drawing actors principally from the theatre: "I intend to make movies, though selectively, but I intend to make them with artistes who have the commitment and the time for good work. I don't want the tantrums and hassles of stars and thankfully for me, theatre is full of such talented artistes"(Menon 2003), he says.

Mahesh Dattani's important early screenplay credits include *Hum Tum aur Woh, Ek Chingari ki Khoj Mein, Ek Alag Mausam*, and the screen adaptations of *Dance Like a Man and Mango Soufflé. Mango Soufflé*, adapted from *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* was his first film as director and it won rave reviews in the film festival circuits, also picking up a couple of awards on the way. Not that critical acclaim was necessary for larger audiences – plays like *Dance like a Man* and *Muggy Night* already had a considerable audience as theatre. And Dattani would be the first to point out that seeing a play and a film are different experiences and not necessarily hierarchical. The immediate, living power of theatre can hardly be overlooked. The audiences may be very small in size but it is their immediate feedback to the content of a play that is important.

Producer Sandeep Shah's request for adapting one of his plays into film set the ball rolling for Dattani's foray into cinema. Both came together to form Lotus Piktures in 2002 to fashion a place for themselves within the Indian-English film genre, aiming at an international audience.

> The film comes at a time when the old paradigms of Indian cinema have changed and there is no new one that has evolved. Typically this is when audiences and the industry veer towards and is willing to try new genre movies. (Riti, 2003)

Dattani's oeuvre may actually be categorized with the genre of films that is currently labelled as 'crossover cinema', as distinct from the earlier 'art' film genre generally referred to as New Wave cinema. With powerful exponents like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak as well as the next lot comprising Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and others, New Wave was a decidedly 'rooted'

phenomenon reinterpreting these realities. The new breed of filmmakers, on the other hand, appear peculiarly remote from a larger sense of historical participation. Technically too, the artistic, cinematic brilliance of the earlier masters seems missing, as they struggle with the medium. It is more disposed to telling stories and communicating, accepting the new shifts in the paradigms in terms of gender, relationships, sexualities and so on.

As Dattani sees it, it is a period of growth, and the new crop of filmmakers has better stories to tell. After an extended and barren phase in the mainstream cinema, there now seems to be a revival of 'sensible' cinema.

> We've a lot more to say, whether it's a direct story telling or a new look at relationships – new icons of gender, gender roles, whole new paradigms on sexuality and feminism. There is a lot more meat than we can chew. (Menon and Prakash, 2003)

In terms of location, how does a film of this crossover genre work, with audiences comprising not just the regional or the national, but international, multicultural, multiracial audiences of a varied hue? In mainstream regional cinema, location is not an issue at all – the whole idea is to keep it fluid so that people anywhere should be able to see themselves in it whether they are in Rajasthan or Karnataka. It poses something of a challenge, however, for international and crossover cinema. One cannot take location for granted, but must work on its details – like the mango grove of *Mango Soufflé*, and later, in *Morning Raga*, the locale set in south India and the Carnatic music in this film.

Reminiscence and remoteness are commonly connected with much of Indian crossover cinema, which in a sense tends to estrange it from the larger historical/political/socio-economic realities that construct India.

But Dattani counters this sense of rootlessness by actually making it work to his benefit. "You could be an outsider looking inwards which somehow places you in a dynamic position because there is a movement outwards and inwards' (Menon and Prakash, 2003).

> I would say that's an advantage and needs to be exploited better because by and large our cinema and literature is located and in that sense coming from within. But I think we need to transcend this as well. And that is where it helps. (Menon and Prakash, 2003)

Interestingly, many of these crossover films often use English, which could actually work against the audience's affinities. The English language Indian film actually took off a good deal earlier with Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane*, which was followed by a few sporadic productions that did not do well. The audience was not ready for such films.

For Dattani, the problem remains unresolved because one also owes it to oneself to be true to one's medium of expression – English is his language as it is for a host of Indians living in India and abroad.

> English is for me a sort of given. [...] I have no choice in this matter. I could have easily done my films *Mango Soufflé* and *Morning Raga* in Hindi but the fact is it's not my language. English is the language I really think in. (Rao, 2003)

On the flipside, it has also found larger audiences, internationally, especially through the exposure in the festival circuit.

