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Visual and Spatial Dynamics: Stagecraft in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore the innovative theatrical and technical modes that Mahesh Dattani uses on the stage to enhance the dramaturgical effect. The stage is defined, re-defined, altered simultaneously by the deft use of space and visuals. For him, the stage do not remain an undifferentiated platform anymore but assumes the nature of a more vital, a complex, multi-dimensional zone. The play-text imperceptibly takes on the flesh of the enactment and the use of masks and dance movements bring out a deeper ritualistic meaning. The conventions of folk theatre blend with the stylized use of dance movements influenced by the Indian classical dances like Bharatnatyam, Kuchupudi and Kathakali. Yet the dramatist applies these techniques to give them a modern interpretation. The adventurous use of theatrical space balances the art of intellectual exercise and emotional outpourings in his theatre. Through examining his two plays *Final Solutions* and *Tara*, the paper elucidates how these plays can always be thought in terms of performance and the concern of the dramatist for a 'living theatre' give the plays a meaning and a depth that is unique in modern Indian English theatre. He does not restrict his plays to a mere philosophical discourse through the ingenious use of stagecraft in the plays. The plays thus exhibit a combination of going back to the roots and through continuation embracing change. In his efforts to push the frontiers of English theatre in India farther, Dattani is able to create ripples in the sensibilities of the audience.

Keywords: theatrics, fusion, dramaturgy, space, expressionistic realism.

Introduction

Dattani's plays illustrate the conflict between traditional and contemporary values, and touches upon the evolution of a new social landscape which emerges from such a struggle. The dramatist writes with a pungency that is skillfully disguised, employing language that resorts to clarity and sharpness, one that pushes the limits of the spoken word and pregnant silences in between. Because of the multi layered reality present in his plays, Dattani uses

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naturalism as only one of many styles. Though his plays are set in houses and offices, yet they move constantly away from them into an internalized reality. And this is exactly where the realistic or naturalistic style takes a backseat for as Vsevelod Meyerhold states, 'naturalistic theatre leaves nothing to the imagination and distracts from the author' (Meyerhold, 1908). The naturalistic style embraces verisimilitude and psychological realism. But Dattani's stagecraft is based on the principle that Nigel Jamieson had expounded about theatre- 'what we are looking for is a heightening of life, we have the everyday life around us, and all art needs to heighten that so we experience things for this brief period of time more strongly'(Jameson, np). Therefore the style that Dattani's plays espouse is not merely realistic or only expressionistic, it combines the two. The technique is influenced by Rene Migliaccio's style of acting that he founded in 1983 while directing plays for the Black Moon Theatre Company. The style that he employed was known as 'expressionistic realism'.(Black Moon Theatre Company Website). Expressionism refers to thoughts and emotions exposed in a specific way by articulating to facial masks and body gestures and movements. Realism builds on techniques of realistic acting, then takes that reality and pushes it to a heightened plane with physicality.

Dattani uses his theatrical space with a dexterity that is unparallel. 'His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigor of Western models like Ibsen and Tenessee Williams'(Walling,2000). Therefore his plays approach a subject from multiple perspectives. The playwright admitting the influence of Western theatre on Indian dramaturgy remarked that 'the Western theatre has the sophistication of filling the sacred space with silence and stillness. That is the major contribution made by Western society to our theatre' (Dattani, interview with Sudeep Sen, 1996). The fusion of forms and influences give Dattani's plays a political and social

statement of astonishing force. One important theatrical function of any production is to locate a play spatially; a sign whose function it is to promote the spectator's understanding always involves the designation of a space. This space bears its implications on the stage. To quote the Eastern European semiotician Jiri Veltrusky, 'all that is on the stage is a sign' (Veltrusky,1940,1964). The audience understands the meaning of a theatrical performance in terms of how they receive and interpret signs and the semiotics of the entire theatre going experience. The importance of non-verbal signs also contributes to the understanding of the meaning of the play text. The purpose of theatre according to Dattani is as Begley stated, 'to put the audience in a better position to understand the world around them, a world which for Brecht and Barthes, is social and changeable. In this way, theatre involves a "politics of sign"' (Begley, 2012).Dattani's use of the theatrical space on the stage serves this one function: to interpret the text and the underlying idea that the play elucidates. The stagecraft in Dattani is called forward in the interest of the thesis of the play.

