

HUMAN RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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ABSTRACT

Why Dattani has been regarded as a radical, unconventional and contemporary voice in Indian theatre summarise all past research efforts, and because of this, are increasingly being used as a way of addressing the rapid accumulation of information the research has been done so far. Because reviews, rather than primary research, are now being used as the basis for many decisions and research proposals as a rich source, it is important that they are conducted with the same rigour of the primary research. To ensure this rigour, the past two decades have seen a progressive evolution in review methodology, to the point where reviews are now considered research in their own right. Despite this development, the standard of many published reviews remains poor. The paper keen awareness and penetrating insight into the socio-psychological spectrum of human behaviour that affects human relationships at personal and interpersonal levels and adds new dimensions to the area of his theatrical canons. The main area of his focus is, of course, the human relationships. Within the periphery of theatre, Dattani dramatizes human pursuits and desires that determine the dynamics of relationships inside and outside the family. Besides depicting the 'visible' social reality, Dattani's preoccupation with the 'invisible' issues inspires him to provide space to the marginalized sections of society like the gays and the eunuchs., usually either as an academic assignment or part of the research process

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Questions why Dattani has been regarded as a radical, unconventional and contemporary voice in Indian theatre get answered once the reader appreciates the new depths and directions he has given to Indian drama by his thought-provoking treatment of his theatrical art both in terms of form and content. Without adhering to any established dramaturgy, Dattani has created a dramatic tradition of his own by bringing theatre close to real-life experiences. He exhibits a keen awareness and penetrating insight into the socio-psychological spectrum of human behaviour that affects human relationships at personal and interpersonal levels and adds new dimensions to the area of his theatrical canons.

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Dattani's plays reveal the intricate family relationships with authenticity and accuracy. Marital relations, parent-child relations, extra-marital relations, outrageous relations like incest and other various issues shape Dattani's attitude towards family. He is a dramatist who reveals how some family members, motivated by their whims and desire to control, abuse others within the precincts of family.

Patriarchy, for example, has been depicted in his plays as a system of domination and control over the family members to impose the will, needs and desires of the patriarch, i.e. the head of the family. Domination of patriarchal authority is manifested through the fathers in *Dance Like a Man* and *Where There's a Will*. Hasmukh Mehta tries to control the life of his son by dictating him terms and conditions and makes a mockery of his wife's submissiveness. Similarly, Jairaj's passions and his individual identity are of not much significance for his father. The gender-defined roles rooted in Amritlal's psyche add to the conflict in father-son relationship.

In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, through the characters of Jiten, Nitin and Praful, Dattani shows how prejudiced patriarchal figure functions in families. Dattani never appreciates the anarchic behaviour of such people who are hell-bent on causing troubles and are not able to see the dangers that are bestrewed on the road they are embarking upon. He explores the psychological, social and cultural causes of their actions and the effects of these actions that produce corresponding results. Dattani condemns dishonesty and hypocrisy in relationship which may ruin the lives of people around.

He also presents women, placing them in the background of familial relationships. The female images projected by him are neither weak nor nervous. They, no doubt, suffer at the hands of the patriarch in the family, but are aware and confident to retaliate against the wrong-doers. They are sensitive to preserve their self-respect and identities and make protest against the irrational conventions of traditional society. In their quest for self-realization, Ratna in *Dance Like a Man*, Smita in *Final Solutions* and Uma in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* are some of the unconventional women characters who refuse to be dominated by those who try to undermine their spirits. Sonal, Kiran and Preeti in *Where There's a Will* are projected as sufferers of patriarchal dominations, but their behaviour, particularly in the later half of the play, are certainly striking and expose the hollowness of the patriarchal authority. In *Tara*, the eponymous protagonist is not a silent sufferer. Dattani's idea of womanhood is not based on the conventional or traditional archetypal female images. His women characters are essentially humans endowed with basic urges and impulses. If they possess the feminine attributes of love and compassion, they can also fight back to resist the forces that are hazardous to their existence and identity. Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are capable of challenging the oppressive authority of their husbands and ultimately show the gestures of resistance and defiance.

Dattani's plays express the sufferings and woes of people, within or outside families, who fail to adjust or align with the established norms of society and long for liberation. They refuse to accept defeat even if it means violating conventional standards of moral behaviour. Dattani dramatizes the crisis in relationships which the gays, lesbians and the homosexuals and the physically challenged people face in a society that does not permit individuals to go beyond the patterns set by it.

In Dattani's plays, we find that realization of relationships and acceptance of social norms are two distinguished facets of human experiences. The gay community suffers from guilt, self-torture and victimization as it stands marginalized in society. Dattani explores the possibility of relationships in 'grey-areas' in his play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. He admits: "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 gender."¹

His concern for the gays has been a motif in *Do the Needful* where he depicts the futility of marriage based on heterosexual relations. While expressing sympathy for the homosexuals,

Dattani exhibits an exceptional dexterity in unfolding the layers of human consciousness on these hidden issues and seems to be seeking social approval for taboo-relationships.

