



# Breaking The Fourth Wall Of Tradition: A Critical Analysis Of Mahesh Dattani's Contribution To Indian English Drama

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## Abstract

This research paper interrogates the transformative role of Mahesh Dattani in reshaping the landscape of Indian English Drama. Unlike his predecessors who largely dwelt on historical, mythological, or rural themes, Dattani brings the urban Indian experience to centre stage, utilizing theatre as a sociological laboratory to examine the fissures of modern society. Through a detailed textual analysis of his seminal plays, *Dance Like a Man* and *Final Solutions*, alongside references to *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, this study explores how Dattani deconstructs hegemonic masculinity, communal intolerance, and the silence surrounding marginalized identities. Drawing upon secondary sources and scholarly commentaries, the paper demonstrates that Dattani's dramaturgy—characterized by a unique blend of Western stagecraft and Indian sensibility—transcends entertainment to become a potent vehicle for social critique. By validating Indian English as a natural medium of expression and tackling taboo subjects such as gender performativity and religious fanaticism, Dattani has effectively liberated Indian English Drama from its post-colonial constraints, establishing an authentic and globally resonant theatrical voice.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani, Indian English Drama, Gender Performativity, Communalism, Post-colonial Theatre, *Dance Like a Man*, *Final Solutions*

## 1. Introduction: The Renaissance of Indian English Drama

The trajectory of Indian English Drama has long occupied an ambivalent position in the broader archive of Indian literature. Critics and cultural historians have frequently described the genre as the “cinderella” (Naik and Narayan 201) of Indian literary production—neglected, understudied, and overshadowed by the towering achievements of Indian English poetry and fiction. For decades, the genre oscillated between two inadequate poles: the slavish imitation of British Victorian theatrical conventions on one hand, and the nostalgic retrieval of ancient Sanskrit dramatic traditions on the other. Neither mode proved capable of generating an authentically modern, urban Indian theatrical idiom. However, the late twentieth century

witnessed a decisive paradigm shift, a renaissance spearheaded by a new generation of playwrights who dared to look inward at the sprawling, chaotic, and contradictory reality of the Indian city.

At the vanguard of this transformative movement stands Mahesh Dattani, the first playwright in English to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998. Born in Bangalore in 1958, Dattani trained in theatre both in India and abroad, and his plays bear the unmistakable mark of a dramatist deeply conversant with Western avant-garde technique as well as the social and philosophical concerns of contemporary India. His Sahitya Akademi citation commends his work for probing “tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism, and gender” (Sahitya Akademi), qualities that have established him as a landmark figure not merely in Indian drama but in global postcolonial theatre.

Dattani’s emergence marked a definitive departure from the drawing-room comedies and historical pageants that had characterized the earlier phases of Indian English theatre. His contribution lies not merely in his choice of language, which he reshaped to suit the rhythms of the urban Indian middle class, but in his unflinching willingness to confront what he himself has called the “invisible” issues of Indian society—the prejudices too uncomfortable to name, the hierarchies too entrenched to challenge, and the silences too profitable to break. Santwana Haldar astutely observes that Dattani is “a keen observer of real life” who makes “a thorough study of what is going on in the society and he chooses for his subject matter only that portion of the collected data which serves his purpose” (89). It is this sociological precision wedded to theatrical imagination that gives Dattani’s dramaturgy its unique power.

This paper critically evaluates Dattani’s contribution to Indian drama by analyzing how he utilizes the stage to dismantle societal hypocrisies. It focuses primarily on *Dance Like a Man*, which challenges rigid gender binaries, and *Final Solutions*, which exposes the raw nerves of religious communalism. Through these texts, supplemented by reference to *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the paper demonstrates how Dattani has moved Indian drama from the periphery of literary discourse to its vibrant and volatile center.

## 2. The Politics of Language and Stagecraft

One of Dattani’s most enduring contributions is his resolution of what critics have long termed the “language problem” in Indian English theatre. The charge, rehearsed by a generation of post-independence critics, was that English was an alien tongue, incapable of capturing the idiomatic nuance, emotional texture, and cultural specificity of Indian social life. To write plays in English, it was argued, was to speak to a tiny, westernized elite and to surrender the playwright’s claim to authenticity. Dattani answered this charge not by argument but by artistic practice. In an interview with Erin Mee, he articulates his position with characteristic candor: “A lot of the damage colonization has done is reflected in the theater, in the English language... I think it is more of a need than a trend. It is not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture” (25). For Dattani, Indian English is not a mark of cultural defeat but a living dialect, carrying within it the social history of a bilingual, multilingual civilization.

