

ETHOS OF MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT:

Dattani wrote his first play in 1986 and has since continued his stellar journey in theatre and films, not just as a playwright, but also as an acclaimed actor, director, and screenplay writer. While his choice of language, his themes, and set-designs set him apart in various ways from other contemporary or older Indian playwrights, what links him to his predecessors is a shared vision of the social responsibility of the artist and a commitment to serious theatre. His plays therefore offer piercing insights into various modes of exploitation and marginalisation, ingrained in different urban spaces, both within and outside the family and operating along both material and discursive axes. It is this consciousness that enables Dattani to explore subalternisation in urban spheres, especially along the lines of gender and sexuality. We may refer here to the character of the seventy-five-year-old former Devadasi, Chenniamma, in *Dance like a Man* (1989), from whom Ratna sought to learn forgotten compositions and arts of 'abhinaya'. However, her father-in-law strenuously objects to such an association, on account of the moral stigma attached to devadasis, and neither permits Ratna to continue her training with her nor allows her to come to the familial home. Victims of earlier patriarchal structures, such as former devadasis, thus act as the silenced 'other' in opposition to which the good middle-class woman must shape her identity. This is not to suggest that Ratna becomes free from patriarchal constraints at the expense of Chenniamma – instead both women continue to struggle against patriarchal impositions, one to retain her individual identity both as a performer and a married woman, and the other to free herself from moral stigma and the attendant material deprivation. The homeless Chenniamma occupies that silence which constitutes the successful middle-class home of Jayaraj and Ratna and thus raises critical questions regarding the moral basis of such homes and by extension such nation-spaces. The nation-space also demands codified performances of masculinity in accordance with conventional gender roles and Jayaraj's choice of dance as a profession not only goes against such orthodox gender roles but also heightens inter-generational conflicts within the family – a recurrent theme in Dattani's oeuvre.

KEYWORDS: THEATRE, INDIAN PLAYWRIGHTS, SUBALTERNISATION, DEVADASIS, MASCULINITY AND GENDER.

INTRODUCTION:

Mahesh Dattani was born on 1958 in Bangalore, Karnataka. He is the first English playwright to be awarded the SahityaAkademi Award (1998). All his plays address social issues, especially the deep-seated prejudices and problems that the society is usually silent on Gender identity, gender discrimination, and communal tensions are major themes Stage space is often divided into different levels Music and dance play a major part in the plays. Winner of the SahityaAkademi award in 1998, Mahesh Dattani is one of the foremost Indian playwrights

writing in English. Born to Gujarati parents in Bengaluru on 7th August 1958, Dattani studied in the local Baldwin Boys' High School, an English medium Christian missionary school where his only brush with theatre came in the form of a typical Christmas pageant in which he performed as an angel without dialogues. He then went on to study at St. Joseph's College in Bengaluru and it was during his college years that he was introduced to Bangalore Little Theatre which significantly contributed to his subsequent immersion in theatre in its varied forms. Ranajit Guha defines subalternity as "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way" (Guha, 'Preface' vii). The plurality of determinants which Guha's definition foregrounds not only transcends mere economism but encapsulates the diverse processes through which subordination is ensured. While the question of class and the consequent problems still remain hauntingly palpable, classes themselves are fissured by conflicting forces of gender, community, and caste and such forces are dexterously used by dominant discourses to perpetuate and consolidate processes of disempowerment that push the subalterns onto the margins. The post-independence nation-space is therefore marked by not only the exploitation of peasants and labourers or the massacre of Dalits, but also the ongoing marginalisation of religious minorities, subjugation of women across various classes, and the victimisation of sexual subalterns. However, Guha does not mention the issue of sexuality and the consequent production of 'sexual subalterns' (Bhaskaran) who are subjected to, on account of the pervasive dominance of the discourse of patriarchal heteronormativity, both social ostracisation and institutional discrimination, which are themselves conditioned by the differences of class, sex, race, nationality, region and such other determinants. What Dattani manages to do is to expand the horizons of postcolonial subalternity itself by drawing our attention to the plural and diverse problems confronting these sexual minorities, along with subalternised women and religious minorities, who are subjected to an emotionally and at times physically traumatic crises of identity. Dattani's plays highlight the fluid and dynamic modes through which heterogeneous individuals are subjected to varied forms of subalternisation which menacingly lurk beneath the veneer of sophisticated urban middle class families to which he himself belongs.