Mango Soufflé

Dattani made his debut as film director with *Mango Soufflé* adapted from the highly successful *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, produced by Lotus Piktures, with a cast including Rinke Khanna, Heeba Shah, Atul Kulkarni, and Faredoon Dodo Bhujwala.

The title of the film addresses the tenor of the film: the treatment and mood is light and summery. The film reworks many particulars of context and plot, relocating from Mumbai to Bangalore, where the scene is set for brunch at a farmhouse outside Bangalore – a beautiful house with large windows overlooking lush mango orchards, "Mango as you know is the fruit of passion just as the apple is a fruit of temptation in the Christian world" (Sharma and Ahuja, 2004). In fact, watching *Mango Soufflé*, set almost completely within the bungalow, is almost like sitting through a play.

There are certain problematic aspects that one would have to deal with in terms of adapting a play into the cinematic medium. As to the problem of setting, a screenplay writer, to open up the play usually increases the number of sets. Theorist Erwin Panofsky, however, holds that 'opening up' is both natural and desirable in a medium known for its movement of space: "approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through the cutting and editing of the various shots." This complements the film's 'dynamization of space' (Panofsky: 247).

On stage, the entire play unfolds in just one location, which would become extremely monotonous in terms of cinema. On film, Dattani uses a lot of exteriors as the locale, and

varies the time/space with flashbacks that provide the audience with a different style of storytelling. Having discovered a completely new idiom that was altogether different from that of the theatre where the script evolved in its immediacy, he speaks of the need in film for detailed and minute planning while also postponing the final event until the entire process is over. But old habits die hard and he points out that his first drafts are mostly overwritten, after which he asks for inputs from the actors and the cameramen. And then the process of trimming it down to the minimum begins. This facilitates the visuals to tell the story rather than just human interactions. Mainly, the difference is that for cinema, the narrative runs through pictures.

> It is a sensory medium with a strong emphasis on the visual component. Colours and use of light are significant. Art direction is a special category which is as important as cinematography. The director's job is really in bringing it all together to serve the script. (Riti, 2003)

Dattani edits out Ed's suicide attempt, isolating him totally and more emphatically than the play does. This attempted suicide is a climactic moment in the play that moves towards a verdict – Ed has to choose, he cannot sail in two boats at once. In *Mango Soufflé*, the episode is more understated. Ed evokes nostalgia and memories of the past through flashbacks, to remind Kamlesh of their first meeting and his earlier contemplation of suicide. As he narrates the past, he tips his glass over the edge of the table, suggesting this recurrent idea in his present state of mind. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a grittier version of urban reality than *Mango Soufflé*, with Kamlesh's flat located in the chaos of the city (albeit typifying 'privileged' spaces situated in Marine Drive). *Soufflé* alters this, and

the action is located at a harmless corporeal, cognitive and affective distance from the city in a mango orchard. There is, even in the play, the element of separation in terms of spatial reality: the plot unravels on the top floor flat that looks down at the 'normal' wedding – which is set at a 'safe' distance, which is also evoked in the film, once they are within the precincts of the farm. The film in a sense actually makes the 'other', the outside, palpably visual, with cuts of the marriage next door. This is the subtle way in which the translation into the cinematic version evolves: this is a narrative that entails different space-time complexities, and the resonant emotional quotient that works wonderfully on stage would be completely static on the screen.

The audiences that Dattani targeted were hardly the mainstream cinemagoers in India, but those that were ready to see something in English that is Indian and reflective, in some ways, of their own lives. "The movie is targeted at urban audiences since it is all about urban life and urban relationships" (Menon, 2003) – what he has often referred to as a 'metrosexual' or 'metor-centric' love story. Not that sexuality isn't expressed and understood in rural India, but that the swiftly shifting lifestyles of the big cities would garner a more perceptive audience. The producer of the film, Sandeep Shah points out that the film hopes to cater to the urban English speaking audience in India as well as the Indian diaspora all over the world in the age group of eighteen to thirty-five years along with the Western art house film goers (Sharma and Ahuja, 2004).

