



# THE CONCEPT OF NATION IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

Dr. Thriveni M.L.

Associate Professor, Department of English SBGFGC. Mayakonda.

## Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a prolific playwright from Bangalore, is a Gujarati by birth but more of a Bangalorean, formed a theatre group called 'playpen' in 1984. He began his career as a playwright with his first play *Where There's Will*. He dealt with many themes like homosexuality, gender identity, family, religion etc. his plays usually deal with middle class life in urban India and the hollowness of middle class life.

**Key Words:** Nationalism, Communalism, Religion, Spirituality, Individualism.

## Introduction:

Indian Drama has its own legacy. From Sanskrit to modern Absurd drama, it journeyed a long way with experiments, explorations and new dramaturgy. Bharata's *Natyashastra* is considered as the first book on Indian dramaturgy. India is a multilingual country hence we have a rich vernacular literature. When British ruled India making English as the prime language of everything even creative writing. Indians got English education and it almost became their language of communication. With the advent of Railways Indians were not only introduced to English literature but also influenced by many literary movements of the west. Because of its huge impact our writers also started experimenting with this language. Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Prosecuted* is known to be the first Indian English drama published in 1813, but the genre became well-known with the publication of Michel Madhusudan Dutt's *Is This called Civilization* in 1871.

## Pre-Independent Drama:

In Indian English Literature, Rabindranath Tagore has a prime position with his unique contribution. He was a versatile writer who wrote not only poems but also dramas short stories novels etc. this Noble Laureate contributed much to Drama even though he wrote in Bengali most of his plays are available in English also. His plays like *Chitra*, *Post-Office*, *Red Oleanders*, *Chandalika*, *MuktaDhara*, *Sacrifice* etc. are a

significant milestone in the literary horizon of Indian English Drama. Sri Arabindo also made a major contribution with his plays like, *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodugnaetc*. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya's social plays explored the new dimensions of Indian English Drama. His most noted plays are *The Windows*, *The Parrots*, *The santry Lantern*, *The Coffin*, *The Evening Box* etc.

### Post-Independent Drama:

The Post-Independent drama flourished with all its facets. Many experiments were done by the amateur and naïve dramatists who explored the unique styles and techniques. D.M Borgoankar, S Fyzee and Balwant Gargi were the pioneers. T.P. Kailasam from Karnataka was a genius who wrote both in Kannada and English. His plays, *The Burden (1933)*, *Fulfilment (1933)*, *The Purpose (1944)*, *Karna (1964)* and *Keechaka (1949)* mirrored the society with its complex and chaotic structure. He made a sensational outburst with his unique humor and sarcasm. Nissim Ezekiel, a modern playwright pioneered the modernist wave with his plays like *Nalini: A Comedy*, *Marriage Poem: A Tragi Comedy* and *The Sleep Walkers*. Girish Karnad, a versatile personality: actor, director, writer etc. substantially contributed to enrich the tradition of Indian English theatre. His well-known plays are *Yayati (1961)*, *Tughlaq (1962)*, *Hayavadana (1970)*, *Nagmandala (1972)*. He borrowed his plots from history, mythology and old legends. Gieve Patel's *Princes (1970)* focuses on the obsession with male children which epitomizes the general attitude of Indian society. Pratap Sharma and Cyrus Mistry are also contributed much to this genre.

We must consider the innovative experiments of eighties and nineties. The translations from vernaculars made a huge difference in this field, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Mahasweta Deve and Girish Karnad are the representatives of modern India. The revolutionary changes took place as they moved from traditional symbolism to realism, Marxism, Existentialism and the Absurd drama. The plays like *Evam Indrajit and Bhoma* questioned the existence of man in the light of existential philosophy. *Evan Inderjit (1962)* *That Other History (1964)* and *There Is No End (1971)*. All these plays are based on political, social, psychological and existential problems. Vijay Tendulkar created the new models and techniques totally demolishing the prudish and conservative ways of expression. *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *Sakharam Binder and Silence! The Court is in Session* raised a relevant question about love, sex, marriage and moral values of the contemporary society. In the plays *Silence! The Court is in Session (1968)* and *Ghasiram Kotwal (1972)*, he exposes the hunger of power and dominance. *Sakharam Binder (1972)* depicted the human violence, avarice and male-chauvanism.