PLAYS BY DATTANI

1. *Where There's a Will (1988)*
2. *Dance Like a Man (1989)*
3. *Tara (1990)*
4. *Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)*
5. *Final Solutions (1993)*
6. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998)*
7. *Seven Circles Round The Fire (Radio play for BBC) (1998)*
8. *30 Days in September (2001)*
9. *Brief Candle (2009)*

Major Themes of the plays of Mahesh Dattani:

Dattani questions mainstream perceptions of gender in many of his plays in relation to the idea of theatre as a powerful tool of social change.

Themes of his Plays:

- Parental authority and patriarchy—Tara, Dance Like a Man, Where There is a Will

- Gender Discrimination—Tara
- Gender role conflict—Dance Like a Man
- Family discord—Dance like a Man, Tara, Where There is a Will, Bravely fought the Queen, Final Solutions.
- Communal conflict—Final Solutions
- Female child sexual abuse—Thirty Days in September and Marginal sexualities—On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful and Seven Steps Around the

Fire

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

One of the four earliest plays of Mahesh Dattani. The play is a drawing room comedy first performed by Play open in Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, with Mahesh Dattani playing Ajit Mehta. A rich businessman Hasmukh Mehta tries to control his family even after his death through his 'will' Hasmukh's mischievous will stipulates that they will not inherit his wealth anytime soon and, worse, his mistress Kiran Jhaveri (being named the executrix of the will for 21 years) must come to stay with them. The ghost of Hasmukh provides the occasion for humour. Like other plays, the play has Gujarati setting

THE PLOT OF THE PLAY

The narrative of the play takes place in the lavish house of Hasmukh Mehta a businessman and staunch patriarch who is now no more. Then dramatist introduces the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta watching over his family and criticising his dimwit and spendthrift son. The stage is divided into three spaces. The fancy dining cum-living room. The bedroom of Hasmukh and Sonal Mehta. The hideously trendy bedroom of their son Ajit and his pregnant wife, Preethi, who followed the steps of his father in his life. As the play opens Ajit is on the phone talking to a friend about his frustration as his father does not give him Rs.5 Lakhs to modernize the factory. Here, we can see the relation between father and son. Hasmukh Mehta's ghost on stage criticises Ajit's irresponsible and crackpot schemes. The women Sonal and Preeti are always busy in the kitchen making dinner. Sonal is victimised and exploited by Hasmukh's patriarchal authority.

Preeti tells Ajit: "He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother." At the end of the play, it is revealed that Preeti had hastened the death of her father-in-law by replacing his tablets, resulting in his heart attack. By trying to establish supreme control over his family through his money and will, Hasmukh is only perpetrating the filthy tradition inherited from his father. Somewhere the hegemony had to stop. Ajit revolts against patriarchy and establishes his final victory.

Kiran character in the play is one strong lady character depicted in the play is Kiran Jhaveri, a New Woman and a very hard-headed marketing executive. Hasmukh Mehta has made her the trustee of the trust named Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust. He has donated all his property including finances, shares etc. to the trust. As per the will, if the family members obey the rules mentioned in the will, they will get a regular allowance from the trust. The trust will be dissolved when Ajit Mehta turns forty five. He had done this to control his family members. As per the will Kiran has to stay with the family members but when they refuse this she tells them, "As the trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust, namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holdings of the trust will be divided

between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder, which will mean that you won't ever get to see even a single rupee earned by your father-in-law. Now will you refuse to let me stay here?". She teaches them every day new lessons at home as well as office. She has got both brain and body like modern woman who can use any of them to satisfy her needs very successfully. Gradually, the family befriends Kiran. She becomes Ajit's mentor, Sonal's friend, and she discovers Preeti's secret involvement in Hasmukh's death using the secret to tame Preeti.