But are Indian audiences actually prepared for movies with offbeat – even shocking – themes where stigmatized reality is presented on film, without pretence? The volatile

reaction to such films as Deepa Mehta's *Fire* or Mira Nair's *Kamasutra* that took up lesbianism begs the question. The shift in audience reaction seems almost imperceptible even as films have begun to openly present a drastic change from the 'normal' with a variety of 'queer' characters. In *Mango Soufflé*, the lovers swim naked in a pool, and the many strands of sexual orientations and relationships unravel. The film went through the usual Censor board without any cuts, with an 'A' certificate, and the action staying, as Dattani put it, 'above the belt' (Rathi, 2002). Dattani asserts that he has no overt agenda/message in the movie – only an exploration of relationships that are necessarily made suspect by the societal givens. True to his antecedents in theatre, Dattani rehearsed extensively with his artists before filming, easing any awkwardness with actors doing gay roles: gayness became merely incidental to the essential character. Although sexuality moves the narrative in a major way, it is at base about the resolution of complex human relationships. "I am not sure whether audience acceptance of a movie should be a form of censorship on creativity. In any case, being gay or lesbian is not right or wrong, it is reality and we have to learn to accept alternate relationships and live with them," says Dattani. (Menon, 2003)

The film, like the play, looks at the fabric of alternate [read homosexual] relationships. While this might be workable with the play, a movie in which male lovers fight, kiss, break/make up, is somewhat shocking for 'straight' audiences of Indian cinema. In adapting the play into the film, however, Dattani added a few new shades to the relationships that are now not as rigidly demarcated as in the play, "I have found out that sexuality can't be straitjacketed or compartmentalized. There are varying degrees of love and bonding one feels for another person irrespective of the gender" (Rao, 2003). Same-sex love

and bonding need not necessarily be sexual alone. "There are grey areas in people's relationships with others too and through my film, I have only brought them to notice". (Rao, 2003)

At the Barcelona film festival, the Mostra Lambda Award went to *Mango Soufflé*, in recognition of a film that speaks of "homosexuality as a normal phenomenon" says festival director, Jaume Gil I Llopart and for its "enormous valour" in giving courageous visibility to the issue in a country like India where "homosexuality is still not recognized, and is not even legal", and also for its beautiful cinematography (Riti, 2003).

It was also one of the most anticipated entries in the fifteenth Austin Gay & Lesbian International Film Festival (aGLIFF). From its world premiere here, *Mango Soufflé* headed for the prestigious London International Film Festival. For its rare handling of gay love in India it was hailed as a landmark film. Internationally too, the audiences for such subjects have only recently opened up, converging with the straight audiences. Films that were earlier screened at such film festivals such as the aGLIFF were "confined to stories of coming out or coming under the spectre of AIDS, the two subjects that defined nineties queer cinema" (Jones, 2002). It is now much closer toward a greater evenness in thematic content. The territory of pop culture too, has undergone a drastic mutation, "there's a new archetype, the 'bitchy-but-kindhearted-and-nonthreatening-gay-next-door-neighbor-and/or-best-friend." 'Straight' audiences are easily lapping it all up the world over, but then, asks Kimberley Jones, "where does that leave the gay audience?" (Jones, 2002). It is interesting indeed that even in acceptance, problems of identity would crop up.

Dance Like a Man

Dance like a Man was produced by the National Film Development Corporation (India) in association with Rooks AV. and directed by Pamela Rooks. The screenplay was written by Dattani and Pamela Rooks, adapted from his play of the same name. Her adaptation, however, is structurally very different from the play. The language remains English like all of Dattani's works, with a typically Indian flavour, slipping into Hindi now and then, with clarity and a naturally urbane casualness. Notably, the film actually uses direct sound instead of dubbed voiceovers. Shot entirely in Bangalore within a stretch of thirty days, the opulently mounted dance sequences are choreographed by Shobhana and Rama Vaidyanathan.

While the focus is on the artistic and historical aspects in the narrative, the film, however, departs from one of the important features of the play: the transitional roles played by two different sets of characters who play both themselves, and their predecessors. Now Arif Zakaria and Shobhana play both the young and the old couple. This in a sense is a loss to the original, because the reverberations of time and change, and resonating history simply cannot be evoked in quite the same way in film. The fact that the characters look different (like themselves, in different roles) from the next set of roles that they are to assume gives that much more significance to aspects of role-playing in the play in terms of theatre: the effortless putting on and shedding of different masks at different points of the play while also moving through time shifts.