His characters speak a language that is fluid and constantly code-switching, shifting between standard educated English and Indian vernacular approximations, thereby creating a linguistic realism previously absent in Indian English theatre. This stylistic choice enables an audience to engage with the characters as authentic representations of their own social milieu. Dattani's dialogue is not the stilted, received English of the colonial stage; nor is it the self-conscious "vernacularized" English of the subaltern studies project. It is, rather, the living speech of the Bangalore or Mumbai professional class, and its familiarity is part of its subversive power.

Beyond language, Dattani's stagecraft is equally revolutionary. He rejects the static proscenium arch in favor of multi-level sets and split stages that physically manifest the psychological fractures of his characters. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, one of the foremost scholars of Dattani's work, has documented how his "mandatory split level stage" and his internalization of craft—in which "stage worthiness is never compromised upon"—contribute to "the continued growth and renewal of his art both in terms of form and content" (Plays of Mahesh Dattani 18). The split stage, in *Tara*, represents the dichotomy of the conjoined twins' shared yet severed existence. In *Final Solutions*, the ramp and the mob-chorus dissolve the boundary between the safe interior of the middle-class home and the volatile exterior of the communal street. In both cases, spatial form carries ideological argument.

Furthermore, Dattani's use of time is consistently non-linear. Memory, trauma, and the present moment coexist on his stage, suggesting that the past is never truly past but an active, shaping force in contemporary life. This temporal complexity demands an audience that is willing to do interpretive work, to assemble meaning from fragments, and to resist the comfort of easy resolution. In this respect, Dattani's theatre is unmistakably Brechtian in impulse, even when it departs from Brecht in its emotional appeal.

### **3. Deconstructing Gender and Tradition: Dance Like a Man**

*Dance Like a Man* (1989) is perhaps Dattani's most nuanced exploration of gender roles, tradition, and the crushing weight of patriarchal expectation. Set against the backdrop of Bharatanatyam—a classical dance form traditionally associated with the *devadasis* and later sanitized by upper-caste nationalist reformers—the play examines the life of Jairaj and Ratna, two aging dancers, and their struggle for artistic validation within an unforgiving social order. The play operates on multiple temporal planes, moving between the couple's youth and their bitter old age, suggesting that the wounds inflicted by patriarchy are not temporary but formative and permanent.

#### **3.1 The Crisis of Masculinity**

The central conflict revolves around Jairaj, a man who chooses dance—a domain coded as "feminine" by his culture—over the "masculine" pursuits of business and nation-building demanded of him. Dattani uses Jairaj to mount a sustained critique of the rigid construction of masculinity in Indian society. Jairaj's father, Amritlal Parekh, represents the benevolent but suffocating patriarch: a freedom fighter who struggled for

political independence from the British yet denies personal independence to his own son. The irony is deliberate. Amritlal's nationalism is exposed as a selective liberation—freedom for the nation, but not for the individual.

Amritlal's objection to Jairaj's dancing is rooted in homophobia and misogyny. His question- "Do you know where a man's happiness lies? In being a man" (Dattani, *Collected Plays* 425)- encapsulates the tautological logic of patriarchal gender ideology: a man must be a man, and any deviation from approved masculine behaviour constitutes a fundamental betrayal. This resonates powerfully with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which holds that gender is not an internal truth or biological given, but a phenomenon produced and reproduced through repetitive acts. Butler argues that "people think that there are true and real genders, and those who deemed to be doing their gender 'wrong' are socially sanctioned as 'unnatural'" (178-79). Jairaj's act of dancing disrupts the performative repetition of masculinity expected of him by his social world, and his punishment is social castration.

John Beynon's observation on the cultural encoding of gender is also directly relevant: "masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast, are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional" (*Masculinities and Culture* 56). It is precisely this binary that Jairaj's dancing refuses, and precisely this refusal that triggers the violence of communal disapproval.