DANCE LIKE A MAN (1989)

Raises several universal questions regarding tradition and stereotyped gender roles in the post-independence society. Jairaj Parekh and his wife Ratna are both Bharatnatyam dancers. The play takes place in the living room of their house. The play oscillates between past and present, presenting Jairaj and Ratna in their sixties as well as in their youth when Jairaj rebels against his father Amritlal Parekh who didn't like his son's career as a dancer. There are four performers, and three of them do double roles: Young Jairaj-Viswas, Young Ratna-Lata, Old Jairaj-Amritlal, Old Ratna

THE PLOT OF THE PLAY

The play opens with Lata, a young dancer, bringing her boyfriend Viswas home to meet her parents. Just when Lata's fiancé is in the process of imitating her grandfather Amritlal's style of wearing the brocade shawl, Lata's parents enter. They do not talk about marriage, instead they talk about Lata's performance at a high profile event in the play a scene of party. Though Jairaj and Ratna were passionately devoted to dance, they didn't become very successful instead they shift their hopes on to their daughter Lata now. Jairaj and Ratna criticize and blame each other revealing their past struggle as dancers. In spite of a seeming harmony, it soon becomes clear that there is little joy and satisfaction in their married life. Jairaj's ambition of a career as a Bharatnatyam dancer was stifled by his ageing father. His father, a freedom fighter, is an eminent figure in the post-Independence society. The son does not appreciate the father's achievements and he ridicules the reforms that freedom fighters fought for. Jairaj wants to create an alternative world that will enable him to practice the one thing that he loves the most—dancing. However, his father altogether stops Jairaj's dancing classes in anger, the son leaves home only to return as he is financially dependent on his father. The father then smoothly talks his daughter-in-law to discourage her husband from his passion and agrees to let her continue her dancing lessons. Being overly ambitious, Ratna will comply with the father-in-law's wish and turn it to her advantage for her career to take off. The father's intention is to pull Jairaj out of his obsession and make him a 'manly' man.

Viswas, whose father is a well-to-do businessman, has no particular interest in art and dance, and wants to leave because of the quarrel between Jairaj and Ratna but Jairaj and Ratna talk to him about the marriage and are happy that Viswas would let Lata pursue her career even after marriage. At the end, Ratna suggests that Jairaj is not man enough to realize his dreams, and is responsible for his self-destruction. Images of a dancing man, dressed in the garbs of a woman, and that of a weak man, are brilliantly juxtaposed. There is a suggestion that there has to be a clear mark between what a man has to do and what a woman is expected to perform. In the end, it is clear that both are able to solve their differences as man and woman, only after their death in heaven; a complete transcendence can be gained only after death. The play is a bitter commentary upon a patriarchal family system. The play also dramatizes the conflict between the aged and the youth

Tara (1990)

The story of conjoined twins Chandan and Tara, often referred to as “freaks”. They were surgically separated for survival in an unequal manner favouring the boy. Their mother Bharati is worried that her daughter Tara may never be accepted by the world being part of conjoined twins. The doctors know that the leg would suit Tara better than Chandan, and so he gets it while sharp and witty Tara (who defeats Chandan in card game), who has high dreams and aspirations, becomes crippled. Science and Nature thus complement each other. Bharati’s father also leaves his property to Chandan. Tara is disadvantaged in every way, and unable to survive, eventually passes away. Chandan is racked with guilt over Tara’s life and early death. He moves from India to England where he attempts to start a new life, repressing memories of his personal history, and assuming a new identity as “Dan”. In Dattani’s play shows the attempts of Indians to develop into a global society, but failing due to cultural inhibitions and stereotypes.

Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)

Three Acts: Women (focus on the women, their conversations, life), Men (the careers of the men, their struggles and frustrations) and Free for All (the hypocrisy in their relationships). The story deals with three couples existing in a hierarchical order, Jiten and Dolly, Nitin and Alka and Shridhar and Lalitha. Jiten and Nitin are the Trivedy brothers who are the respective husbands of two sisters Dolly and Alka. They own an advertising company and are the stereotypical rich businessmen, employers of Sridhar, their accountant and Lalitha’s husband. They deal their life according to the strict dictates of patriarchy. There are other characters too who are closely connected to the main characters and impact significantly the progress of the play for instance Baa, Daksha (daughter of Jiten and Dolly), Praful and auto driver. Praful is the brother of both Dolly and Alka who marries off Alka to his gay partner Nitin to conceal his relationship.