But then again, the switch between the stage and the screen has its own special problems and has to be judged on its own terms, and not only in comparison, although

comparisons with the 'original' are inevitable. Rooks' adaptation, however, does not seem to have gone down too well with a section of its viewers: "[the film]...is too short and slapdash for Hindi tastes, too baroquely soapy for Westerners..." as Ken Eisner scathingly comments (Eisner, 2003).

Ek Chingari ki Khoj Mein (In Search of a Spark)

Among Dattani's early forays into films was the screenplay for the K. P. Sasi film, *Ek Chingari ki Khoj Mein*. Based on the experiences of an abused woman, it raised significant questions on the problems associated with dowry. Notwithstanding the fact that this is an issue that has been raked up to the point of being clichéd by socially-conscious filmmakers, Dattani retains his power over the narrative that deals with the horrors of the situation, focusing upon two contrasting female personalities – Vijaya, who cows down to the system and Usha, who would transcend it. Usha urges Vijaya to legally resist the constant violence dealt to her for dowry, but she returns to her husband's home. Dattani's screenplay underscores the desperate hopelessness of the abused woman who is unable to strike out on her own for the lack of a familial/societal support system. The strong and unafraid Usha is the metaphorical spark of hope, and yet as her own marriage approaches, she becomes troubled by the possibility that she too might fall prey to a similar fate.

The short, twenty-odd minutes film encompasses an entire range of women-centric issues in India: the status of the girl child, the cultural moorings of the dowry system that legitimizes the objectification of women, the violence and

the abuse, and the loneliness of their experience that finally isolates them. The film is aimed at exposing domestic violence for what it is, and promoting attitudinal changes towards dowry. Most importantly, it seeks to persuade women to rationally analyze their own domestic situations (and the malfunction) in order to empower them to make informed choices. Madhyam, a Bangalore-based NGO that works with issues related to women, produced the film.

Ek Alag Mausam (A Special Season)

It is not very often that producers/directors/social activists choose the medium of mainstream cinema, and a genre like a love story in order to raise ideological questions on social issues, or to make a political statement. Scripted by Mahesh Dattani and directed by K. P. Sasi, *Ek Alag Mausam* is a love story of two HIV positive people. The objective was to infuse a sense of belonging, care and hope in the HIV afflicted.

This was hardly an easy task in the Indian context where myths constantly shape and colour the present, not merely evoking the past. Involving sexuality, many of its themes are taboo or stigmatized. The protagonists are both HIV positive and aware of it, despite which, they decide to get married. In India, there is the precedence set by the Apex court that disallows the right of an HIV positive person to get married. The scriptwriter and the director nonetheless went ahead with the story. "It is a human rights issue and the courts have no right to interfere in the decisions that individuals make – if they are aware that the person they are going to marry is HIV positive" (Kidwai, 1999), he says. The lives of the characters are inextricably linked together

by the HIV virus and the inexorable sense of loss that is imminent. And yet, there is also a special season filled with beauty that beckons, anticipating their discovery of happiness through love. "I think Indian audiences will look forward to such a film, because it's been nearly 20 years since the virus first appeared in India, and people want to know the truth" says Dattani. (Kidwai, 1999)

ActionAids maintains that it is a film that "will make people sit up and start thinking about the issue seriously. So far we have only seen the marginalization of such people. Through *Ek Alag Mausam* we hope to put the problem in a different perspective and help audiences understand the issue better. We have used the film medium to reach out to not only HIV positive people out there who are feeling isolated, but also a large cross section of people" (Vishwanath, 2003), observes the ActionAid India Society Chief Executive, Jerry Almeida.

Produced at a cost of Rs 50 lakh, the 140-minute long film stars well-known faces – Anupam Kher, Nandita Das, Rajat Kapur, and Renuka Sahane – and includes a number of songs. The stars and the songs "have been judiciously and consciously incorporated to draw the common viewer apart from the discerning audience," says Almeida "The idea is to spread Aids awareness and message through fun, joy and tears as in a regular formula fare", at a time when good cinema is coming of age (Vishwanath, 2003).

Morning Raga

Dattani's next project was an original screenplay and not an adaptation from any of his plays. "...it is very difficult to translate a play into cinematic terms. It is like

restructuring an old building. Isn't it much easier to just knock it down and build afresh?" (Jha, 2003). The entire problem of generic adaptation from play to film discussed earlier is relevant here and Dattani seems to have simplified matters for himself by making the shift in genres more radical than would have been possible in terms of adaptation.

