Indian English Drama and Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Indian Drama in English began its run with the start of Indian Writing in English. It is a matter of fact that the number of plays written in English is fewer than that of poetry and novel due to limited audience. The Indian English drama flourished during the pre-independence era. In India drama in English became visible with the establishment of three presidencies by the colonizers in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Indian English drama was begun in Calcutta Presidency of Bengal by a Bengali youth named Krishna Mohan Benerji. But the plays by Aurobindo, Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyay laid the foundation of Indian drama in English. But the Indian English drama gets its independent identity with the plays of Mahesh Dattani.

Key Words: Flourished, Foundation, Presidency, Visible

A piece of quality literature always reflects the true picture of the society with its hopes and aspirations, demands and responsibilities. Without literature we cannot imagine a society. Like poetry, novel and fiction, drama plays an important role of representing the human society. It is the oldest and the most charming form of literature. Indian English drama came to light before pre-independence era. The audience of Indian English drama is limited. So plays in English are not widely written like poetry and novel in that language. In this connection K.R. Srinivas Iyengar points out the lean period of drama in the following words:

“The paucity of good actable English drama written by the Indians is mainly attributable to the fact that the natural medium of conversation with us excepting for the super-sophisticated who live in the cities and the larger towns, in the universities or in certain government offices or business house is the mother tongue rather than English, and hence unless the characters and situations are carefully chosen, it would be difficult to make a dialogue among the Indians in English sound convincing”. (236)

The origin of Indian English drama can be traced back to the pre-independence era. Krishna Mohan Benerji was the first Indian playwright who wrote The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes illustrative of the present state of Hindu society in Calcutta in 1831. The journey of Indian English drama embarked with the appearance of this play. But the real journey of Indian English drama began with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's ‘Is This Called Civilization’ which appeared on the literary horizon in 1871. The play was originally written
in Bengali but it was translated by the dramatist himself into English. Ramkinoo Dutta wrote *Manipura Tragedy* in 1893. It completes the tale of Indian English drama published in Bengal in the nineteenth century. M. K Naik explains the lack of tradition of writing plays in English as:

“Owing to the lack of a firm dramatic tradition nourished on actual performance in a live theatre, early Indian English drama in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, grew sporadically as mostly closet drama; and even later, only Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya produced a substantial corpus of dramatic writing.”(103) Yet Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, T. P. Kailasam contributed a lot to the development of Indian English drama.

Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, the two great personalities and poets of India, are the first worth considering Indian dramatists in English. The contribution of Rabindranath Tagore in the field of English drama is very praiseworthy. R.N. Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali but almost all his Bengali plays are available to us in English renderings. His prominent plays are *Chitra*, *The Post Office*, *Sacrifice*, *Red Oleanders*, *Chandalika*, *Muktadhara*, *Natir Puja*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *Sanyasi* and *The Mother's Prayer*. Tagore had written all these plays in the Bengali language and they were later translated into English by Tagore himself. But his play, *The Post Office* was translated into English by Devabrata Mukherjee and *The King of the Dark Chamber*, by K.C.Sen. His plays are firmly rooted in the Indian ethos and ethics in their themes, characters and treatment.

Sri Aurobindo is the uncontested outstanding figure in Indian English Literature. He was a great philosopher. He was also a major voice in Indian English drama. He wrote five complete and six incomplete blank verse plays between 1891 and 1916. His complete plays are *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodogune*, *The Viziers of Bassora* and *Eric* and each of these plays was written in five acts. Although he wrote his plays in the tradition of Elizabethan drama, yet the influence of Sanskrit classical dramatists can be seen in them. So K.R. Srinivas Iyengar mentions, “But all five plays are steeped in poetry and romance, recalling the spirit and flavour of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified in different ways by Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhuvbhuti, though, of course, all have Aurobindonian undertones”.(226)

The plays of Sri Aurobindo deal with different cultures and countries in different epochs, ringing with variety of characters, moods and sentiments. Perseus the Deliverer is grounded on the ancient Greek myth of Persues, *Vasavadutta* is a romantic tale of ancient India. *Rodoguna* is a Syrian romance; *The Viziers of Bassora* is a romantic comedy which takes us back to the days of the great Haroun al Rashid, while *Eric* is a romance of Scandinavia, a story of love and war between the children of Odin and Thor. Romance, heroic play, tragedy, comedy, farce, all find representation and thus the scale is large and the themes are diverse.
The tradition of Indian English drama has been enriched in the post-independence era. The difference is that in the pre-independence era most of the dramas were written in verse whereas the post-colonial dramatists showed much inclination to prosaic drama. M.K. Naik rightly opines “The Tagore- Aurobindo -Kailsam tradition of poetic drama continues, but which a difference in the hands of poetic drama continues, but which a difference in the hands of Manjeri Isvaran, G.V. Desani, Lakhan Dev and Pretish Nandy.” (268)

G.V. Desani is an entirely different kind of playwright. His Hali was published in 1950 and received high praise for its originality, symbolism and rich imagery. It was abridged into a drama in poetic prose.

