
UNIT 2 A PREVIEW OF DATTANI'S DRAMATIC WORLD

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Plays
- 2.3 Themes
- 2.4 Techniques and language
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to engage with other plays by Dattani to mark the contours of his dramatic world – to establish his major concerns as a writer and the techniques he uses as a dramatist. We'll also look at his use of the English language.

2.1 INTRODUCTION



Mahesh Dattani is a Bangalore based playwright and director. There are two published texts of Dattani's plays – one a collection of plays and the other your prescribed text. We shall talk about *Tara* in detail later, so we shall concentrate on other plays by Dattani now. *Final Solutions and Other Plays* contains four plays – *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Final Solutions*. Recently his plays have been collected in a single volume called *Collected Plays* published by Penguin. This includes his radio plays which were not published earlier. I suggest that you read these plays even before you read *Tara*. These plays showcase Dattani's concerns as a writer and dramatist. In other words, they

demonstrate his continuing thematic concerns as well as his exploration of, and experimentation with, stagecraft.

2.2 THE PLAYS

Even a cursory reading would have created an impression on you of a vigorous mind enquiring about contemporary urban concerns in a language not too different from what we hear or speak. What do you think are his characteristic concerns? If you have already read his plays, take a few minutes and write down your answer in point form:

Whether you've read the plays and answered the above question or not, let us go on to discuss the plays (albeit briefly) to see what themes reveal themselves to us.

Where There's a Will has as its protagonist a rich businessman, Hasmukh Mehta, who dies in the first scene itself and then stays on the stage as a ghost! He ruled his household when alive, and has attempted to do so after his death. This he does through his will, which installs his former mistress in the household. The play explores the lives and motivations of his son, his daughter in law, his wife, and his mistress who have to collectively exorcise his ghost. Mehta, it transpires has been sick of his son's namby pamby ways. His daughter in law is interested only in the money and may have hastened his end by substituting vitamin tablets for his blood pressure pills. The son, Ajit, resents him while Hasmukh Mehta's wife is under her sister's thumb and gives him no satisfaction. It takes the entry of his mistress into his family for Hasmukh's ghost to be laid to rest. Hasmukh is finally dismissed as no more than his father's creation, a projection of an image, a prisoner to somebody else's needs rather than an individual of his own making.

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani examines the life of a couple, both of whom are Bharatanatyam dancers. Jairaj had gone against his father's wishes in order to learn dancing and dedicate his life to it. Amritlal, the father, thinks dancing a feminine occupation and manages to buy off Jairaj's wife, Ratna, to thwart Jairaj's dancing career and sets the couple off on a life of petty manipulation – the lot in any case of all artistes in this age of bureaucratic patronage. Jairaj is forced to live with a sense of mediocrity as well as his wife's treachery. Both Ratna and Jairaj have to live with the knowledge of their sacrifices and sins having led to nothing more than a sense of frustration. They have even lost their son in their pursuit of fame. But their ambition lives on in their daughter, Lata, who has fallen in love with a sweet wallah, Viswas. Will she have the career they didn't or will she have the successful family life that they never had. Or can she manage both? We don't know because the play ends with the birth of Lata's daughter.

Bravely Fought the Queen (the reference to the famous poem on the Rani Of Jhansi should be obvious to all educated Indians who've done some Hindi in school) shows us the boredom of suburbia, the emptiness of lives caught up in the swirl of capitalism (the Trivedi brothers run an advertisement agency). Each of the characters has to face up to this emptiness, to his/her needs. But the women have a special fight on their hands, a fight for agency, a fight to structure their own lives. And bravely they fight – but should they fight like the men or create a different space, adopt a different strategy? The story revolves mainly around the Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Nitin, and their wives, Dolly and Alka, who are sisters. Lalitha and Sridhar are the outsiders who get caught up in the action of the Trivedi family. There is Baa, the mother of the Trivedi brothers, and a few other characters, both imaginary and real. Of the real characters, two do not ever come on stage. They are Daksha, daughter of

Jiten and Dolly, and Praful, the brother of Dolly and Alka. The undercurrents of 'normal' family life are revealed to us; we see the results of the examples parents can set and the turf battles that they fight. It turns out that the father was a violent man and the first son, Jiten, turns out to be like him. Even Praful is shown to have been violent with Alka when admonishing her for mixing with boys. Nitin is ultimately revealed to be a homosexual who has been duped into marrying Alka (and she him) by his partner, Praful. Where will it all end?