Morning Raga speaks about the confluence of the past and the present, of old and new worlds, the archetypal and the contemporary, and importantly, Carnatic and Western music as the pre-release comments and interviews by the director stated. Based on the life of a classical music singer, with music as the central theme, it features Shabana Azmi in the lead role. Amit Heri and Mani Sharma score the music and the songs are rendered by Sudha Raghunathan, Jayashri and Kalyani Menon. The cinematography is by Rajiv Menon, with Dattani as director. The inspiration for this film came from one of his experiences during the making of *Mango Soufflé*.

The film's music director is Amit Heri, a Jazz musician and Ramamani, a Carnatic vocalist from Bangalore was roped in on one of the songs.

> During the recording, it was interesting to watch the interaction between these two artistes belonging to two different worlds – carnatic and western. They were working together and creating something new. It was a meeting of two worlds [...]. (Aruna, 2004)

Going by his earlier experience with *Mango Soufflé*, Dattani's strategy for garnering better audience support this time was a release on the international film circuit first, followed by the Indian one.

Cinema, then, the other performance space that Dattani has now chosen to enter in various capacities, could be seen as both an extension of, and a shift from his basic concerns with theatre. It has been a remarkable learning experience about the cinematic techniques that are so significant to the genre. Nonetheless, he maintains that technique remains subordinate to the narrative content of film:

> Since telling a good story is my forte, I know it's possible to achieve levels of technical perfection through the medium of film. I definitely look forward to working more in this medium. (Rao, 2003)

In a way expanding his horizons through a wider audience, and new artistic techniques, he seems quite happy to straddle the two zones that obviously partake of each other without too many contradictions and work within the requirements of each medium.

7. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani and Contemporary Indian Writing

From the time he began his career on the stage in Bangalore – the city where he had grown up, enjoying, as a child the spectacle of the Gujarati theatre that sometimes travelled there – to doing English theatre that was mostly derivative in nature, and finally to becoming one of the leading and most performed playwrights of the country, actor-director Mahesh Dattani has come a long way. While he admits to being a "reluctant" playwright, perhaps the seeds of his success lay in this very reluctance: he needed English plays to perform, and they were unavailable. So he wrote them – not as a writer writing a self-consciously 'literary' work like a novel or a poem – but as a performer amalgamating the 'extra-literary' polyphony of the stage in his writing and keeping audience reception in his mind. That has perhaps made all the difference to the manner in which Dattani has managed so fluently to communicate with such audiences, as well as the reason, ultimately, for the 'literary' quality of his output.

The need to make contact with, to speak to one's audiences in their own terms, and yes, in their own language is the paramount condition for the playwright's success. Speaking of the audience for English theatre in India, we have already at length tried in the earlier chapters to locate and rationalize the ambit of their identity in postcolonial India. Important questions of audience pragmatics come in here,

and in some sense, dictate the content and form of a writer writing for the stage. These will shape the identity of his/her corpus finally and 'place' the writer of drama not only in terms of literary merit, but also in terms of stage history and context as the plays will be performed, interpreted and in a sense, 'rewritten' again and again – in performance. This is the special generic quality of drama, within which context we have tried to assess the work of Mahesh Dattani.

To start with, a quick recapitulation of his major plays. Beginning with the 'family' play within a personally relevant context (Dattani being a Gujarati), the playwright managed to catch the imagination of his limited audiences in Bangalore with *Where There's a Will* that instantly captured the little shades that were intrinsically rooted in the social milieu with its sparkling dialogues and clever stage devices. Already his interest in issues of gender constitution seems to be in place, and despite the suggestion of a light, clever and frothy comedy, Dattani confronts issues of authority and identity. *Dance Like a Man* would also begin, it would seem, with a directly personal relevance (Dattani's career in dance) and go on to become a resonant work on contemporary society as it moves back and forth in time, spanning three generations. The important aspect in this play, as in all of his plays, is the emphatic 'staginess' – the self-conscious theatricality that is deliberately worked into the writing. It would never be enough to read the playtext – its peculiarities may only be realized through the mechanism of the stage. As Michael Walling points out, "His plays fuse the physical and spatial 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" (Dattani, 2000: 229).

