

The Art of Characterization in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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Mahesh Dattani has a strong 'passion' for drama and theatrical art. He has penned several full-length plays and what renders the most charismatic quality to his plays is the method he has adopted to make his plays stage-worthy. To make his plays artistically meaningful and simultaneously entertaining to an audience that is accustomed to realistic effects of the cinema and modern theatre, Dattani, as a free-thinker, incorporates various modern styles and techniques of production that suit his dramatic requirements. The present paper examines how Dattani portrays an array of characters in some of his plays that present the modern day multi-layered Indian life as well as sensibility.

A plot grows out of characters. Since drama presents us directly with scenes, which are based on people's interactions, characters play a pivotal role in the genre and thereby need a close scrutiny. The characters in the plays can generally be divided into major characters and minor characters depending on how important they are for the development of plot. Nevertheless, both in their own way, and with their characteristic traits, create an indelible impression on the mind-sets of the audience apart from contributing immensely to the development of the plot.

As Mahesh Dattani writes of the contemporary scene, the characters contain the modern sensibility. His characters are rooted in the urban cosmopolitan setting of modern middle class in India. Pranav Joshipura writes, "Modern drama has no heroes. It has no exceptional human beings. It is peopled with average men and women with their ordinary peculiarities" (8). In Dattani's plays too, there are no male heroes or female heroines. But, there are central characters in his plays that are under the microscopic lens of the dramatist. In this sense they may be called protagonists. They are ordinary human beings who exhibit the crisis, meaninglessness, confusion, frustration, disintegration, bickering relationship and disillusionment of the twenty-first century. The characters display the hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the harsh reality of what he achieves what he professes and what he practices, what he really is and what he really would like to be taken for.

The playwright has to deal with the minute details in delineating characters, as it can enhance or mar the intensity of the play. Much more important is the revelation of the character through speech and action, through what the character says and what he does or does not do. In view of the limited number of overt actions that can be represented on the stage, characterization by means of speech may be even more important than characterization through action. For, every dramatic feat of a character is driven by a strong motive. For instance, the action of killing may in itself be surprising or shocking, but the significance of the act resides in what the character says about the motives that led him to the deed and about his reaction to it.

"Mahesh Dattani," says Das "believes in the magic of the spoken word. . . ." (125) Dialogues disclose what a character thinks of other characters and how s/he feels towards them; the opinion of others expressed through dialogue throws light on own intelligence, judgment and ethical and cultural demands. And finally, the character's speeches provide insight into his scale of values—selfish or altruistic, idealistic or cynical, moral or immoral, religious or secular—and reveal what values constitute his life-goal, and whether that goal is materialistic or idealistic, self-regarding or self-blaming, superficial or profound. In this way, characters play a dominant role in fulfilling the dramatic purpose. Through the characters the dramatist sets a relationship with the audience and with a powerful characterization he makes the audience get carried away. The audience should feel one with the character, major or minor. If this ideal is achieved, it ultimately leads to the play's triumph and dramatist's satisfaction. In the preface to *Collected Plays (CP)* Dattani gives full credit to his characters and says, "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" (xi).

The variety and range of the characters and the contrast they present add interest and richness to his plays. There are grandfathers, grandsons, fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, uncles, male friends, etc., covering the entire range of relationships. Dattani takes special care in portraying some good male characters in his plays such as Deepak in *Thirty Days in September*, Chandan in *Tara*, Ramnik Gandhi and Bobby in *Final Solutions*, Ajit in *Where There's a Will*, to drive home the point that such people still exist in real-life who with their goodness make this world a better place to live in. With the exception of this minority, all other male characters are shown as insensitive, aggressive and authoritative towards other members in their respective domiciles.

The old father figures such as, Hasmukh in *Where There's a Will*, Amritlal in *Dance Like a Man*, Patel in *Tara*, Chandrakant Patel and Devraj Gowda in *Do the Needful*, are nothing but the replicas of real-life authoritative male-heads who inhabit and control the domestic affairs of countless Indian households. As both husbands and fathers, they act as the custodians of patriarchal values and mercilessly curb the freedom of their wives and children. On the other hand, characters representing the young son such as Ajit in *Where There's a Will*, Jairaj in *Dance Like a Man*, Chandan in *Tara*, Alpesh in *Do the Needful* stand in sharp contrast to their old-fashioned father characters. They are modern and rational in their outlook and represent a new generation built on the foundations of Individualism and modern value systems. There are wicked and cruel male characters too such as Jiten and Niten and Praful in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, MR Sharma in *Seven Steps around the Fire* who with their black deeds make this world a hell for others.

Dattani has created a similar range of female characters in his plays. There are grandmothers, granddaughters, mothers, daughters, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, wives, sisters, aunts, female friends, etc., covering the entire variety of familial relationships and friends. Dattani's female characters are always presented against the backdrop of family. They can be broadly classified on the basis of their age, education, economic status and attitude towards life. They represent the images of women stretching from traditional, silent and submissive women to modern, assertive and bold women, struggling to register their protest against patriarchal authority and social injustice. Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Hardika and Aruna in *Final Solutions*, Shanta in *Thirty Days in September*, Sonal in *Where There's a Will*, are moderately old, economically dependent with little education and are very traditional in their outlook. They are the victims of gender-discrimination and male power.

Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are educated modern women in their mid-thirties. Though economically dependent on their husbands, they are quite resilient and determined to preserve their identity and self-esteem. Uma Rao, in *Seven Steps around the Fire* is an icon of modern independent educated Indian woman of the twentieth century. The streak of independence in her, her compassion for eunuchs and her persistent search for the truth behind Kamala's murder, mark her out as a woman of the twenty-first century. Lata in *Do the Needful* is a fiercely spirited modern girl who thinks that the woman, just like the man, deserves to enjoy sexual freedom to choose her partner. Similarly, Smita, in *Final Solutions*, is modern young girl who possesses a secular consciousness free of the stifling code of religion.

