

The Dynamics of Language in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani

Dr. Arpita Chakrabarti

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Asansol Girls' College

Asansol, West Bengal, India

arpitachakrabarti100@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper elucidates Mahesh Dattani's attempt to create a living theatre through the use of language in his plays *Final Solutions* and *Tara*. In these two plays, he uses English as the link-language and the language of communication in order to reach out to the multilingual and multicultural reality characteristic of the country. The English language that he uses is not the standardized English which carry with it an aura of colonization and bears the imperialistic fervors. Dattani's use of the English language is based on hybridization of English words, use of native Indian words that introduce his audience to the cultural and social milieu of the plays and the presence of colloquial English that English speaking urban Indians use in everyday life. The dynamics in the use of language is one of the method through which the playwright attempts to transform the face of urban theatre in post-colonial India.

Keywords: communication, multicultural, hybrid, milieu, urban

There has been a widespread debate among the practitioners and critics as to whether it is feasible to use English for any literary effort in India. In 1895, R.C. Dutt declared, 'all attempts to court the Muses in a foreign tongue must be fruitless.... True genius mistakes its vocation when it struggles in a foreign tongue' (Dutt, 1895, p.182). All said and done, English remained

the medium of expression right from the pre independence phase to date. Probing deeper into the issue of English writings, certain basic differences are perceptible between the pre-independence and post-independence phase. Macaulay's intention to teach the native the language spoken by the ruling class was to create a separate class of scholars. 'Complete Anglicization of India was Macaulay's ultimate aim' (Verghese,1971, p.3). The Indians showed an immense interest in Western learning because as K. K. Datta asserted that enlightened Indians in the early nineteenth century had come to 'realize the need of linking their countrymen with the progressive cultural forces of the outside world'(Datta,1964, pp.17). This learning also served as a link-language between people inside the country, thus resulting in a creation of national consciousness which helped the struggle for independence to gain momentum.

The literature that was written in English in the pre-independence phase was strictly British-English- a foreign tongue and the language of the masters. The motive behind writing in English was as M. K. Naik remarked '...practical. The Indians wanted to be heard by his English masters' (Naik,1982, p.228).The writings, especially Indian English drama, were written in unadulterated or chaste English or what may be called imperial English. Playwrights like Aurobindo or Kailasam cast their plays in the age-old Shakespearian mould. As a result, there was a wide disparity between the playwright's subject and his medium of expression, his subject being typically representative of Indian sensibilities and his language English. This is the problem that all Indian writers trying to express themselves in English face as Raja Rao in the foreword of his novel, *Kanthapura* expresses,'the telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is playwrights began to realize that English is an 'alien' language, yet not really an alien one's own'(Rao,1938). This problem remained unheeded until India gained independence. The playwrights began to realize that English is an alien

language, yet not really an alien language to them. It is the language of 'our intellectual make-up but not of our emotional make-up... We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us' (Rao,1938). Yet English is the only medium through which the writers can reach out to the multi-lingual, multi-communal and multi-cultural reality that is India. English is still the official language in India and has a sense of largeness and expansion which is denied to the regional languages. Moreover, it reflects a certain class that is still very much prevalent in India - the Western Indian elite educated in English or the urban upper class and the middle class. Writings which portray this class also portray the continuing 'colonial mentality of Indians, among other things' (De Souza, 1977, pp.56-57). So it is important to portray this class, to assess its role and its values. 'If Indian English drama can give us insights into this class, explore its relationship with and relevance to the rest of the society, and make that class realize what it is, it will perform a valuable function' (De Souza,1977, p.57).

But it was only when the theatre-of-roots movement began after Indian Independence that the Indian writers felt a need to 'create a theatre that did not follow British colonial models for modern theatre prevalent at the time' (Mee,2002, p.2). The theatre-of-roots movement can be seen 'as a way of decolonizing the theatre, a politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy (Mee,2002, p.2). It was with this movement that English language went a dramatic change. Playwrights like Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and others felt the need to indigenize the medium of writing in order to portray a comprehensive view of modern India with its highly complex cultural milieu.

Mahesh Dattani too, belonged to this vein of Indian English dramatist who observes 'like many urban people in India, where the language you speak at home is not the language of your

environment, especially if you move from your hometown and you use English to communicate, so you find that you're more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English' (Dattani, interview with Erin B. Mee, 1996) This was exactly what Dattani did in his two plays *Final Solutions* and *Tara*. But the English of the 'centre' was domesticated in his writings. He follows Rushdie's instructions 'to break up the language and put it back together in a different way... to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language...[and] to dislocate the English and let other things into it (Goonetilleke,1999,p.43).