With *Tara*, the playwright begins to look at his own art, and at the same time continues his negotiations with questions of gender, the family and its relationship with the self. This was an unlikely subject, perhaps even a 'freaky' one, and yet the play went on to become one of Dattani's best-loved works. Despite the surface 'unreality' of its subject, Dattani's exploration of his milieu was skillfully worked out, as were his metatheatrical objectives of the artist-dramatist-writer looking at his own art. *Tara* has excited audiences all over the world, and Mee writes: "My students loved Dattani's work in general and *Tara* in particular – several of them became so excited about the play that they wrote their final papers on it" (Dattani, 2000: 320). Another play that looked at 'gendered' worlds, so to speak, was *Bravely Fought the Queen*. With the segregation and then the climactic showdown between the male and female worlds – with a touch of gay – Dattani was already knocking at new frontiers that he would explore in his later works.

Final Solutions, his next play was the work that was to become something of a turning point for Dattani in more senses than one. He turned here from the intensely personal focus that marked his earlier works, and looked at history and its ramifications within the localised context, with simple and powerful visual texture that made it one of his most important performed plays. It fetched him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and created a space in the Indian literary scenario for this special new genre of writing – Indian drama in English.

His first radio play came next, and *Do the Needful* was aired to a multicultural British audience. This is a confident

Dattani, raking up controversial issues with cheeky humour in his version of a contemporary 'romantic comedy', and deftly drawing the changing contours of a multicultural India with its multiple voices. Next was the overtly (and daringly!) 'queer' *Muggy Night* whose success surprised everyone, most of all its author, who would later adapt it to direct his first film, *Mango Soufflé* which in turn would fetch him a number of international film awards. Destroying all manner of stereotypes, and the resulting oppression it emphasizes the need to transcend the 'given' for honesty in self-expression. *Muggy Night* is an example of the playwright's preoccupation with bringing to the centre stage what is referred to as 'fringe' issues that remain on the periphery of social concerns.

The playwright does not end his quest for the 'invisible' here and he goes on to the 'third gender' in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and with his usual urbane humour exposes the myths surrounding an 'invisible' community and the shams that the society indulges in. This radio play is followed by two more commissioned by the BBC and finally by the last play that we have looked at – *Thirty Days in September* – that reveals some intensely horrifying faces that haunt the society. Taut and sombre, the play implicitly makes the viewer party to the traumatic betrayal that scars the psyche of the child sexual abuse victim as it finally gives a hearing to the abused.

With this impressive corpus of 'performed' plays to his credit, Dattani has, it would not be too far fetched to say, been actually responsible for the rejuvenation of a nascent genre that would otherwise have in some sense died a premature death. "To Mahesh, a play is never really finished. Plays only really happen in the theatre, as ephemeral events. The apparently permanent printed text

is just one approximation to what might occur when the piece is performed", says Michael Walling (229). Time and again, therefore, Dattani has pointed out that he is a craftsman; a theatre person before being a writer, and it is this intense and primary focus on the performance rather than the literary aspect of his work that lies behind his success. Automatically, the literary accolades have also poured in as Dattani tackles issue after tricky issue not to merely cater to his audiences but to communicate his concerns with them.

> Every time audiences (critics too!) have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silence in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me. ... critics 'hate' me. ... For if they loved me, I would probably write boring plays full of self-importance that nobody really wants to produce, direct, act in or go to stuffy halls with inadequate facilities to see (Dattani, 2000: xi).

The audiences have 'connected' wherever Dattani has been performed in India and abroad, and he never fails to mention the incredible roles played by Alyque Padamsee and Lillette Dubey in becoming that important interface between him and the audiences, especially those outside Bangalore. While Padamsee in producing *Tara* "believed in my work even before I believed in it myself. He gave me the courage to call myself a professional playwright and director" (Dattani, 2000: xiii), Dubey's "perseverance and true grit" have led to a truly worldwide audience for his plays.