A close study of Dattani's plays reveals that they are a protest against the imposition of restraint and constraints as well as the forces of social conventions and myths that offer a dehumanizing treatment to others. Dattani is a humanist who articulates the voice of the oppressed against all maladies prevalent in contemporary society. The play, *Dance like a Man*, explores how a convention-bound society fixes gender roles and thus hampers the aspirations of a male dancer. The play dramatizes conflict resulting from the individual interests and social traditions. In *Tara*, the girl-child, Tara, suffers acutely due to the society that gives preference to male-child. The whole Patel family and particularly Chandan undergo mental pain and agony of guilt which can be deemed as a response to the scheme and patterns of society. In this play, through the doctor-patient relationship, Dattani makes people aware of the corruption rampant in medical profession. Many unfortunate practices plaguing the society are exposed and castigated through the negative peer relationship which reflects the prejudiced public attitude towards individuals with disabilities. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani dramatizes the victimization of human beings in the name of culture, customs, community and gender. He shows how established norms of society repress individual urges and passions causing them mental agony. His plays are 'non-conformist' in the sense that they criticize the dominant culture for its hypocritical values.

Dattani presents the ills of society which make human life miserable and generate conflict between individual self and established patterns of society. His characters make perpetual struggle to liberate themselves from the evil grip of contriving and stifling social patterns.

While he brings this phenomenon to the attention of the audience, Dattani himself takes the stance of an observer and he does not pass judgments over these issues. He presents reality as it exists in contemporary society. With his dexterous art and craft, vision and ability, he reconstructs real life experience on the stage. Dattani's plays manifest his dissatisfaction with the prevailing social order. He draws naked truth out of shuttered closets, pulls the hidden issues from under the carpet and has the audacity of calling a spade a spade. His plays address vital aspects of Indian culture and society, highlighting how ruthlessly the established cultural patterns stifle the minorities, and thwart human aspirations.

Dattani, sometimes, shocks the conventional sensibility by revolting against the social and cultural values and by introducing the forbidden and taboo subject matter. However, he always seems to have sound arguments to present the unperceived realities. His plays are rooted in realism that has multifarious shades. His world is peopled with ordinary men and women with their peculiarities. Instead of heroes or villains, he presents human beings with vices and virtues. He seems to think like Chekhov who says: "Life on stage should be as it really is, and the people, too, should be as they are and not on stilts."²

Dattani uses stage not merely to provide entertainment but also to bring about the change in the mindset of the audience. The chief impact of his plays is one of shock, agitation and awakening of the audience's consciousness to the maladies of society. Like Ibsen and Shaw, Dattani withholds easy solutions and facile denouements in his plays. He provokes people in order to sensitize them towards the more serious issues and encourages them to be self-critical and analyze their thoughts, feelings and prejudices in real life and to work out solutions.

Dattani's humanism is based on a concern for positive growth of individual and rejections of determinism. It is a plea to accept diversity and difference. In projecting the revolt of his

protagonists, Dattani displays his love for humanity and his commitment to human values. His depiction of the dehumanizing conditions and suffering of the minorities and ostracized sections of society is his endeavour to speak for their lives which hinge on the stereotypical mindsets of the majority. His characterization of the agony and anguish of men and women in families, in fact, represents their desires and efforts to break free from the repression of patriarchy and social oppression. With his keen and minute observation, Dattani seems to emphasize that one of the main causes of man's insensitivity to others and rigidity of behaviour can be attributed to his tendency to conform to the blatant stereotypes and obtrusive myths that prevail in modern educated society.

Dattani has faith in human spirit that has enormous potential for self-fulfillment and cannot be crushed: "...the theme of the triumph of the human spirit over societal oppression is reflected in his writings."³

Thus, what makes Dattani remarkable is his attempt to focus on the realistic exploration of inner reality of the unexplored dimensions of human psyche and sensitive apprehension of the existentialist vision of anguish. He does not negate the dark aspects of human life and arrives at the light of truth through darkness. He is a maverick dramatist who has amazing insight into human nature and captures the qualities and idiosyncrasies of his characters in an interesting and credible manner. Dattani's dramatic oeuvre has undoubtedly carved him a distinct niche in contemporary dramatic world. K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger comments: "Modern Indian dramatic writing in English is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quality. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English – but seldom for actual stage production."⁵

But with an impressive corpus of performed plays to his credit, it would not be farfetched to say that Dattani has created a dynamic and new theatrical form which is a marked development on the hitherto dormant Indian drama in English.

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