Final Solutions and *Tara*, Dattani's two most representative plays can be examined to illustrate the point. Dattani always thinks in terms of performance because it is only through the process of performance that the written words assume flesh. 'And when the words are Mahesh Dattani's,' says Michael Walling, 'the flesh is already contained within the word' (Walling, 2000).Through elaborate stage directions, props, lightings and sounds together with skilful usage of space and movements, the playwright strives to present realistic characters and communicate his ideas. In *Final Solutions*, for example the setting that is suggested at the beginning of the play brings to mind the expressionistic techniques used by German dramatists and later improved upon by American playwrights. 'The stage is dominated by a horse-shoe or crescent shaped ramp, with the ends sloping to stage level. Most of the

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action of the Mob/Chorus takes place on the ramp. Ideally the Mob/Chorus should remain on stage in a crouched or stylized position throughout the play' (Dattani,2000). The whole description introduces us to the theme of the play. The ramp which ends on the stage level suggests the all encompassing presence of the Mob/Chorus and their remaining in the stylized position throughout the play brings out their significance. The five men who comprise the mob carry ten masks on sticks. The sticks are held in front of them suggesting that they are wearing the masks. The sticks are to be used as weapons at more dynamic moments in a stylized fashion. The concept of masks can be traced back to ancient Greek drama and the expressionistic techniques used in modern theatre. In O'Neillean dramas, we find the use of masks to delineate certain theatrical functions. Like O'Neill, Dattani, too, is concerned with the background pattern of conflicting tide in the soul of man, the mystery in any life on earth. Talking about his dramatic intentions, O'Neill once said that his use of masks had three dramatic functions-- 'one was to differentiate two sides of a split character, second was to indicate a gradual change in personality and the third was to show a transfer of personality'(O'Neill, 1961). But Dattani's intentions are different. His use of masks in the play evolves out of the demand for type characters rather than particular individuals. The Mob / Chorus represent the psyche of the community they belong to. Dattani specifies that five are Hindu masks and five Muslims masks. The five together represent the 'group' psychology that operates within the community with its inherent hatred, prejudices, social and psychological constructs. It also portrays a 'masking' of true judgement, rational thinking and genuine human feelings. It exemplifies a state of existence where the individual is made subservient to the authority which is manifested through community interest at the cost of the individual. As Mardi Valgemae had pointed out 'expressionism wanted to produce and make vivid the very own reality, the dramatist's inner

idea or vision, it is to stress the importance of a unified theatrical effect that would bring out the inner life of a play' (Valgemae, 1920).The demons of communal hatred which suggest our own paranoia is symbolically delineated through the creation of the mob in the play. As Alque Padamsee rightly observes in 'A Note on the Play' that introduces Mahesh Dattani's *Collected Plays*, 'each member of the mob is an individual yet they melt into one seething whole as soon as politicians play on their fears and anxieties'(Padamsee, 2000). Though the concept of expressionistic theatre to convey the illusion of reality in the presence of the obviously unreal in order to portray the 'inner reality' is borrowed from the great European masters, Dattani uses techniques that are chiefly indigenous. The stylized movements of the mob in an atmosphere of violence and hatred remind one of the classical Kathakali dance widely practiced in India. The dance-like movements also suggest a deeper ritualistic meaning.

Yet another expressionistic technique adopted by the dramatist is the presence of multilevel sets which highlight the physical tension between two foci, we are compelled to watch the contrast between one space and another. In *Final Solutions*, we find that the difference in time period is suggested by the use of different levels. On the level is the house of the Gandhis' and the action that takes place there suggests the 'present' while on another level the room with a roll-top desk and an oil-lamp converted to an electric one speak of the period as late as 1940s. The narrow space of the room frames Daksha as a creature who is confined not only within the household but trapped within her prejudiced mind. The house of the Gandhis is presented schematically up-stage on an elevation is a detailed kitchen and a 'pooja' room. This setting brings to mind the setting of Arthur Miller's 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*. There we see three rooms at once, each set on a different level, and there are no realistic walls between them. There the levels help us to observe divisions between father and sons and

portray shared and solitary spaces. Moreover as Mick Wallis and Stephen Shepherd observes, it also 'facilitates a cinematic cross-fading between spaces'(Wallis and Shepherd,1998).Here Dattani uses the split-screen technique used in films where two apparently unconnected sets of action happen at the same time is portrayed, it stages simultaneous action.