Dattani's *Final Solutions* takes on a larger theme of Hindu-Muslim hostility. Dattani resists easy schematisation in this dramatisation. There are no good Hindus or bad Hindus, no good Muslims or bad Muslims. What we have are people caught in the trap of conditioning and past experiences. Again the situation is worked out through a family and the way in which the past controls its present. In the Gandhi household which consist of Ramnik, his wife Aruna, their daughter, Smita, and Ramnik's mother Hardika, two intruders enter. They are Muslim youth seeking refuge during a riot. How does the liberal humanist Ramnik deal with the situation, or for that matter the religious-conservative Aruna, or the rabidly anti-Muslim Hardika? It turns out further that Smita knows one of the youth, Babban alias Bobby, fairly well (she may be in love with him but can she face it?) as well as the sister of the other, Javed. Javed is in town as an agent provocateur, and is intensely anti-Hindu. Babban is the seemingly acceptable face of Islam but he is actually ashamed of his religious roots, which is why his preferred nickname is Bobby. As each one of them comes to terms with the present, the past reveals itself including the terrible family guilt that Ramnik carries about, an event which had wrongly soured Hardika against Muslims altogether. His father who had asserted his patriarchal authority over Hardika to stop her from meeting her Muslim friends had actually made use of riots to obtain the shop that had belonged to Hardika's friends. Can such historical situations ever be righted? The play ends with this question.

Can you see any common threads running through these plays? What are they? Write down your thoughts (briefly) here and we shall compare notes later.

I shall not discuss this immediately but go on to tell you in a few lines about Dattani's later plays – plays written after *Tara*. You realise of course that with a living and successful playwright like Dattani you will have to look out for newer plays constantly and learn to read them with the confidence gained from reading his earlier plays here. What may happen also is that the newer plays could make you re-read/re-evaluate the earlier plays.

In *On a Muggy Night in Bombay*, Dattani's latest stage play, one of the characters sings, "When makes a man a man?" Kamlesh is a homosexual who is comfortable with his gayness. But he is in a turmoil because his sister is going to marry his former lover who pretends to be straight (a heterosexual). In Dattani's one-act play, *Night Queen* (published in *The Telegraph Autumn Collection*, 1996), Ash sleeps with Raghu whose sister he plans to marry. In his radio play *Do the Needful* (broadcast on BBC in 1997), Alpesh reveals his homosexuality to Latha, his future wife. She has a married lover herself and agrees to marry Alpesh. They make a marriage of convenience and continue to meet their lovers. In another radio play, *Seven Circles around the Fire* (broadcast on BBC in 1999), Dattani looks at hijras, who are treated as less than human by the majority of society but who nevertheless are used as sex objects.

2.3 THEMES

Homosexuality

It must be clear by now that the major preoccupation of Dattani, the predominant theme in his later plays, is homosexuality. Is this related to some of the themes that you may have noted down? Homosexuality is dealt with in *Bravely Fought the Queen* as well (there too a former homosexual partner marries a sister, but the circumstances are very different). Have you put down patriarchy as one of the recurrent themes? You can see that the autocratic (if not tyrannical) father is present in more than one play of Dattani's. You have Hasmukh Mehta in *Where There's a Will*, Amritlal in *Dance Like a Man*, Jiten's father in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, as well as a host of hurtful husbands. So if family life is oppressive (and did you write family as well as oppression as major themes?), it is mainly due to the operation of patriarchy embodied in the figures of the fathers and other males (remember Praful in *Bravely Fought the Queen*?).