Post Independence era also the period of one act plays. R. Raja Rao's *Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays (1996)* portrays homosexuality. T.S. Gill's *Asoka (1983)*, V.D. Trivedi's *Gandhi: A Play (1983)* and Prema Sastri's *Gandhi, Man of the Millions (1987)* and Mr. Behram, Dina Mehta's *The Myth Maker (1959)* and

*Brides Are Not for Burning*, Uma Parameswaram's *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* (1998) are the major play of modern period.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cinema, T.V and plays were the popular media which help the people in better understanding of the social, economic and political contents along with the cultural institutions and organizations. Mahesh Dattani, holding a mirror to the society, discusses openly the subordinate culture, such as *Hijra* cult, the beginning of lesbianism, the gay culture etc. Mahesh Dattani's contribution to Indian English Drama is remarkable. He began his career as a copy-writer in an advertising firm and then joined his family business. But his passion towards drama didn't diminish which he cherished since his childhood. He started writing and directing dramas for the stage his first play *Where There is a Will* was published in 1988, is a story of middleclass family. With his theatre group "Playpen", he experiments various techniques. His plays are staged worldwide with critical appreciation. He is a director, actor, dance, teacher and writer. As a director he felt that there are not enough plays written in English so he took writing seriously. He conducts workshops regularly for playwright, actors and directors. He also teaches theatre courses at the summer session programme of Portland State University, Oregon, U.S.A. his Radio plays for BBC got him an international fame.

Alyque Padamsee a great theatre personality said about Dattani that at last India got a playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity. He got many awards including Sahitya Akademi for his *Final Solutions and other Plays* published in 1998. His major themes are modern man's alienation, anxiety, loss on belongingness etc. Individualism is treated as the trait of man which should be recognized in the society. What was once insignificant is made significant. But in this process our life is drifting which once was like a bubbling spring. But today life is not advancing there is a lack of vitality, a spiritual flagging due to our socio-political vicissitudes. We ignored the law of growth. We seem to be afraid of ourselves.

### **Nation and Communalism in Mahesh Dattani's Plays:**

We should also think about our national progress. We should respect the past and traditional forms, but there should also be a freedom and flexibility of the mind. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an 'imagined community'. Nationalism is a memory of past achievements, traditions and experiences. There is a difference between nationalism as a political movement and nationalism as a cultural construct. The nationalism constituted of economy, statecraft, science and technology and a spiritual inner domain of culture which includes religion, customs and the family. The nation's identity lies with the assertion of spirituality. India is a country in which core value of tradition remained in spiritual has the diversities of life, classes, castes, religions, races and cultures. But it has common outlook on life. The people have a sense of identity in their religion and culture.

Dattani's *Bravely fought the Queen* was written in 1991 which unravels the corrupt corporate system. We see the corporate men pimping around in order to be secure in their profession. The Trivedi brothers Jiten and Niten, are the co-owners of an advertising agency. Materialism becomes the main motto of life and spiritualism gradually gives way to the merchandise while ethics is losing its value which is evident in the comments of Jiten and Nitin on fashion and ad world. The Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Nitin are the owners of an advertising agency. The cruelty, the hate that exists in human beings expressed in the exploitation of the weak. A government minister in *Seven steps around the fire* (1999) manipulates the things in order to escape from the charges of murder. Caste is a complex institution, now it is degenerated as an instrument of oppression. In the play *Do the Needful* (1997) the families of Gowda and Patel being liberal minded arrange inter-caste, inter-regional marriage of their children. But behind this liberal mind there lies self-interest. Lata being unpopular as an unchaste girl in the community could not find a groom. Alpesh being a gay could not become groom. The dramatist also draws our attention towards the nativity of Gowdas. He feels proud of his caste and its ritualistic practices. People like to construct their identity on the basis of their caste rather than their nation. The play sets partly in Mumbai and partly in Bengaluru. The roaring masses of the big city are brought in contrast with the quieter rural backdrop of the village; the big doctor in city becomes a passionate country man in village and is a proud landowner of his ancient heritage. The past, however negative it was glorified and made significant in the guise of Religion and Culture.