In terms of pedagogy there has hardly been much interest in the work of Indians who write drama in English, and few universities that include a paper on Indian writing in English in mainstream 'English literature' courses would

also include in its ambit, 'Indian English drama' as they would the genres of poetry and fiction. Although things are changing, as they stand, there is a lot of room for change and indeed, universities must open up to the idea of an English theatre based in India as a *bona fide* literary genre. This is an imperfect world for these purposes, and to quote Dattani again, a world,

> Where if I wrote about the working classes, I am told, I would gain international recognition (but if I were, in fact a working class person, no middle-class critic or theatre practitioner would give me the time of day.)...where there is no real professional theatre... Where I am met with open hostility in parochial Universities. Where in literary circles, I am seen as inferior because I am a playwright.... (Dattani, 2000: xiv-xv)

It is against such a backdrop that one is to evaluate the achievements of Mahesh Dattani. Man of multiple roles, he has always managed to make his audiences sit up and listen, and listen with such involvement that they even begin to forget that they are in fact, watching a play in an 'alien' tongue. He could, in a sense be seen as one of the strands that carry forward the traditions of Indian theatre through the necessary dynamic of change and innovation. Not having to repeatedly revisit his roots, he works instinctively and meticulously, anchored to the contemporaneous urban realities, collaborating with artists to put up his shows, pushing the frontiers of his art, and nudging his audiences into acknowledging it.

Topics for Discussion

- The evolution and emergence of Indian drama in English, its historical antecedents, and present scenario to be considered both in terms of literature as well as a performance art.

- Dattani's evolution as a playwright, from being an actor, dancer, director etc.

- Stagecraft: scenography and the structure of the plays and how these are enmeshed with the thematic concerns of the plays.

- The Dattani stage: the trademark splitting of the space of the stage into different levels to achieve particular structural/thematic effects as the exteriors merge into the interior landscapes.

- Sounds/Sights: the distinctive dramatic effects of a radio play as different from a stage play.

- Dattani's use of genres like the 'romantic comedy', the 'whodunit' and the like to suit his own purposes of exploring some of his chief concerns.

- The Dattani dialogue: the witty repartee, the acid rejoinder, the focused punning, and the play with language to boost audience participation in the play.

- Humour in Dattani: the evocation of grotesque laughter through his use of 'black' comedy.

- The site of confrontations: the significance of the family in the plays of Dattani.
- Locating the self within the mechanism of the family: the social context of the plays of Dattani.
- The quest for identity within the categories of the individual, the familial, the religious, the social and the national in Dattani's drama.
- The psyche of the mob: its faceless identity that assumes and sheds different colours in *Final Solutions*.
- History as a lived moment in the plays of Dattani: the seamless movement of time and space in terms of dexterous stagecraft.
- Satirizing stereotypes – "ugly but funny" – the distorting mirror that Dattani shows to a society that refuses to acknowledge some of its own truths, but forces its men and women (and the third gender) to live in 'forced harmony'.
- Homogenising the taboo: throwing off the veneer from existing realities and exposing the latent hypocrisy of Indian middle class reality in the plays.
- Gender questions: The repositioning of the male-female stereotypes within patriarchy – the 'strong' women and 'weak' men in Dattani.
- The 'gendered self' in Dattani's work: giving a voice to the female within the male, or the male within the female selves.

- The common spaces between the woman and the gay, through a shared sense of patriarchal oppression and the discrepancies in the plays.

- Making space/giving voice to the unseen/unheard within the public arena of the stage in Dattani's plays.

- Dattani the self-conscious artist: the consideration of the mechanism of his craft within the body of his plays.

- The audience: the nature of the milieu that such a genre addresses, considered in its various categories – urban/middle class/upper middle class/literate/ English-speaking.

- Limitations of the genre because of its limited audiences in India: concentrated mostly in the five metropolitan cities of India.

- Audiences abroad: different perspectives, altered problems of performance.

- Dattani's shift into the genre of film: the difference of the two 'languages', the problems of adaptation, and the problematics of an altered audience perspective.

APPENDIX

Works of Dattani

Dattani in Theatre

Plays	Details of First Performance
Where There's a Will	First performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23 September 1988, as part of the Deccan Herald Festival.
Dance Like a Man	First performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 22 September 1989, directed by Dattani, as part of the Deccan Herald Festival.
Tara	First performed as *Twinkle Tara* by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23 October 1990.
Bravely Fought the Queen	First performed at the Sophia Bhava Hall, Mumbai on 2 August 1991, directed by Dattani.
Final Solutions	First performed by Dattani and Preetam Koilpillai and group at the Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore on 10 July 1993.
Night Queen	First produced in 1996.
Do the Needful	First broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 14 August 1997, directed by Sally Avens.
On a Muggy Night in Mumbai	First performed by Lillette Dubey and her group at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai on 23 November 1998.
Seven Steps Around the Fire	First broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio on 9 January 1999, directed by Jeremy Mortimer. First performed on stage by MTC Production and The Madras Players on 6 August 1999 at the Museum Theatre, Chennai.
The Swami and Winston	First broadcast by BBC Radio, 2000.
Tale of the Mother Feeding Her Child	First broadcast by BBC Radio 3 and 4, 2000.