Gender Identity

This leads automatically to another of Dattani's concerns – gender identity. How are men and women constructed in terms of gender? What are the definitions of their roles? How meaningful are these definitions? Hasmukh Mehta does not think his son Ajit manly enough in *Where There's a Will*, and Amritlal does not think dancing is for men in *Dance Like a Man* (and crucially even Ratna thinks her husband Jairaj isn't much of a man). *Bravely Fought the Queen* foregrounds this whole issue with its very title. This seemingly awkward translation of the well-known Hindi poem that supplies the title to this play is rendered by Lalitha:

'We'd heard her praises sung so often
So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi
So bravely fought the manly queen...' (Act 3)

Our attention is immediately focussed in the ensuing dialogue on the supposed manliness of the queen. What this does is to question what we have always lived with, our traditional ways of defining ourselves. Why should the bravery of a queen make her manly? Why should a man who wants to dance Bharatanatyam be effeminate? What is manly and what feminine? Why should it be so? Why can't women go out in the world? Why should men be masterly and women subservient? Why can't men and women be open about their sexuality? Dattani raises these and a host of other questions regarding gender and social stratification and hierarchy and sexuality.

Revelation of Past

Dattani's plays are revelatory in nature. The past rides the shoulder of the present and not only has to be dislodged and laid to rest but has to be faced fully for what it was. There is always some action that has been suppressed, some deeply damaging action that has contributed to the warped growth of characters and the conflicts between them. If in *Where There's a Will* it is the ghost not of Hasmukh Mehta but of his father that has to be recognised, in *Dance Like a Man* it is the collusion between Ratna and Amritlal to thwart Jairaj's ambitions as also Ratna's hand in the death of their son. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* it is a host of issues that have to be revealed and faced – from the homosexuality of certain characters, to the violence of the father, to the hand of Jiten in the maiming of his daughter, Daksha. In *Final Solutions* there are again various revelations, the most important being the heinous behaviour of Ramnik's father and grandfather. But while it may seem that this is almost Ibsenian, this concern with direct but suppressed causality, Dattani is actually more tangential. He is not so much interested in the causality – who can say that these are necessarily the only possible effects – as in the process of revelation. His concern is to show what

lies beneath, what took place before, in peeling the layers and showing us unexpected complexities.

Middle- Class Life

He shows us the hollowness of middle-class lives. His plays explore what lies below the facades characters and families put up to fool the world, reveal the essential loneliness of people. Dattani presents to us the vulnerability of characters, the emotional price they pay in their quest for successful appearances, in their need to belong. His characters are displaced, disenchanting. They are dangerously normal, average, people who are in search of happiness, and fulfilment. They need love and affection; they need to feel sexually fulfilled. If they seem to need the family only as much as one would need a terrible pain somewhere in the body, they need to work out their destinies within the family unit, as it is the basic unit of society. The family in Dattani stands for society at large. Dattani's characters search for security and acceptance, to be true to themselves and yet belong. These are everyday concerns of every person.

Family

Dattani's is not a world of simple dichotomies. There is a great deal of conflict in relationships and no one is willing to be an easy victim. In this world of patriarchy, women emerge as pretty strong characters. The home is a battlefield with uneasy (and perhaps disastrous) alliances being forged by various parties and everyone fights as many of the others as possible for individual turf. In Dattani's world the socialisation process initiated in the family unit has as its aim the stunted growth of a bonsai tree. The family is there to stifle all natural instincts and inclinations, to suppress and oppress, and to curb freedom and growth. All we can produce are ugly dwarves.

2.4 TECHNIQUES AND LANGUAGE

One thing that emerges immediately in Dattani's career is the fact that while he writes about everyday lives, he does not attempt an impossible realism. He in fact revels in the possibilities that the stage (as well as the fictive mode) offers him. A playwright who begins his career with a ghost present almost through the play obviously has no interest in replicating the drawing rooms of the world on the stage. In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani has the ghost addressing the audience directly with the actor playing the ghost picking up a victim in the audience to inform that his/her shoes need polishing (Act II, scene ii). In *Dance Like a Man* there are rapid shifts not only in space and time, even actors change roles instantaneously.

In his note to the play, Dattani gives us this direction:

The play requires four performers, and the parts should be distributed as follows:

THE YOUNG MAN, early twenties, plays Viswas and the younger Jairaj.

THE YOUNG WOMAN, early twenties, plays Lata and the younger Ratna.

THE OLD MAN, early sixties, plays the older Jairaj and his father, Amritlal Parekh.

THE OLD WOMAN, early sixties, plays the older Ratna.

It is important that the above role-switching be adhered to, as it is vital to the structure of the play.