Dattani poignantly illustrates this "castration" through the symbol of Jairaj's long hair. Amritlal forces his son to cut it—the symbol of his artistic and androgynous defiance—thereby stripping him of his creative power and forcing him into the mould of the conventional male. The tragedy of Jairaj is not simply that he fails as a dancer, but that he internalizes his father's gaze, eventually becoming the very mediocrity he was forced to perform. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri captures this dimension of the play when she notes that Dattani raises "unlikely questions about the sexual construct that a man is," and that Jairaj's obsession with dance positions him to "demolish the stereotypes" of gender, exploring "the nature of the tyranny that even men might be subject to within" patriarchal structures (*Plays of Mahesh Dattani* 67). It is this radical insight—that patriarchy imprisons men as surely as women, though differently—that gives the play its enduring relevance.

### **3.2 The Double Burden on Women and the Ethics of Complicity**

While the play is titled *Dance Like a Man*, it is equally, and perhaps more devastatingly, a study of the patriarchal bargains women make in order to survive within oppressive structures. Ratna, Jairaj's wife, is a character of remarkable complexity: simultaneously victim and agent of patriarchy. To pursue her own artistic career, she colludes with Amritlal, undermining Jairaj's confidence in exchange for the permission to dance professionally. Dattani refuses to paint Ratna as a simple victim; instead, he shows how patriarchal logic pits individuals against each other in a zero-sum competition for scarce recognition and legitimacy.

Beena Aggarwal has perceptively noted that Dattani's treatment of Ratna "explores the invisible horrors of gender discrimination" while presenting a woman who is "not a silent sufferer but a conscious individual endowed with a passion for self-identity" (163). This is Dattani's particular ethical achievement: he neither sentimentalizes nor condemns, but illuminates the structural conditions that produce such impossible choices.

Dattani himself, in an interview with Laxmi Subramanyam, has articulated his position on his female characters with admirable precision: "They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I am focusing on is the powerlessness of these people at the end of the play... My only defence is to say that I am not biased against women" (Subramanyam 131). This humanist insistence on the complexity of motivation, rather than the allocation of blame, is what elevates the play above the level of social polemics and into the realm of genuine tragedy.

Gerda Lerner's metaphor is apposite here: gender is "a costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance" (Lerner 238). In *Dance Like a Man*, every character is costumed by their culture, and the tragedy is that even those who recognize the costume cannot remove it. The next generation, represented by Ratna's daughter Lata, reproduces the cycle: Ratna's control over Lata mirrors Amritlal's control over Jairaj, suggesting that tradition, when unexamined, becomes a tool for repression rather than a source of cultural richness.

#### **4. The Anatomy of Hate: Final Solutions**

If *Dance Like a Man* excavates the domestic interior, *Final Solutions* (1993) explosively demolishes the walls of the home to let the violent streets of communal India rush in. Written in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition and the riots that convulsed India in 1992-93, the play is a harrowing investigation into the psychology of religious intolerance. It refuses the comfort of liberal optimism, does not offer simplistic solutions, and declines to distribute its moral judgements along predictable ideological lines. Instead, it exposes the deep-seated prejudices that middle-class Indians, secular and orthodox alike, harbour beneath a veneer of civility.

##### **4.1 The Shadow of Partition**

Dattani employs a sophisticated, non-linear narrative structure that oscillates between the contemporary present (the late 1990s) and the traumatic past (the violence of 1947). Through the character of Daksha/Hardika, the grandmother, he links the unhealed wound of Partition to the recurring cycles of contemporary communal violence. Hardika's diary entries reveal a young girl's innocence shattered by the eruption of religious hatred, leading to a lifetime of bitterness towards Muslims. She represents the collective memory of a generation that has literalized its trauma into permanent identity.

The dual naming of the character—Daksha becoming Hardika upon marriage—is itself a carefully crafted metaphor. In an interview with Bijay Kumar Das, Dattani explains: “Where I come from, in traditional families, a woman has to change her name to suit the rashi of her husband. I have used it as a metaphor for what Daksha has to give up to conform to her new home” (Das 179). The enforced renaming enacts, at the level of the personal, the same violent erasure that Partition enacted at the level of the national. Hardika is not merely a character; she is a figure of India’s undigested history.