Tara, in spite of being physically handicapped, is also strong enough to overcome the adversities in her life. It is clear from the story that she is a cleverer, more independent, resourceful twin than Chandan her male twin. She is brave enough to go through several prostheses and other operations and still remains cheerful. She is a fighter. But she had to succumb to the manipulations of a patriarchal society that deprive her of her rightful chance to live. But, if she had lived, it is certain that she would have lived life on her own terms. Kiran Jhaveri, Hasmukh Mehta's mistress who manages his business after his passing away is an attractive young woman with a commanding presence. She is an intelligent lady who has the knack to get her things done.

Mala in *Thirty Days in September* puts up a brave front to overcome and survive the trauma of her childhood sexual abuse. In all these characters, Dattani presents the multi-faceted Indian woman. She is resourceful like Uma Rao, she wants to enjoy sexual freedom like Lata, she is broadminded and religiously tolerant like Smita, she is a fighter like Tara, she is shrewd like Kiran, and she can overcome the trauma of sexual abuse like Mala. Thus, the Indian woman can no longer be ignored and relegated to the background. All these women characters represent the twenty-first century modern woman who is characterized by authenticity, candour, assertion, independence and courage. She is not deterred by the discouraging attitude of society. She is not defeated by the internal conflicts within her. Rather, she challenges the oppressive environment suffocating her inside the family and outside as well. Exposure to education, improved self-respect due to employment, and awareness of one's own potential make them reject tradition and customs that stifle them, and emerge out of the cocoon built by a patriarchal society. They evolve different strategies in order to assert their own individuality and act independently with a sense of freedom and conviction.

Plays evolve from characters in action and characters in conflict with one another and an audience instinctively polarizes around a character or a group of characters striving to attain a noble objective. Being completely aware of the audience's pulse, Dattani creates conflicts of various sorts by setting up his "male and female characters against each other" (Das 124). For example, when husband characters and wife characters confront each other in a verbal duel in Dattani's plays, we come to know of their incompatibility. From the confessions they make, we understand that there are many social, cultural, economic, political, religious and personal issues on which they disagree with each other. Similarly, Dattani kindles conflicts between the aged and the young characters of the same sex to present his ideas on individual freedom, intergenerational gap, and tradition versus modernity.

It is through such verbal arguments between the characters that are pitted against each other, that Dattani addresses several familial and social issues confronting the individuals indirectly because he has "a lot of things to say and I am not good at saying them well" (CP xii). As the conflicts unfold, the characters

communicate through dialogues, their attitude towards life, personal ambitions, sacrifices, struggle, compromises, inner psychological conflicts and the way they try to cope with the life thus becoming Dattani's mouthpiece on the stage.

We can see Dattani's characters moving around us as they have a touch of reality and authenticity. They stand out more sharply with their gestures and phrases, leaving lively and living impression. The gossipy girl Roopa who spreads rumours about the Patel family in *Tara*, the highly orthodox and superstitious Aruna who is strongly prejudiced against other religions, the corrupt and criminal-minded politician MR Sharma who plots the murder of the eunuch Kamla in *Seven Steps around the Fire* are very much present in our society.

A distinct feature of Dattani's characterization is the creation of 'other' characters. These characters neither belong to male nor female prototypes but demand a space of their own in terms of sex and gender. They are gays, lesbians, bi-sexuals and eunuchs. They lead a dual life and to understand them thoroughly one has to peep into their psyche. The characters such as Alpesh, Trilok, Mali in *Do the Needful*, Nitin, Praful and Autorickshaw driver in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Kamleh, Ed/Prakash, Ranjit, Bunny, Sharad, and the Guard in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* are homosexuals. Anarkali, Champa, Kamla are eunuch characters in *Seven Steps around the Fire*. It is an undeniable fact that Dattani's plays are a bold commentary on social realism of his times but what is more appreciable is his craft in sculpting such queer characters, making them boldly articulate their sexuality and win sympathy of an audience that is strongly prejudiced against them.

As far as the traditional element is concerned, the characters in Dattani's plays resemble the everyday human characters that we encounter in social plays of Sanskrit theatre such as *prakarana*, *prahasana* and *bhana*. A faint streak of the classical *vidhushaka* character may be noticed in the character of Munswamy who plays the constable's role in *Seven Steps around the Fire*. With his comic gesticulations and witty remarks he provides comic relief to a serious murder-mystery plot. He is seen as accompanying and helping the female protagonist Uma Rao in her efforts to track down the real culprit of the eunuch Kamla's murder. He resembles the classical clown when he cautions Uma Rao about the dangers involved in the chase and expresses his genuine concern for her safety and well-being.

Another traditional element is the presence of a supernatural character on the stage in the form of a ghost in Dattani's comical play, *Where There's a Will*. Appearance of spirits and monsters on the Sanskrit stage and their fierce encounters with the hero during the course of the plot is a typical dramatic constituent intended to create the element of 'wonder'. But, the ghost character in *Where There's a Will* has a technical significance. In the first act (i), as soon as Hasmukh Mehta dies, he turns into a ghost. He is not made visible nor his voice audible to the rest of the characters on stage. In a soliloquy, he directly communicates with the audience like a typical traditional theatre *sutradhara*, to ensure the audience's participation in the play and in establishing actor-audience contact

HASMUKH (*to the audience*). Have you ever hung 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 definitely look peculiar. (*Points at someone.*) Your shoes need polishing. (CP 496)

In this way, Dattani gives a fresh lease of life to the tradition of Indian drama by skillfully portraying male, female and 'other' characters from all walks of life that inhabit the modern Indian milieu.

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