Dattani's caution at the end of the note is important. It would be impossible to create the same impact if the switches in role are not performed the way he wants. In the first flashback in Act One, the actor playing Jairaj wears a shawl to change into his father. Viswas becomes Jairaj, and Lata changes into Ratna. Their ages remain the

same as the previous characters they played. A shawl, lighting, and a lightning change in the setting and we are in the 1940s. At the end of this flashback the younger Ratna exits calling for the younger Jairaj, Amritlal takes off his shawl and becomes the older Jairaj, and the older Ratna enters calling out to him. There are such rapid and effortless shifts in time and space throughout the play.

In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, past and present commingle as does the office and the home in Act II. The level that represents Baa's room in Act I remains in Act II even though the locale has changed to the office of the Trivedi brothers. Even the well stocked bar from the previous act is retained though now as part of the office. In this act you see the interaction between Baa and the women that took place almost off stage in Act I. You hear them through and in between the conversation between the men; and Baa's comments on her sons and her husband are heard as we watch the men in action. Baa's voice from the past intermingles with the present conversation between her sons and frames it in ways otherwise impossible.

In *Final Solutions*, Hardika and Daksha, the old grandmother and her younger self, exist on the same plane. When the play opens the younger (fifteen-year-old) Daksha is reading out what she has just written in her diary, while the sixty-year-old Hardika is seated at the same level. Again, Dattani's stage directions are worth noting:

On another level is a room...This belongs to the young Daksha, who is in fact the grandmother, also sometimes seen as a girl of fifteen. There are several instances when Hardika – the grandmother, and Daksha – the young bride, are on this level at the same time, although they are the same person. Hardika should be positioned and lit in such a way that the entire action of the play is seen through her eyes.

The past and the present both co-exist, and while the past has fashioned the present the present helps the characters to re-read the past. So the play has to be seen through Hardika's eyes; the play should be seen as Hardika's education and tragedy. We are meant to see the social processes of oppression and hatred as they operate on Hardika. Hence even in a play which was meant to be about the construction of communal hatred, a play which was meant to be on a large scale, choric in character, Dattani's stage techniques are aimed at making the audience intimate with the life of a family – its trials and tribulations and debilitating secrets. This is perhaps why John McRae notes in his Introduction to *Final Solutions and Other Plays* that while Alyque Padamsee's production of *Final Solutions* was spectacular and choric, Dattani's (he is a director himself) was small-scale and intimate (p 8).

You must have noticed in the stage directions that we discussed above, as in the directions to other plays, that Dattani likes to divide his stage into different levels. This enables Dattani to mingle the past and the present as well as stretch available space to show different locations at the same time. This may help both – a narratorial linearity as well as simultaneity. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, for instance, in the scene we discussed earlier, the brothers are shown talking to each other in the office, while at the same time their mother is shown in her interaction with the women at home. This simultaneous action in two different locales helps us to evaluate the characters as the action builds up to the moment when the mother and the brothers speak through each other and some of the past is revealed. The influence of their mother's life and views on them and their lives is seen as a continued presence through the device of having her bedroom at a higher level and keeping it visible throughout the play.

As we have seen, Dattani exercises great care in ensuring through his detailed stage directions that readers and potential directors understand all this. This division of the stage allows clearly demarcated space for certain characters, or time periods, as well as for different locales. He specifies the use of lighting for a similar purpose. This allows Dattani to cut from one character to another, one time frame to another, one

locale to another as well as to fuse everything together when he needs to. This helps him to build tension as well as further the action. The stage also becomes emblematic of the layered nature of our lives. In *On a muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani allows for at least three levels, including one called 'shunya' where the true selves of the characters are revealed. C.K. Meena says, in an article on Dattani, "Unmasking the Middle Class: The Drama of Mahesh Dattani" (Indian Review of Books, Vol. 8, No. 6, 1999), that this distribution of "the action among different levels on stage... not only makes his plays visually exciting but makes them move at a snappy pace." What do you think?