However, Dattani complicates what might have been a straightforward narrative of victimhood. We learn that the violence Hardika experienced was not simply the product of religious difference but a result of a far more compromised history: her husband’s family had used the cover of communal rioting to seize property belonging to a Muslim family. By revealing this, Dattani suggests that communal memory is not a transparent record of events but a selective construction that serves to justify current prejudice. Subir Dhar aptly describes the play as a “powerful indictment of the communal passions that threaten to split our country” (109), and it is precisely this willingness to implicate the “secular” middle class in the perpetuation of communal violence that gives the play its most unsettling charge.

#### **4.2 The Mob and the Middle Class**

The most formally innovative device in *Final Solutions* is the use of the Mob/Chorus. Dattani prescribes that the Mob is always physically present on stage, a shapeshifting mass that alternates between Hindu and Muslim identities. The same actors who shout “Jai Shri Ram” in one scene might shout “Allah-u-Akbar” in the next. This fluidity of religious identity is not a gesture towards syncretism but a structural argument: that fundamentalism, regardless of its doctrinal content, is a single phenomenon. As theatre director Alyque Padamsee, who directed the original production, articulated in his director’s note: “the demons of communal hatred are not out on the street... they are lurking inside ourselves” (161). Dattani’s stage geometry makes this psychological insight viscerally theatrical.

The play centers on the Gandhi family—the liberal father Ramnik, his orthodox wife Aruna, and his mother Hardika, who give shelter to two Muslim boys, Javed and Bobby, during a riot. This act of charity rapidly becomes a litmus test for the family’s claimed secularism. Ramnik Gandhi prides himself on his tolerance, but Dattani systematically peels back the layers of his self-image to reveal a more complex and guilty interiority: his grandfather had burnt down a Muslim shop to acquire land, and Ramnik’s liberalism is, in part, an act of personal atonement. His secular identity, like Hardika’s communal identity, is constructed over a foundation of violence that neither character is willing to fully confront.

Aruna, Ramnik’s wife, represents the orthodox Hindu viewpoint: obsessed with ritual purity, terrified that her culture and faith are under existential siege, and unable to separate religious observance from social prejudice. Her refusal to allow the Muslim boys to touch her water or enter her prayer room instantiates what might be called “kitchen communalism”—the privatized, everyday form of religious intolerance that

flourishes beneath the official rhetoric of national unity. Dattani does not demonize Aruna; he gives her a coherent voice and a comprehensible history. This, precisely, is Dattani's dramaturgical strength: he allows conflicting ideologies to clash on stage without authorial intervention, forcing the audience to take up the role of the jury. As Padamsee's director's note poses the question: "Is life a forward journey or do we travel round in a circle, returning to our starting point? Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes?" (161).

### 4.3 The Failure of Dialogue and the Ambivalence of Closure

The emotional and dramatic climax of *Final Solutions* occurs in the prayer room, a sacred space that becomes a site of violent ideological confrontation. Bobby, the more moderate and intellectually restless of the two Muslim boys, picks up the idol of Krishna, defying Aruna's laws of purity, and challenges the premise on which those laws rest: "See! I am touching God! Your God! My flesh is holding Him! Look... He does not burn me to ashes!" (Dattani, *Collected Plays* 224). This moment is one of the most theatrically powerful in modern Indian drama: it performs, before the eyes of the audience, the falsity of the purity doctrine and the human cost of its enforcement.

Yet the play's ending refuses catharsis. The boys leave; the riot subsides; but the internal fissures remain intact. Hardika is left questioning the reliability of her own memories. Ramnik is left with his guilt and his mortgage of ancestral crime. The "final solution" of the title remains, conspicuously, unattained. Dattani implies that the solution to communal hatred lies not in political treaties or administrative measures but in the far more difficult labour of personal reckoning, the confrontation of historical truth and the exorcism of inherited prejudice. The play ends not with resolution but with a question that it hands, unresolved, to its audience.

## 5. Voices from the Margins: Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen, and Beyond

Dattani's commitment to the representation of marginalized identities extends well beyond the axes of gender and religion. In *Tara*, he turns his attention to the medical and social ethics surrounding a pair of conjoined twins. The surgical separation of Tara and Chandan is manipulated by the twins' own mother and maternal grandfather to favour the male child. Chandan receives the stronger leg; Tara is condemned to a life of disability and eventual death. The play is a scathing indictment of the Indian preference for the male child, and its power derives from the fact that the decision to sacrifice Tara is made not by a villain but by those who claim to love her. Dattani uses the play to argue that patriarchal preference is not merely a matter of social convention but a life-and-death allocation of bodily resources.

