

Mapping Social Realities: A Sociological Analysis of Mahesh Dattani's Select Plays

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Abstract

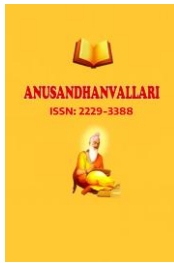
Mahesh Dattani occupies a seminal position in the contemporary Indian English drama due to his unflinching examination of peripheral identities and socio-cultural realisms. Unlike early Indian dramatists who focused essentially on mythological/historical topics, Dattani raises the complexities of modern urban India, asking questions about power dynamics inherent in family, gender, class, sexuality and other social institutions. Through his plays like *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Final Solutions*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *Where There's A Will*, Dattani exposes societal disparities that stem from patriarchal practices, communal disharmony, gender discrimination and the othering of non-normative identity. The study draws on approaches from sociological critique, feminist theory, gender studies and perspectives that centre the subaltern to analyze the above. Dattani's style of realistic characterisations and his dramatic conflicts reveal the indecisiveness that a civilisation faces standing on the line between tradition and modernity. The paper treats Dattani's play as a sociological artefact that holds a mirror up to the fears, biases and changes in modern-day Indian society. It is also an important aspect of his contribution to the growth of socially orientated Indian English drama, as he dramatizes the silenced voices and suppressed experiences.

Keywords: Sociology; Gender; Patriarchy; Marginalization; Social Identity

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani became one of the most important voices in Indian English drama during the last few decades of the twentieth century. Before Dattani, Indian English theatre often struggled to find its own identity, separate from older colonial drama styles. Dattani breathed new life into the genre by dealing with real-world social issues and bringing up topics that mainstream Indian culture often avoided or kept quiet about. His plays are more than just entertainment. They are detailed examinations of social institutions, cultural expectations, and how people interact. As John McRae notes in the Introduction to *Collected Plays*, Dattani was "the first playwright writing in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award," an award that really highlights his contribution to Indian theatre and literature (McRae vii).

Ideas about society are central to Dattani's plays. They explore how family, marriage, religion and community influence individual identity and behaviour. Dattani frequently highlights the tension between individual aspirations and social expectations. For example, *Tara* looks at the construction of gender in families and *Dance Like a Man* challenges traditional masculinity. *Final Solutions* explores prejudice between communities and religious intolerance. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, he brings attention to how the transgender community is pushed aside. And in *Where There's a Will*, he criticizes male dominance and power within families. Through these varied issues, Dattani creates a panorama of Indian society and its tensions.



Several experts have underlined the sociological importance of Dattani's plays. Dwivedi contends that Dattani's drama "is a mirror to the socio-cultural realities of contemporary India" (Dwivedi 87). Likewise, Angelie Multani notes that Dattani "consistently brings 'the invisible and marginalised sections of society into the centre of dramatic discourse'" (Multani 15). His characters are not separate individuals but rather products of the social forces that form their identities, aspirations and conflicts. Therefore, the dramatic narratives of Dattani offer an insight into the functioning of social institutions and cultural ideas.

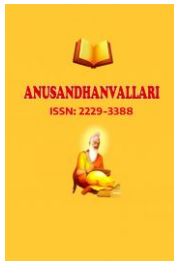
From a sociological point of view, literature is a medium through which society looks at itself. Sociological Criticism: The relationship between literary works and social structures. Literature is a reflection of society, a critique of society, and a shaper of social ideals. As the theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu and contemporary sociologists suggest, individual experiences cannot be disentangled from social settings. Dattani's plays illustrate this idea in their portrayal of the reproduction of social inequality through everyday interactions and institutional activities. His dramatic portrayals reveal that problems such as gender discrimination, communal conflict, and social marginalisation are not only individual problems but effects of wider social structures.

While a great deal of scholarly work exists on Dattani's exploration of gender, sexuality and identity, there have been very few studies that have attempted a thorough sociological analysis of several plays. Existing critique tends to focus on individual themes or texts without analysing the interrelated social forces that underlie Dattani's theatrical output. This paper tries to address a gap by looking at how Dattani's major plays, when considered together, paint a picture of Indian society today. The study contends that his plays are a significant social commentary that critiques the dominant ideologies, uncovers structural inequalities and gives voice to the marginalized. Dattani employs realistic dialogues, rounded characters and socially relevant issues to make the stage a place for social examination and the critique of its culture.

Gender Discrimination and Patriarchal Structures in *Tara*

Tara is a very famous play by Dattani. It attacks the traditional structure of Indian households where men are often more powerful, and women are discriminated against. The play is about conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan. Their surgery to detach them reveals the extent to which society can be unfair to girls. Although Tara was actually stronger and more likely to survive, the family chose to give priority to the boy, Chandan. The line "the leg was left with Chandan because he was a boy" (*Tara*, 324) demonstrates how deeply ingrained the belief is that boys are more important than girls, even if it is to the detriment of a girl's health. With this terrible act of familial discrimination, Dattani exposes the functioning of patriarchy not just through public institutions but also within the personal domestic settings.