Have you also noticed how often Dattani uses an outsider as catalyst to the action? He also experiments with symbolism (for example, the use of bonsai plants in *Bravely Fought the Queen*). He departs from his usual style to include a chorus in *Final Solutions*. And the same actors visibly play different roles in *Dance Like a Man* as we have seen. Dattani isn't averse to experimentation and is an evolving playwright. What we have established is that though Dattani seems to favour the well-made play as a vehicle, he doesn't mind playing around with it, bending and twisting it to his will. The well-made play is tailor made for Dattani because it essentially suits his kind of theatre where the character is foregrounded and key actions are revealed in climaxes. This structure helps him to build tension and to reveal things gradually till the tempo is heightened to the climax.

But at least two other things need to be said about Dattani's craft. Do you know what they are? We haven't mentioned his humour as yet, nor have we talked about his use of language. Dattani is essentially a comic writer. There is a great deal of humour in his plays, from the subtle to the slapstick. Kusum Haider points out in a review essay, "Essentially a Comic Muse" (*The Book Review*, Vol. XXII, No. 3), that the tone of Dattani's "plays is light, there is bright comedy within often sombre bounds." The comedy arises from Dattani's essential subject matter – human behaviour. There is often comedy in the way people talk to each other as well as in the way they present themselves to and perceive each other. But the amusing dialogue does give way to dark truths. I would like to think that Dattani makes you examine the spring-wells of your own sense of humour. Humour and laughter too are ways of dealing with the world and its unpalatable truths.

The most important contribution of Dattani is perhaps his use of language. The note to his very first play, *Where There's a Will*, reads as follows:

Should the play be read in classrooms, I sincerely wish that English language teachers... will not dismiss my syntax as bad English, or worse still as incorrect. While knowledge of the rules of grammar is important, the richness and variety of the spoken word is a study in itself.

The characters, I am sure, would love to speak in Gujarati but have unfortunately been conceived by a mind that thinks in English. This is not an apology, but a definition of reality. In fact, it is this misfortune that puts all such works on edge, creating challenges for both the performer and the serious student...

Dattani defends his use of English as spoken by people in India but also goes on to make another serious statement. He says that his characters "would love to speak in Gujarati" and his challenge as a writer is to convey their Gujaratiness without distortion in English. His *Where There's a Will* is thus a Gujarati play in English set in Bangalore. Dattani's characters speak the kind of English that most middle class Indians do. And they would obviously speak in it in the same situations that we would. The challenge that Dattani faces is not to allow the audience to feel that his use of English limits his range or that of his characters. He has to attempt the same feeling of authenticity, of range and of nuance, as a Gujarati playwright writing about the middle class. Do you think that Dattani manages this or do you think that his

characters end up speaking a homogenised convent English? Does his language remain a perennial limitation? I feel that Dattani manages to meet this challenge successfully. He is getting to be freer in his use of language to the extent of cracking interlingual jokes. As his characters begin to move freely from English to Gujarati and Kannada (do not forget that he is a Bangalore based playwright), much as middle class Gujarati residents of Bangalore, his theatre becomes visibly (audibly?) more representative and accessible and acceptable. Dattani, I think, has over a period of time managed to extend the range of his language and made it more suitable for his theatre.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Mahesh Dattani's plays usually deal with middle-class life in urban India. While the plays are usually based in Bangalore, they are peopled with Gujarati characters. The major issues he deals with are homosexuality, gender identity and construction, the pressure of the past, the hollowness of middle-class life, and the family as a battlefield. He uses all the resources of theatre at his command, from creating different levels on the stage to giving double roles to actors, to effective use of lighting and music. All this allows him to collapse the past and the present as well as geographical locations. He is also able to achieve fluidity of movement, which gives his plays a cinematic quality. He also uses Indian English with great confidence and captures the rhythms of the spoken language.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Name Dattani's published plays.
2. What according to you are the major themes in his plays?
3. Discuss Dattani's treatment of gender in his plays other than *Tara*.
4. Why does Dattani divide the stage into different levels or acting areas?
5. What are the various devices that Dattani uses to show the continuity of the past in the present?
6. What according to Dattani are the challenges that language poses to the Indian English dramatist?

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Bentley, Eric. *The Theory of the Modern Stage: An Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968

Dattani, Mahesh. *Final Solutions and Other Plays*, Madras: Manas (Affiliated East-West Press), 1994 (You will find the introduction quite useful.)