The play establishes the position of women in Indian society as marginalized however the globalization has affected the core of our society. But the play scrutinizes the opportunities that has been introduced in our social set-up due to globalisation as Dolly and Alka have reduced merely as the show-piece in their house without any real assertion of their will. The presence of Dolly and Alka has been taken for granted. Music thumri creates an atmosphere of love and romance which is in direct contrast with the lived realities of the two sisters Dolly and Alka. The play depicts a few hours of an evening in the rich Gujarati Trivedi family. There are total six female characters in the play, out of which four are physically present (Dolly, Alka, Lalitha and Baa), while the two do not physically appear on the stage (Daksha and a prostitute whom Sridhar uses against Jiten). But the agonies and the torments of all the six female characters are not altogether different. However, they have the same story of oppression of their own.

The play starts in *medias res*, meaning in the middle of an action, the consequences felt and realized, the cause of which has to be traced back in the past or rather in past wrongdoings. Lalitha is coming to meet Dolly because Jiten asked her to meet Dolly to discuss the “masked ball” which they are organising to launch a new product ReVaTee. Lalitha is a freelance writer of a magazine, a bonsai expert and an equal partner in her husband’s professional affairs affirms her space in male dominated society. Dattani, from the very beginning, has hinted at the pretensions and hypocrisies in the lives of the characters through various symbols. The appearance Dolly makes in the beginning putting a ‘mud mask on’ while she welcomes Lalitha is indicative of a life which hides truths to make it more palatable and comfortable, if not to the individual concerned then at least to the guest present.

The tone of dialogue between these two ladies projects a difference of social class and status. Dolly expects Lalitha to go home, but Lalitha cannot risk the journey by an auto to her home at the outskirts of the city as there is a fear of crime against women, especially, rape. The Bored Suffering Wives,

drinking alcohol as a fashion and consumerist culture became a habit for Alka. She lost control once in a dinner, abused her mother in law in front of her husband and she was thrown out of the home for two months. Her brother Praful came twice begging and pleading with Nitin to take her back. Alka is among those few women who could speak and fight back bravely which draws the name of the drama itself following the English rendering of the Hindi poem, Jhansi Ki Rani and Alka proved the spirit of the historic Rani in her brave fight against the tyrannical husband and mother in law.

Alka plans to appear as Jhansi Ki Rani in the mask ball while Dolly prefers to play the role of tawaifs. Alka's dance in the rain is her liberation from the shackles of loveless marriage. Rain also symbolizes her tears that she has shed all through her life as a woman and now she has got the strength to fight back like the brave queen. Bored as a rich man's wife, Dolly allows Kanhaiya, a 19 year old servant to ravish her beauty; she enjoyed the young touch, tight arms around her and the warmth of the body as well as the soul amid the slow music of Thumri. However it is not clear whether Kanhaiya is a real man or a fantasy of Dolly. Both the sisters bear the brunt of Baa mainly because of their mother's second marriage with an already married man. Meanwhile, Trivedi brothers are ready to exploit their own brother in law for investing in their advertising company. The current advertisement for a brand of women's under-garments is designed as Re Va Tee in which women are shown as sex objects.

Baa

Dolly and Alka might be superior to Lalitha in terms of class, but their condition is equally marginalized. Baa, their tyrannical mother in law is also disadvantaged being a woman. In her decrepit old age also she cannot forget the trauma of being treated cruelly by her husband. She was dominated in her youth violently as her husband beat her regularly, and stopped her pursuing her passion for singing. Ill-treated, Baa has a paralytic attack and becomes incapacitated. Even in this condition her past memories haunt her but she is unable to break away from the past. The sons were also not spared from ill treatment. The process of socialization made Jiten a monster, and Nitin was a gay by his very basic nature, grappling with his need for relationships with men. Baa could see the image of her tyrannical husband in Jiten. He is very violent with his wife Dolly as his father was with his wife, Baa. He hit Dolly badly even when she was pregnant, and their daughter Daksha was born invalid due to that.

Baa's possessive nature prevents Nitin from developing any kind of emotional attachment with Alka. As a woman she is a catalyst of male dominance of her husband reacting with both of her sons and then hastening the process of a complete breakdown of the family with Dolly deciding to walk out and the tragic death of Alka.