The play shows that gender inequality is reproduced through family structures as key agents of socialisation. Tara's grandma represents the conventional patriarchal worldview in believing that family resources should be invested in the male kid. Such cultural behaviours are claimed by feminist sociologists to reproduce patriarchy, and women themselves often serve as agents of gender discrimination. Thus, Tara's misery is not just her physical impairment but also her emotional marginalisation and social alienation. Dattani reveals the insidious manner in which society constrains feminine potential while privileging a masculine identity. Through the depiction of Tara's grief, Dattani critiques the social order that devalues and discriminates against women and limits their chances of self-realisation.



Gender, Masculinity, and Social Expectations in *Dance Like a Man*

Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* brings out the socially constructed gender norms and the rigid expectations of men in a patriarchal society. The play is based on the story of Jairaj Parekh, a talented Bharatanatyam dancer whose creative ambitions are thwarted by his father Amritlal Parekh, obsessed with traditional notions of masculinity and social norms. Amritlal believes classical dancing is at odds with traditional conceptions of manhood and constantly discourages his son from pursuing a career in the performing arts. He mentions that dance is "not a career for a man" (*Dance Like a Man*, 431), and this shows the deeply rooted gender prejudices that rule social behaviour. Through Jairaj's struggle, Dattani illustrates the fact that patriarchal culture not only restricts women but also confines men in strictly defined roles.

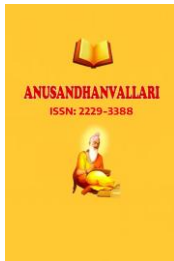
Sociologists like R. W. Connell claim that hegemonic masculinity is a societal construct that confines what behaviours are acceptable for a male and inhibits alternative kinds of masculine expression. The story of Jairaj is an example of this. Jairaj wants to be a dancer. "This dream goes against what people normally think it means to be a man, which is to have power, make money and be respected in public" ("Tell me about"). Amritlal does not like this idea because he thinks that dancing and art are not good for men who want to be respected. So, Jairaj is very confused about who he is and what he wants to do with his life. He wants to dance. He also wants to fit in with what society thinks is okay. You can see how frustrated Jairaj is when he says, "I am a man, and I want to dance" (*Dance Like a Man*, 446). This sentence shows the problem between what Jairaj wants and what society expects from him.

Some people who have studied *Dance Like a Man* say that it questions the way men have power over women and how this affects both men and women. Lakshmi Subramanyam says that the play by Dattani "looks at the ideas people have about gender and being an artist and shows that these ideas are not always true" (Subramanyam 72). The problems of power and wanting to succeed are also shown in the relationship between Jairaj and his wife, Ratna. Both Jairaj and Ratna want to be artists, but Ratna becomes more famous, which makes Jairaj feel like he is not good enough. *Dance Like a Man* shows how hard it is for people like Jairaj to balance what they want with what society expects from them, especially when it comes to things like *Dance Like a Man*. Thus, Dattani shows that patriarchy generates hierarchies that cause emotional distress regardless of sex. The play becomes a sociological study of the means by which cultural organisations control identity and limit human freedom.

Communalism and Religious Intolerance in *Final Solutions*

Final Solutions is one of the most socially relevant plays of Dattani. It deals with the topic of communal conflict in postcolonial India. Set against the backdrop of rising religious tensions, the play exposes the entrenched prejudices dividing Hindu and Muslim populations. Dattani's complex story, set between the Gandhi family and two Muslim sons, Javed and Bobby, reveals the irrational fears and prejudices that underpin racial hatred.

Hardika's task is to look at how historical memory incites communal violence. Her comments on the Partition period experiences reveal the continuing impact of communal trauma on contemporary social attitudes. She recounts her fear of Muslims, acknowledging that "the fear has stayed with me all these years" (*Final Solutions*, 184). The persistence of this sentiment indicates the intergenerational transmission of prejudice within society. Emile Durkheim's theory of collective conscience helps explain how communal identities are embedded within social groups and how they shape the individual's experience. Dattani shows that communalism is not only a political phenomenon but a social process based on memory, fear and cultural conditioning.



The Chorus in *Final Solutions* works as a synecdoche of collective psychology. Their changing identities as Hindus and Muslims show the fluidity and constructedness of communal differences. Angelie Multani states that the Chorus “embodies the collective prejudices of society” (Multani 92). Dattani uses this dramatic approach to show how people internalise social ideals that foster division and hate. Ultimately, the play promotes for discussion and mutual understanding as alternatives to hate. Dattani’s play is a space of social critique and healing as it exposes the irrational bases of community prejudice.