Lakhan Deb and Gurucharan Das are another two important playwrights of India. Their plays were performed on the stage and got considerable success. Lakhan Deb composed three dramas *Tiger’s claw* (1967), *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976) and *Vivekanand* (1972). These plays were written in blank verse and they deal with historical events. The play *Tiger’s Claw* is a historical play in three acts dealing with the murder of Biajpur General Afzal Khan by Shivaji, whereas *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* deals with murder of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. This play compels us to remind the famous play *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot. He has made ample use of dramatic devices, especially chorus and prologue in his plays. His plays are marked with the flawless quality of blank verse.

Gurucharan Das’s contribution to the development of Indian English drama is remarkable. His play *Larins Sahib* is a fine example of decolonization of English language in the post-independence era. His play *Mira* was staged successfully as a ballet in New York and in Bombay.

The climate of Indian English drama slightly changed in the post-independence era. Indian English drama has acquired the growing interest in the foreign countries. The plays of Aship Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma, Gurucharan Das were staged successfully in England and the U.S.A.

Asif Currimbhoy is one of the most prominent and prolific playwrights in the Post-Independence era. He has rendered substantial contribution to Indian English drama by publishing more than thirty plays. His best known plays are: The Tourist Mecca (1959), The Doldrummers (1962), Thorns on a Canvas (1962), The Restaurant (1960), The Dumb Dancer(1961)The Captives (1963), Goa (1964), The Hungry Ones (1965), Monsoon (1965), An Experiments with Truth (1969), Inquilab (1970) The Refugee (1971) Sonar Bangla (1972), The Miracle Seed (1973) and The Dissident MLA (1974). He has presented the interesting situations and atmosphere in his plays. He draws diverse issues and events in his plays such as social, political, economical, philosophical, historical, psychological, religious, cross-cultural, etc. His theatrical art, efficiency and profound knowledge of various human fields have immensely enriched and expanded the tradition of Indian English drama. He has rightly been considered “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre”. Apart from these
there are some dramatists who have contributed their humble mite in the development of Indian English drama. They are: Grish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mahasweta Devi, Uma Parmeswaran, Pratap Sharma, Dina Mehta, Bharati Sarabhai, etc.

India is a country of multi-language. In India plays were written by great dramatists in their own regional languages. Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Grish Karnad in Kannada, Badal Sircar in Bengali, and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi wrote a number of plays which gave a new lease of life to Indian drama. But Mahesh Dattani, born in Bangalore, wrote dramas in English.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most celebrated and significant living playwrights of modern India. He is a versatile genius. He is a very good actor, director, dancer, teacher and writer. He has fixed his name and fame in Anglo-Indian drama. He is the first Indian playwright writing in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1998 for his Final Solutions and Other Plays. He was born in Bangalore on 7th August, 1958. He studied in Baldwin’s High School and St. Joseph’s College of Arts and Science at Bangalore. He is a graduate in History, Economics and Political Science. He took his M.A in Marketing and Advertising Management. He worked for some time as copywriter in an advertising firm and subsequently joined his father’s business. He was not interested in his job as his heart was in drama. He joined Playpen theatre group for which he directed several plays on various themes. Mahesh Dattani puts Indian drama in English to the level of world drama. He wrote several significant plays for his own playgroup as well as others. They are ‘Where There is a Will’, ‘Dance Like a Man’, ‘Tara’, ‘Bravely Fought the Queen’, ‘Final Solutions’, ‘Do the Needful’, ‘On a Muggy Night in Mumbai’, ‘Seven Steps Around the Fire’.

Mahesh Dattani is a prolific writer whose plays are known for their multifarious themes such as gay relationship, communal violence, human relations and the ordinary, untouched, unthought conflicts between son and father, husband and wife, lovers, etc. He studies social problems and presents it in his plays. He writes on those topics in which he has his own experience. His art is revealed in his rendering of contemporary social problems in a manner that is unique to him.