In *Tara* for example, the multilevel set con- tributes to yet another dramaturgical necessity, it facilitates fluidity. The lowest level on the stage in the play represents the house of the Patels. The next level represents the bedsitter of the older Chandan in a suburb of London. The dramatist claims that it is the only realistic level because the whole drama is presented through the consciousness of this character. We are introduced to the action and taken along on a journey through the plot based on Dan's perspectives. Dr. Thakkar's God-like presence is asserted through his position on a higher level, where he remains seated on a chair throughout the play. He symbolically represents the authoritarian social order that dictates and manipulates all human actions. The 'galli' outside the Patel's house is shown downstage right on the stage level. This is suggested by cross- lighting and various conversations occur here. A dialogic strategy is implied when we hear different characters speaking together with- out hearing each other. Patel talks with the 'invisible' Narayan saab in the 'galli' while Roopa and Tara converse with each other inside the Patel household. We are not only initiated the Bakhtinian model of the dialogic in which there exists 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices, and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices' (Bakhtin,1973) but also the technical function of emphasizing the conversation. A latent ironic function also facilitates the plot progression.

Patel : She needs help. I am not so sure -- may be some kind of therapy ...or counseling.

Tara: About me. Strong. Healthy. Beautiful. (Dattani 2000, p. 329)

Underlying the apparently unconnected conversation runs a deep undercurrent of pathos and irony.

The use of flashback technique significantly pushes back the accepted borders of naturalistic drama. Time in Dattani is non-linear; it breaks the limits of chronology and freely travels back and forth. The 'past' and 'present' is set forth simultaneously in the plays. This fluidity of time is aptly portrayed through the flashback technique, dialogues and use of space on the stage. In *Final Solutions*, it is Daksha whose recollections of past memories take the audience back in time. But in *Tara*, the past memories are actually staged. The flashback technique is yet another device which portrays the contrast between ideas and perspectives among generations. It also highlights the leitmotif that the dramatist wishes to delineate viz. the continuation of primeval ideas in modern society. This method of 'flashback' gives the entire theatrical organization a three dimensional approach which is made more emphatic by the use of lighting and sound on stage. The significance of lighting had been shown by the famous theatre personality Adolphe Appia - 'Light is the most important plastic medium on stage. The light that is important is the light that casts shadows. It alone defines and reveals... Any portion of the setting a building, a tree, a background of a room can actually be brought forth or wiped out as its dramatic importance in the scene increases or diminishes' (Simonson, 1963). This is the concept of lighting that Dattani uses in his two plays. The technique that he espouses in *Final Solutions* and *Tara* is basically the same. The cross-fading used in the plays divert the audience's attention to a scene that is more important at that particular moment. The use of spotlight makes the situation more emphatic. 'Diffused light produces blank visibility, in which we recognise objects without emotion', observes Lee Simonson (1963). It is a light source that Dattani deliberately avoids. The source that he extensively uses is the focused and mobile

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light which gives 'ausdruckskraft' or 'the force of the expression' to his plays. The canons of pictorial art seem valueless in Mahesh Dattani's concept of stagecraft. Painted decorations are not only at odds with the actor but with the light that illuminates them. Therefore, the dramatist endorses a minimalistic approach to set designs. In *Final Solutions*, a bare structure suggests the house of the Gandhis with just wooden blocks for furniture. In *Tara*, too, the multi-level set is unencumbered with exhaustive decorations although they represent entirely unidentical spacial locations. The dream-like sequence that ends *Tara* drives the audience into a world which is in direct contrast to the reality that the play illustrates. The Utopian projection of life is a re-creation of the desire or wish-fulfillment that lay submerged in Dan's subconscious mind. Suddenly, the light fades out and the audience is hurled back into the familiar world of actuality, a world encompassed with conflict, pain and suffering. This is exactly how Dattani blends naturalism with expressionistic techniques which gives an outward form to the inner subconscious emotions of an individual or a group.

Music plays a significant role in Dattani's *Final Solutions* and *Tara*. In both these plays, music is used to express a sense of liberation, an escape into a world of hopes and aspirations. It is significant that in Final Solutions it is music that brings the two young girls Daksha and Zarine, belonging to two different religious communities, together. The dream of Daksha to become a famous singer presupposes her latent desire to step out from the conventional role entrusted to the women folk of the country. In *Tara*, the explosive music of Brahms' First Concerto offers its characters as well as the audience a sense of 'youth bursting forth in the world with all its claims. A spring like freshness'(Dattani,2000, p.333), as Chandan remarks. Mahesh Dattani's use of Indian and Western classical music in the two plays also suggest the potentiality of music to break the frontiers of time and space and establish human relationships based on mutual love, trust and respect.

Conclusion

Dattani's stagecraft demonstrates the new interpenetration of cultures, the effect of 'globalisation' in the post modern world. A brave document of fantasy and logic, of reality and imagination, his plays multiplies the viewers' impressions and presents visual, mental and sensual material at several levels. For him, as was for Adolphe Appia, 'the stage is a vista into the unknown, into boundless space, and this space for which our souls long inorder that our imagination can be submerged in it' (Simonson, 1963).

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