Marginalization and Social Exclusion in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, one of Dattani's most revolutionary works, the social marginalisation of the transgender minority in India is explored. Uma Rao is a university scholar. The play follows her investigation into the murder of Kamala, a hijra who secretly married Subbu, son of a powerful politician. Dattani, through Uma’s research, portrays the systematic discrimination and violence faced by transgender people. The hijras hold a contradictory place in Indian society. They are seen and invisible at the same time, culturally recognised and socially marginalised. The central hijra figures like Anarkali become the symbol of this marginalisation. The police look down on her, and society refuses to see her as a human being. From the viewpoint of society, Uma finds hijras are “neither men nor women” and therefore are denied basic rights and dignity (*Seven Steps Around the Fire*, 19). This marginalisation is what sociologist Erving Goffman calls stigma, a social process that discredits and excludes particular groups from mainstream society.

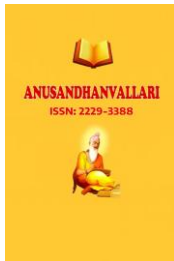
The murder of Kamala is an example of the violence that inflexible social systems produce. The relationship she has with Subbu challenges the prevalent social standards of gender and sexuality. Thus, she becomes a victim of institutional tyranny. Dattani shows how political power, law enforcement and cultural views perpetuate bias. Uma, in her quest for truth, observes the double standards of a society that uses hijras in rituals and festivities but does not accept them socially. “A radical intervention in Indian theatrical discourse” is how Aparna Dharwadker describes Dattani’s depiction of transgender identities (Dharwadker 214). The play is thus a potent sociological critique of discriminatory social systems and forces the audience to re-evaluate their ideas about gender and identity.

Family, Power, and Authority in *Where There’s a Will*

In *Where There’s a Will*, Dattani’s focus shifts to the inner workings of family power and patriarchal control. The drama is about Has Mukh Mehta, a dictatorial businessman who intends to dominate his family even after his death by means of a well-planned will. While the play combines humour and sarcasm, it deals with weighty societal concerns of power, inheritance and family connections.

Has Mukh is the patriarchal leader of the family whose identity is based on power and control. He doesn’t see them as people, but rather as extensions of his own will – family members. Has Mukh’s conduct can be understood using Max Weber’s theory of authority. Weber contends that authority comes from the structures of power that are socially recognised and that affect interpersonal relationships. Has Mukh exercises dominance through control of the purse strings and decision-making. Even in death, he tries to manipulate the lives of his wife, son and daughter-in-law by legal means.

The drama highlights the limitations of patriarchal hegemony in the failure to create meaningful emotional connections. Has Mukh’s relationships are based on manipulation rather than affection. His son Ajit tries



to find an independent identity under the weight of his father's expectations. Dattani satirises the patriarchal preoccupation with control and reveals its devastating repercussions. Scholars have remarked that *Where There's a Will* is a critique of the middle-class family as a locus of ideological reproduction in which authority and obedience are normalised (Chakraborty 136). Dattani's humour and irony expose the inconsistencies buried in conventional family systems and contest the legitimacy of authoritarian leadership.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's plays are a powerful sociological survey of current Indian society. Through genuine characterisation, dramatic conflict and socially significant subjects, he reveals systemic imbalances and cultural paradoxes that influence human life. *Tara* reveals gender discrimination and patriarchal privilege; *Dance Like a Man* challenges socially constructed notions of masculinity; *Final Solutions* explores communal prejudice and religious intolerance; *Seven Steps Around the Fire* draws attention to the marginalisation of transgender communities; and *Where There's a Will* satirises patriarchal authority in the family. These plays explore the complex relationship between human individuality and social organisations.

Dattani's plays provide a social commentary, reflecting the common fears, prejudices and social changes in contemporary India. His characters are always trying to carve out their own identity in terms of the constraining structures, often under the influence of social pressures. His plays give voice to the marginalized groups, expose the injustices and challenge audiences to confront uncomfortable social realities. Thus, Dattani's plays demonstrate the potential of theatre as a potent instrument for social critique and cultural reflection. His major achievement lies in his ability to translate individual stories into larger sociological commentaries.

Dattani's plays probe into questions of gender, sexuality, religion, family and identity, thereby expanding the thematic horizon of Indian English drama. His engagement with these themes makes him an important social commentator in contemporary Indian theatre. The lasting relevance of his work is due to its persistent engagement with issues such as discrimination, exclusion, inequality and identity, which continue to affect modern global society. Hence, a sociological analysis of Dattani's plays not only enhances an understanding of his dramatic art but also offers critical insights into the changing dynamics of Indian social life.

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