Thirty days in September	Commissioned by RAHI and premiered at Mumbai in 2001.
Clearing the Rubble	First performed in 2004. The play was broadcast on BBC World Service in 2001.
Two Solos and Dear Diary	Performed at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav in January 2005.

Dattani the Actor

1985 *Surya Shikar, Five Finger Exercise.*

1986 *Inherit The Wind, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, The Witness*

1987 *A Macbeth, Hippolytus, Relatively Speaking*

1988 *Star Spangled Girl, Self Portrait, Where There's a Will*

1989 *Dance Like a Man, Doongaji House*

1990 *Professor Vasan (TV Serial), Doongaji House, Torch Song Trilogy*

1991 *Broadway Bound, Fate of a Cockroach*

1992 *Our Town*

1994 *Where There's a Will*

1995 *The Tempest, A Perfect Ganesh* (for ART Portland, Oregon)

2001 *Henry IV*

Dattani the Director

1986 *God!*

1987 *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds*

1988 *In Camera, Where There's a Will*

1989 *Dance Like a Man*

1990 *Tara, Torch Song Trilogy*

1991 *Fate of a Cockroach, Bravely Fought the Queen*

1992 *Final Solutions*

1996 *Bravely Fought the Queen* (Co directed with Michael Walling, London)

1997 *Tara for Scene Stealers*, New Delhi

1998 *Bravely Fought the Queen* (for TAG New Delhi)

Dattani in Cinema

Screenplays

1992 *Chalo Memsahib* (co-wrote for Shunyata Films, directed by Ayesha Sayani)

1994 *Hum, Tum aur Woh* (for Tutu Films, directed by Pankaj Parasher)

1996 Untitled script for Govind Nihalani.

1998 *Ek Chingari Ki Khoj Mein* (for Madhyam, directed by K. P. Sasi)

1999 *Ek Alag Mausam* (for Actionaid India, directed by K. P. Sasi)

2001 *Spice Boy*

2002 *Mango Soufflé* (also directed by Dattani, adapted from the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai.*)

2004 *Dance Like a Man* (directed by Pamela Rooks)

2004 *Morning Raga* (also directed by Dattani)

Dattani the Dancer

1984-87 Western ballet training under Molly Andre at Alliance Francaise de Bangalore.

1986-90 Bharatanatyam training under Chandrabhaga Devi and Krishna Rao, Bangalore.

1989 Ranga Pravesh (Dance debut solo) at Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore. Subsequently has performed in temples, festivals and informal spaces.

Dattani the Teacher

Workshops Conducted

1993 Screenplay writing at Xavier Institute of Communications, Bombay.

1993 Dramatic structure and playwriting at Media Centre, Bangalore. Actors' Workshop at Media Centre, Bangalore.

1996 Yoga for the Performer and Indian Cinema at Portland State University, USA.

1996 Workshops for playwrights and actors conducted in all the major cities of India.

2000 Dramatic structure, weekend class at Haystack, Canon Beach, Oregon, USA.

Dattani in Theatre Groups and Institutions

1987 Artistic Director, Founder of Playpen performing arts group, Bangalore.

1994 Senior Associate, National Institute for Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

1998 Founder of Mahesh's Studio, a centre for the performing arts, Bangalore.

1999 Senior Trustee, Swabhava, a charitable trust, Bangalore.

2000 Trustee, VOICES, a development organization supported by Ford Foundation.

Scholarships

1992 USIS visitorship to the United States of America to study American theatre and culture.

British Council grant in aid to visit United Kingdom and meet theatre professionals.

1996 British Council grant in aid to visit United Kingdom.

1997 Charles Wallace Scholarship to visit University of Kent as writer-in-residence.

Awards

1997 Sahitya Kala Parishad Award for best production, *Dance Like A Man.*

1998 Sahitya Akademi Award for book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays.*

2000 Sahitya Kala Parishad Award for best production, *Tara.*

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