Lalitha

Lalitha cannot engage in social parties and drinking like Dolly and Alka, and spends her time writing columns on women or nurturing bonsai plants, symbolic representation of how the natural growth of the women in our society has been stunted under the pressure of patriarchal code. Lalitha shirks away from cosmetics, big talks, big show or bragging; rather she prefers to keep her desires pruned off like bonsai. Dolly and Alka, Daksha, even Baa at one point in her life, are shrunk bonsais, whose lives have been confined within a narrow trough, whose vital decisions like marriage have been taken by men. Naina Devi's thumri is heard throughout the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

This significance is multi-layered. Thumri celebrates the eternal love between Radha and Krishna, the iconic lovers in Indian mythology.

FINAL SOLUTIONS (1993)

The play addresses the issue of communalism, focusing on the Hindu-Muslim enmity. It exposes the stereotypes and clichés and the collective sensibility of one community against another. The approach is not sentimental or simplified or moralistic. At the end comes the realization that the demons of communal hatred are located deep within us.

THE PLOT OF THE PLAY

The play spans the period from the Partition (1947) to the end of the 20th century and examines the attitudes of three generations of a middle-class Gujarati business family. Hardika represents the first generation. Her son is Ramnik and daughter-in-law Aruna, the granddaughter Smita is not allowed to have a relationship with a Muslim boy. The play shows how people transfer their own perceptions, impressions and viewpoints to the younger generation

When the communal riot occurs, Hardika, the grandmother, remembers her past (at which time she was called Daksha) when another riot had taken place before 40 years. She reads the entry made in her diary nearly four decades ago and comments, "Yes, things have not changed that much". Ramnik Gandhi is the only sensible person in the family. He is not a hardened communalist like his mother and wife Aruna. Hardika's daughter-in-law Aruna strictly and fanatically follows the Hindu traditions and customs but hides her communalistic zeal, the drama begins when two Muslim boys, Babban and Javed, seek shelter in their house while fleeing from a Hindu mob. The Hindu family is sharply divided over giving shelter to the unknown Muslim youths in the midst of communal frenzy and violence. After a nightlong exchange of arguments and retorts, they come to the conclusion that tolerance is the only possible solution of the crisis.

SYMBOLS AND STAGING

The play becomes a timely reminder of the conflicts raging not only in India but in other parts of the world. The stage is dominated by a crescent-shaped ramp, with the ends sloping to stage level on which the action of the Mob/Chorus takes place. The mob in the play is a symbol of our own hatred and paranoia.

Seven Circles Round the Fire (1998)

The central character of the play, Uma Rao (who teaches sociology at Bangalore University and is the daughter of the Vice Chancellor) is the wife of Suresh Rao, a superintendent of police. She is working on her thesis Class- and Gender-Related Violence for which she takes up Kamala's case as a study for research. She faces numerous problems while doing so as Kamla is a transgender who gets killed in mysterious circumstances. The police are pressurised to solve the murder mystery of Kamala, and they take another Hijra Anarkali into custody and close the file. She is put along with the male prisoners who treat her brutally. When Uma raises her voice against this, her husband asks her to stay away from legal matters. Uma investigates from Anarkali and Champa, the "mother" Hijra, about the background of Kamala, and the incidents responsible for her murder. But Uma feels that reality is being hidden. She does not lose hope and tries to get to the main culprit.

Munnaswamy, a constable helps Uma in her efforts to bring out the truth of Kamala's murder but he also asks her to stay away from transgender people. Uma's husband Suresh does not like her to be involved in Kamala's case. He asks her to take some other topic for her research but she disagrees.