Dattani’s ‘Where There is a Will’ is the first play which was written in 1986. Since then he has been working full time for theatres. The play is a drawing room comedy of a rich businessman, Hashmukh Mehta, who tries to control his family even after his death through his ‘will’. In this play Dattani presents the picture of women and how they are marginalized in their own homes. Hashmukh wants to control the lives of his son, his wife and his daughter-in-law. His house is a battle-ground of arguments and counter-arguments between him and his wife and son. It is a fact that the kitchen is the kingdom of women but they are no longer ruling over them. They are pushed on margins of invisibility. ‘Where There is a Will’ has several interesting aspects. Mahesh described it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code.
Women – be it daughter-in-law, wife or mistress – are dependent on men and this play shows what happens when they are.

Mahesh Dattani writes plays on social issues that can be seen in Indian society. ‘Seven Steps Around the Fire’ is an unusual play of the Indian context. The play depicts miserable condition of hijra in our society. They are isolated and separated and constitute an ‘invisible minority’ within the society. As Jeremy Mortimer puts it:

“For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. The murdered victim Kamla, a beautiful hijra (eunuch), had, it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young burned to death, and hastily arranged for his son to marry an acceptable girl. But at the wedding, attended of course by the hijras who sing and dance at weddings and births, Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijras community”. (CP-3)

Mahesh Dattani, the living legend of Indian English theatre, showed courage in introducing the themes of homosexuality openly through his dramas like ‘On a Muggy Night in Mumbai’, ‘Do the Needful’ and ‘Bravely Fought the Queen’. ‘On a Muggy Night in Mumbai’ is the unsurpassed and the most intricate play that debates the socio-psychological identity crisis of the gays. Male and female are the only sexual categories which have secured social existence and society’s approbation. A fine delineation of characters like Ed and Bunny and Sharad and Kamlesh is sketched in a lively and witty manner. Prakash and Kamlesh were deeply in love with each other. But the separation between Prakash and Kamlesh causes immense pain and distress in the heart and mind of Kamlesh. So he comes in contact with Sharad and develops homoric relationship with him. Kamlesh cannot adjust himself with Sharad because he is hunted by the memories of Prakash who is known as Ed and intends to marry Kiran, divorced sister of Kamlesh. In this play Dattani brings out the psychological pressures and fears, the real and the imaginary, gays have to live with.

‘Do the Needful’ explores the twin issues of gender and alternate sexuality. The play is about upper class families that do not understand their children’s desires. They compel the children to get married against their wishes. Alpesh, a gay Gujarati boy “thirty-plus and divorced”, Lata Gowda, a South Indian girl “twenty-four and notorious” who loves a Muslim boy, cleverly clinches the deal between their parents and get married. Alpesh can carry on his affair with Trilok and Lata can meet with Selim whenever she wants to. Both keep each other’s affairs secret. It is about social restraints against gays and the social inhibition of inter-caste marriage. Lata and Alpesh refreshingly come as honest, young people of the new generation who are frank and open with each other.

‘Dance Like a Man’ deals with the issues of gender and patriarchy. Dattani says on this play: “I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid twenties. […] a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women....” (Ayyar, 2004) Amritlal’s attitude is patriarchal. He dislikes his son and daughter-
in-law taking training in classical dance. The gender of Jairaj is under question. There are heated discussions on his gender.

‘Tara’ is about the courage and spirit of a handicapped Siamese twin who could have survived but for her mother’s decision to give the extra leg to her twin brother. Dattani uses the themes like gender identity, discrimination, middle-class life, revelation, etc. He, through these themes, has beautifully shown the agony of a girl in typical Indian society. We can see the difference between male and female in our society. ‘Tara’ explains to Roopa about the conversation between father and son, "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going for hunting while the women looked after the cave”.

‘Final Solutions’ is a staged play of three acts which deal with the contemporary problems like communal disharmony in India. It dwells on the recurring patterns of communalism in India from the 1940s to the present time. The play is centered round the family of Ramnik Gandhi, his daughter Smita, wife Aruna and mother Hardika. Ramnik is a liberal minded man who gives shelter to two Muslim boys named Bobby and Javed during the riot. Dattani, however, is successful in touching the deep sense of futility which fills the heart of those involved in committing such violence. Javed is not the only sinner. Ramnik, Aruna and Hardika all have played their part and ultimately have to share the burden of guilt. The final solution seems to be a life proposed by the young Smita and Bobby who have possessed a consciousness that is liberated from shifting caves of religious cults and who meet their fellow beings at a secular plane.

To conclude, Mahesh Dattani is recognized as one of the greatest living dramatists of India. His greatness lies for drawing the social issues of urban areas. He has touched different twists of human life and expands the scope of Indian English dramatic world. He makes a revolutionary change in the theatre and gives it a unique identity.

References