Chaudhuri has described the play's setting as a meditation on "the self and the significance of the other, through the frameworks of gender and gender roles", a space where "the prostitute as dancer," "the man as dancer," and the guru with an "effeminate' walk" represent "categories that the older generation... cannot come to terms with" (*Plays of Mahesh Dattani* 88). The split stage of *Tara* is not merely a theatrical device

but an ontological claim: the self and the other are always twinned, always interdependent, and the violence of separation leaves both diminished.

In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani exposes the hollowness of the urban wealthy. The Trivedi brothers conceal their homosexuality and domestic brutality behind a facade of business success and respectable marriage, while their wives retreat into alcohol and private fantasy. The play stages the intimate violence that structures the bourgeois Indian family and refuses to allow its audience the comfort of locating cruelty elsewhere, in poverty, in ignorance, or in the slums. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani became the first Indian playwright to address gay identity openly and seriously, moving well beyond the stereotype of the effeminate comic relief to present gay men as complex, suffering, and loving human beings. As Raj Ayyar has noted, Dattani insists that his women protagonists “fight, scheme and get a piece of the action albeit at great personal cost,” and that “we have yet to see feminism find expression in Indian society” (Ayyar). The same observation applies, mutatis mutandis, to his treatment of queer characters: they exist in a social order that punishes their existence, and Dattani documents that punishment without sentimentality.

Tim Delaney’s sociological observation that “power corrupts is not a gender distinction” and that “people in legitimate authority positions have power over others; their sex has little bearing on this reality” (Classical and Contemporary Social Theory 229) is borne out across Dattani’s body of work. Whether it is Amritlal’s patriarchal authority, Aruna’s domestic orthodoxy, or the mother’s fatal surgical preference in *Tara*, power in Dattani’s theatre is always structural, always relational, and always capable of crossing the boundaries of gender, class, and religion.

## **6. Conclusion: An Authentic, Globally Resonant Voice**

Mahesh Dattani’s contribution to Indian English Drama is, by any measure, monumental. He has pulled the genre out of the archival dust of mythology and historical pageant and placed it firmly on the pavement of the modern Indian city. His plays are sociological documents of the highest literary order, recording the shifting seismic plates of Indian culture, the clash between individual desire and collective obligation, between the sacred and the profane, between the inherited past and the demanded present.

Through *Dance Like a Man*, he liberated the Indian stage from the straightjacket of toxic masculinity and showed that gender is a performance whose script can be rewritten. Through *Final Solutions*, he forced a nation to look into the mirror of its own communal intolerance and recognize, in the face of the other, a reflection of itself. Through his masterful deployment of Indian English and his formally innovative stagecraft, he proved that Indian drama could be simultaneously locally rooted and globally resonant. His work speaks to audiences in Bangalore and Berlin, in Mumbai and Manchester, because the social fractures he diagnoses, the violence of gender norms, the pathology of communal hatred, the loneliness of the marginalized self, are not peculiarly Indian but universally human.

Rozario Ignatius has observed that in Dattani's theatre, identity, whether gendered, religious, or sexual, is always constructed, always contested, and always the site of both oppression and resistance (The Plays of Mahesh Dattani 108). This is the animating insight of his entire dramatic project. James D. Fearson's theoretical formulation is useful here: identity operates simultaneously on the "social" level—as a category assigned by a community, and on the "personal" level, as the ground of individual self-understanding (10-11). Dattani's theatre dramatizes the perpetual tension between these two registers, and it is from this tension that his finest work draws its energy.

Dattani does not provide answers; he formulates the right questions. In an era when India is hurtling towards globalization while its social fabric is simultaneously being strained by revivalism and intolerance, his work remains a vital cultural checkpoint. It reminds us that modernity is an empty achievement if the ghosts of tradition, prejudice, and inequality continue to dance in the shadows of progress. Dattani has given Indian English Drama what Virginia Woolf demanded for women writers: a room of its own. In that room, Indian drama can finally dance without apology—like a man, like a woman, and like everything in between. His legacy is not merely literary; it is ethical. He has taught Indian theatre how to ask of itself what it is for, and to answer that question with courage.

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