Uma is also in a marginalized position. Her condition is no better than Kamala's. Kamala had loved Subbu and secretly married him, and was killed soon after her marriage by the goons of Mr Sharma, an influential politician and Subbu's father. All the characters of the play are assembled at the house

of Mr. Sharma on the day of his son, Subbu's wedding where the truth of Kamala's murder is revealed. Uma arrives at Mr. Sharma's place to investigate when Subbu is going to be married. Mr. Sharma, the minister anticipates some crisis and tries his best to prevent Subbu from being involved in the case. In the latter part of the play events like the sudden release of Anarkali, the marriage of Subbu, the appearance of Champa (the leader of the Hijras) on the occasion of the marriage of Subbu and the nervousness of Suresh accelerate the play to a dramatic end. Subbu commits suicide. There is a photograph of Kamala and Subbu with marriage garlands. To get this photograph, Mr. Sharma sends Salim, his servant to Champa to threaten them. But he is able to get that photograph only after the death of Subbu on his wedding day. The play begins in a dramatic way, and confuses the audience. The marriage mantras and terrible cries of Kamala burning altogether create a tense environment. The ending comes as a surprise.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998)

Kamlesh is a well-to-do fashion designer living in Mumbai where he is entertaining a few guests. He confesses that he is still in love with Prakash, a man who, on the other hand, has apparently moved on and 'gone straight.' Thus, he has called upon his 'gay' friends to help him in his crisis. The characters in Kamlesh's party represent the varied faces of the LGBTQ+ community: Sharad, who is also Kamlesh's former paramour, is the flamboyant gay man who doesn't care about how the world views him. Bunny, his antithesis, is the clandestine homosexual man who plays a happily married father on a television sitcom as well as in real life. Ranjit, the diasporic gay man who is happy to be abroad rather than being in India. Dipali, the lesbian, who is the sensible woman. Later in the play, Kamlesh's sister Kiran comes to visit, and there is a revelation – she is set to marry Prakash, Kamlesh's former lover. Kamlesh is unable to reveal the truth about himself and Prakash to Kiran and end her happiness. The play's ending hinges on a chance happening – the sexually unambiguous photo of Ed (Prakash) and Kamlesh is discovered. This play was adapted to the movie *Mango Soufflé*.

Stage Settings

The stage setting divides the stage into three acting areas to depict in the multi-layered landscape in the urban setting. "The first is a small flat, beautifully done up in 'ethnic chic' fashion," which belongs to Kamlesh and represents the private open world. The second area is "a completely non-realistic set comprising three levels [and] is black and expansive" and where "characters are immediately suspended in a 'shoonya' [void] where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts". The third is Kamlesh's bedroom which represents the private secret world. Furthermore, the private space of the bedroom that serves a key role in the play "is hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy". The window in Kamlesh's room is used, in a symbolic manner, as a portal through which the gay characters in the room view or gaze unto the outside world – of the heteronormative. They are often seen to be disgusted and concerned with the problems of their neighbour, the diamond merchant, when they see the wife indulge in extra-marital sexual acts with the milkman.

Thirty Days in September (2001)

The play centres on a mother (Shanta) and her daughter (Mala) who was sexually molested by her uncle Vinay when she was young. The story is about the daughter's recovery and survival and the keen sense of betrayal she feels towards her mother. Deepak, Mala's boyfriend, becomes the agent of change here. He dares to unmask the evil, even at the cost of his love. But when the mother discovers the truth about her daughter, which sets them both on a journey of self-discovery about their lives and their inextricably linked past.

THE PLOT OF THE PLAY

The play *Thirty Days in September*, describes the traumatised childhood of a girl, Mala, the protagonist of the play, who is sexually abused by her own maternal uncle, Vinay. Mala was first abused when she was a small girl of six. Vinay starts raping her in her childhood and continues doing so until she is in her adolescence. Vinay not only plays with her body but also plays with her motions, feelings and her mind. Mala trusts him, but he deceives her and breaks her trust and belief. Mala gets raped by her uncle continuously for years and she becomes obsessed with sex when she attains her adulthood.

Mala tries to express her agony to her mother Shanta, but her mother Shanta doesn't pay any attention to her daughter. Shanta was also a victim of child sexual abuse and she was also raped by her own brother Vinay and she was aware of the fact that he is the rapist of her daughter as well. But despite knowing the truth, she doesn't deprive her brother of repeating the same crime and she also doesn't take any initiative to protect her daughter from him. Mala feels that her mother is responsible for the pain from which she suffers and to a good extent it is true. Shanta's husband left her because he felt that his wife is a frozen woman. Though her husband left her, he used to give money to his wife and daughter and the money was handed over by Vinay to Shanta. Despite Vinay's torture, Mala's mother remains silent because she feels that Vinay is the only one who helps them if any help is needed. Mala feels bad and gets upset when she gets to know that her mother doesn't believe her. At first the women are unable to deal with their trauma. But towards the end of the play, with the help of Deepak, Mala's friend, who later becomes her husband, both the women open their mouths against the injustice done to them.