Dattani's *Final solutions* (1993) takes on a larger theme of Hindu-Muslim hostility. According to him there are no good or bad Hindus, no good or bad Muslims. The people are caught in the puzzles of contemporary and past experiences: Aruna, the mother, is obsessed with some faiths of Hinduism which are considered as necessary for salvation until her daughter shakes her belief. The communal hatred is brilliantly brought out; the mob which is symbolic of our own hatred. The Hindu family transforms its beliefs while giving shelter to Muslim boys Smita revolts against the constraints of religion. Hardika the grandmother builds up a hatred for Zarine and her community only because she doesn't have the courage to be independent. The established views of the society regarding the Hindu Muslim hostility are wonderfully portrayed through the characters. The mob exhibits the people's hatred and paranoia. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century we think that we have progressed a lot but the man continues to behave in the primitive way till today. In spite of advanced technology, we are not progressing in a right way. We are using the social media to nurture our age-old thoughts without worrying about the future. The question is whether we are moving forward or caught in a vicious circle of hatred. The Hindu-Muslim animosity is explored in the play with the backdrop of communal violence. Bobby and Javed, two Muslim boys seek refuge in the Hindu household. The liberal humanist Ramnik Gandhi gives shelter to these boys in spite of his wife Aruna and mother Hardika's objection. Hardika had become an anti-Muslim because of her past. The action of the play moves from the present to past. The partition turmoil disturbed the people changing their attitudes and beliefs. Hardika was unhappy with the Muslim community because of her father's murder during partition riot. She thought that she was betrayed by

her Muslim friend, Zarine. But her son Ramanik Gandhi knew the truth that it was his father who cheated Zaine's father. He became a successful businessman after taking over Zarine father's shop which was burnt deceitfully. With that tormented guilt Ramanik develops secularist ideology and tried to get rid of that guilt. He says;

“We burnt it. Your husband, my father and his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred. Because we wanted a shop. Also they learnt that .... those people were planning to start a mill like our own. I can't take it any longer. I don't think I will be able to step into that shop again.... When those boys came here, I hoped I would be able set things right. I-I wanted to tell them that they are not the only ones who have destroyed. I just couldn't I don't think I have the face to tell anyone..... (Collected Plays, 226)

Smita, Ramnik's wife is a typical housewife who strongly believes in Hindu customs and traditions and cannot let go of her *samskara* by giving shelter to Muslim boys. She is a God fearing woman but when two Muslim boys enter her house being modest and human she could not say no to her husband and she sympathizes with them but as the time moves she could not compromise with her beliefs Babban and Javed accidentally enter the house of Gandhis, Babban is a moderate but Javed is an aggressive youth who is hostile towards the conservative Hindu society. He too has his past which was painful and humiliating. He wanted to take revenge against the whole community. The whole night they express their inner reality exchanging their beliefs and ideologies bursting out the myths. The Gandhi family members introspect themselves while the muslim boys realizes the hollowness of the constructed myths about both the religions. The characters different mindset symbolizes the people of our society. The liberal minded Ramnik, the religious-conservative Aruna, anti-muslim Hardika and smita who was in love with a muslim boy. All these characters undergo transformation when they learnt the real truth like Hardika learnt that Ramanik's father had actually made use of riots to get the shop of Hardika's friend Zarine and Hardika had been wrongly soured against the Muslim. The only solution that emerges is tolerance and forgetfulness. When Bobby suddenly lifts the tiny image of Lord Krishna, Aruna was in a state of trance and couldn't say anything then he says:

See, See I am touching God! My flesh is holding him! Look, Javed, And he does not mind! He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from heavens saying He has been contaminated! Look how he rests in my hands. He knows I cannot harm him but he believes in me. He smiles at our trivial pride and our trivial shame. (Collected Plays 62-63)

It is indeed true that God created this universe and granted equal rights to all its inhabitants to live. But communalism, segregation and hierarchy perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice among the people which results into animosity, hatred and violence because of their cultural and religious difference. Ramanik feels that there are no good or bad Hindus, no good and bad Muslims. The people are caught in the puzzles of contemporary

and past experience like Hardika in her past she was Aruna who was obsessed with some faiths of Hinduism which are considered as necessary for salvation until her daughter shakes her belief. Smita also feels uncomfortable with the presence of Bobby and Javed. Earlier she had a relationship with Bobby which made her uncomfortable but later discloses her views on religion. Like her father she too not much bothered about the conservative society.

The contemporary world is becoming too small. Thinkers have prophetic vision of a global village because of ever widening Mass media and multi-nationals. The nation now demands us to inquire into the existing social structures and ideological postures, to reinstate relationships and institutions. We hate to look at the present world, present life which has infinite variety. But the nations like India were forced to choose between 'being themselves and being modern'. In spite of all modern scientific progress and internationalism there is something lacking in, which can neither produce harmony between nations nor within the spirit of man.

### **Conclusion:**

Mahesh Dattani is a realistic writer who has taken the material from his own experience. He has witnessed many social movements, travelled across the world and tries to penetrate deep into human relationships. We can see his compassion for the common man's struggle and his patriotism. Through his plays he is creating awareness in the society regarding contemporary youth's anxiety that is torn between socio-cultural myths and ultra-modern idealisms. He also focused on the ultra-modern themes like homosexuality, nativity, regionality and communalism.

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