Brief Candle (2009)

Subtitled *A Dance between Love and Death* alludes to Macbeth's famous soliloquy beginning with: "Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow"

Out, out, brief candle!

Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player That
struts and frets his hour upon the stage And
then is heard no more.

It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing

The play deals with the life of cancer patients. It is set in a hospital where cancer patients are about to stage a comic, play to raise funds for their hospice. The patients like Shanti, Amarinder, the doctor Deepthi, etc are enacting the play-within-the-play written by another patient Vikas. The play-within-the-play is a farce containing explicit sexual overtones, jokes and funny dialogues. This farcical play-within-the-play heightens the tragedy as the audience knows that the actors enacting the play are cancer patients. Very soon their 'candle' of life will be extinguished. In using the play-within-the-play technique, Mahesh Dattani is also following a Shakespearean tradition. Mahesh Dattani uses cancer both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Cancer not only refers to the deadly disease that mutilates the human body and often leads to slow, agonising death but is also used as a metaphor for ugliness, abnormality and perversion of thought. The mask called 'Face of Cancer' is present on stage since the beginning of the play to make the audience aware of this truth of life. The 'Face of Cancer' is an "androgynous face that is melting. A face that is ravaged by the effects of chemotherapy and is now ready to give up the struggle". In the play, both men and women admitted to the hospital are patients of cancer. The use of androgynous face is further symbolic as Shanti and Amarinder suffer from breast cancer and prostate cancer respectively.

Amarinder

Amarinder recounts his story. It was during his first stay in the hospital that he discovered that he is suffering from prostate cancer. The disease had attacked his manhood. His sexuality was under threat and it made him feel afraid. The fear of losing his manhood is no less disturbing, psychologically shattering than the fear of approaching death. Faced with this threat to his manhood, he refused to perform the surgery choosing to eventually die because of the deadly disease. He preferred death over loss of masculinity.

Shanti

Shanti, on the other hand, performed the breast removal surgery and is living with the trauma of losing her left breast, a symbol of her beauty and feminine sexuality. She may come across as more

Courageous when compared to Amarinder but she has her own mental demons that she must fight every single day in order to survive with her ugly, deformed body. Shanti too reveals that she was too ashamed to look at her own breasts in the mirror. "I hadn't seen my own breast in the mirror. In the bathroom, I always took off my blouse when I was away from the mirror. As a young bride, she was quite uncomfortable with the intimate caresses of her husband. Shame, discomfort made her move away from his embrace. Then suddenly she was confronted with blood stains on her undergarment.

SHANTI. I lay exposed to the technicians, my breast pushed against the X-ray plate. One of them marked my lumps, treating my breast as if it were already a piece of dead flesh... Their job was to invade my body and take out tumours, and they did. But they grew and came back till they took it all out. Apart of me that I had barely felt. That I had never seen fully myself. Gone. Shanti never loved her own body. And now when she wants to embrace her sexuality, love the curves of her body she has to accept the reality of living with ugliness and deformity.

Vikas

Vikas, an AIDS patient who dies of cancer during the course of the play pin points the horror of living with one's sexuality under threat. It is a fear that is shattering, traumatising both for men and women. And living in constant fear of losing one's sexuality is no less damaging to the body, mind and soul than encountering the fear of death.

VIKAS. It is the fear of losing something that you have and did not even think of the possibility of not having. But now when there is a real danger of losing it, you begin to understand its true worth. And then you are afraid you will have to live without it for the rest of your living moments. Vikas wants to spread the message of love, fulfilment, vitality and laughter. He is the ex-lover of Deepika, the doctor of the hospice and had spent his last days in the hospice. He is also the playwright who pens the play-within-the-play titled "Hotel Staylonger". As a playwright, Vikas makes wonderful casting choices. In reality, Deepika is the doctor in charge of the hospital and Vikas, in his play-within-the-play, makes her the hotel manager who flirts with Mr Kulkarni played by the ward boy Mahesh. Mahesh was secretly in love with Deepika but could never express his feelings for her as his social status as the ward boy always came as barrier before his emotions. Vikas allows Mahesh to live his dreams although in few fleeting moments of performance. Casting Shanti as Miss Unnikrishnan, a symbol of beauty and object of desire for Mr Malhotra, played by Amarinder, suits both of them as in reality they are pained by their loss of sexuality. Thus, unlike the real world where death is a constant presence Vikas weaves a world full of laughter, love and sensuality. But, there are fissures in the script through which reality seeps in. Amol's credit card limit is about to end in the play. In reality, he has no money to fund his treatment and Shanti's pleasure trip to her world of fantasy and desire abruptly comes to an end during

one of the rehearsals as her towel unintentionally slips exposing her hollowessand bodily deformity. Amarinder recoils in horror and Shanti is left in tears of shame, loss and disappointment.

Life has failed to keep its promise and hope has turned into a “foul, deceitful thing” (phrase taken from speech of the Second Chorus in Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*). Repeated references to arrival and departure also remind the audience of man’s journey from dust to dust.

CONCLUSION:

This distinctiveness is also evident from the multi-level sets that Dattani often uses in his plays through which we are introduced not only to the hierarchized spaces within bourgeois homes and the subalterns located therein, but also to those peripheral spaces that lie beyond the purview of bourgeois homes, as something of a mote in the eye – a presence you seek to erase but are unable to overlook because of the discomfort it creates. Again and again, such spaces and the voices associated with them intrude into ordinary homes and upset the comforting delusions of peace and harmony we try to cling on to. One may refer here again to the beggar woman, wrapped in tarpaulin, outside the home of the Trivedis in *Bravely Fought the Queen* or the caretaker or the gardener who fleetingly enter the space of the bourgeois homes before retreating beyond the space of representation. In *Final Solutions*, Dattani also uses the space of the stage to switch between time periods and thereby implicate the traumatic past into the troubled present, as well as suggest the continuity and accretion of violence within the structures of family, home, and the nation. While Dattani remains aware of the forces of subalternisation that exist within bourgeois homes in terms of gender or sexuality or religion, he is also aware of those that lie beyond the pale of bourgeois homes or those whose voices remain outside the idiom of that discursive matrix within which he himself is located as an author. Therefore, he repeatedly reminds us of the silences and occlusions that are built into his own plays, despite their forays into hitherto uncharted territories. This self-conscious appraisal of his own limitations enables him to implant those precise elements which the careful reader or mindful spectator may use to raise other questions that may force us to re-orient our perceptions or re-configure our spaces. As Dattani states, “It’s only when you are left hanging in the 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). Recalling the earlier reference to the ‘unhomely’, it might be argued that the task of interrogating personalities and perceptions also entails an encounter with the ‘other’, the ‘double’, and considering the focus on bourgeois homes, this ‘other’ is precisely the ‘subaltern’, inside and outside the home, whom Dattani repeatedly foregrounds, either through direct portrayal or through a strategy of presence-in-absence that proves to be all the more disconcerting. Foregrounding the cacophonous silences generated by orthodox discourses of class, creed or gender, Dattani allegorises the different ways in which the secular nationhood of India is threatened by the dominant discourses and the attendant parochialism. The death of Ratna and Jayaraj’s firstborn thus becomes a telling commentary on the systematic erosion of the idealised hopes and expectations of a postcolonial nation-state.

In this context, it is also worth analysing Dattani’s choice of English as the language of dramatic communication and the politics in which such a choice is invariably implicated. Dattani’s English plays do not suffer from those stifling artificialities that choked the early efforts of some of his predecessors such as Asif Currimbhoy or Nissim Ezekiel. Instead, he writes with a confidence and fluidity that confirms the position of English as another Indian language that is part of our lived experience in all its bristling multiplicity and unabashedly defends his right to perform Indian theatre in English in such ways that they may truly become, in his own words

“metaphors for life” (Multani). A brief example from *Tara* may serve to illumine the nature and extent of this confident artistry

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