Dattani's strategy or method of Indianisation, revitalisation and decolonization the English language is manifest at the lexical level by his insertion of a considerable number of Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani lexical items into his English. In *Final Solutions* we find 'poojapath,' 'baap re,' 'pallau,' 'galli,' 'charpai,' 'hookah,' 'tonga,' 'mohalla,' 'poojari,' 'sanskar,' 'karma,' 'ganga-jal,' 'rat,' 'haram ki aulad,' 'koel,' 'khakra,' 'jalebis,' 'dekshis,' 'thalis, etc. These words provide the exact connotation the playwright wishes to transfer to his audience in order to introduce them to the cultural atmosphere of the country. They also pinpoint the class and its activities. Dattani demolishes the notion of centrality of English by inventing new forms of existing English words as well as of Indian lexical items through audaciously creative hybridization for example in *Final Solutions* words and phrases like 'pooja-room', 'mere own khoon ne mujhe maar dala,' etc. are used. The language in the play is deliberately modified and has distinctively Indian rhythms. This experimentation was also followed by Gieve Patel in his play *Princes* as exemplified by Eunice de Souza in his article (De Souza,1977, p.158). It creates a language that characters can speak without straining our credulity. The above examples from *Final Solutions* concede to Gurcharan Das's remark that 'the English theatre in India [will have to] project the kind of hybrid English we speak interspersed with Indian expressions. My

approach is that the characters should speak the English that is spoken in India, using expression like 'kya yar.' 'chalo,' 'Bhai'. And actors can bring about a revolution in spoken English (Das, Interviewed by R.Parthasarathy,1973). In *Final Solutions* we find Dattani's usage of the complex and compound sentences in order to suggest the 'indianness' of the language. Simple assertive sentences are dropped in favor of long sentences. This is deliberately an anti- colonial strategy to highlight the typical Indian language habit. In his *The Indianisation of English*, Dr. Kachru observes, '...Indian English has a tendency toward using complex noun and verb phrases and rather long sentences' (Kachru,1983, p.178).

Indian inflexions abound in Dattani's play. The language speak of a mind that is typically Indian for example 'Whom you knew there's a curfew?' or 'the chariot was to be brought,' and 'I gave her mother the saree I had brought for embroidery' etc. Dattani also transplants Indian concepts into English equivalent expressions, for example 'a drop of oil cannot merge with an ocean of milk,' 'want our blood to boil,' 'stone thrower's threat,' and philosophical expressions which convey something more than just words. They project Indian sensibilities like 'All religion is one. Only the ways to God are many,' 'sanskar,' or 'karma'. A familiar Indian flavor is created in the dialogues by a reference to 'sandal paste,' 'attars,' 'fragment flowers,' 'Gangajal,' etc. These techniques in striving to indigenize English portray a 'synthesis of East and West, while retaining, rediscovering and reclaiming much that has always been our own' (Naik,1982, p.229). M.E. Derrett convincingly argues, 'Because of their first- hand experience of the West, they (i.e. Indian writers in English) have the power to perceive differences; they have experienced the oriental's adjustment to a western so- ciety and re-adjustment again to the oriental... they must feel a sense of release in expressing their sensations' (Derrett,1966, p.152).

This is exactly the psychological temperament that went in the creation and use of language in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*. Unlike *Final Solutions*, this play operates on a much more domestic level into which is instilled the issues of the larger society. Throughout the play, Dattani's conscious ploy to retain and re-adjust the language is noteworthy. *Tara* portrays an affluent Indian upper middle class family together with its linguistic usages and stylistic idiom. As in the other play discussed above, in *Tara*, too, we find the presence of a number of regional lexical items in English - for example, 'bhaiya', 'bartheeni', 'beda', 'gadda', 'chemcho', 'heg iddira', 'wandu tarah', 'ghati', etc. These regional words not only give the play an element of Indianness of its own but also bring in the issues of class and community. The difference in community creates a rift in the characters of the play. Though all the characters speak in English, Bharati finds it comforting to have Kannedigas as neighbors in Mumbai. Her relationship with her Gujrati husband and her gradual estrangement is rooted in these issues of class, caste and community. The conflict is reflected in the use of language in the play. Beside the use of regional lexical items, Dattani places various slang words, words of everyday use and idiom used by the twentieth century generation. Tara says about Dr. Gokhale that 'he's handsome in a "ghati" sort of way'. Roopa, talking about Prema and Nalini, opines that they love to 'gas about'. Patel, asking Chandan to stop helping his mother with the knitting calls it a 'damn' thing. He accuses Bharati of turning Chandan into a 'sissy'. Therefore, it is explicit that Dattani intermingles Indian lexical items along with contemporary English slangs giving it an effect which is representative of the cultural reality that is our very own. Accompanied with it is the creation of a potentially Indian family atmosphere in its language together with its reference to 'Kanchipuram idlis' and south Indian cuisine. As in *Final Solutions*, we find hybridisation of English words in phrases like -- 'Tell, tell' and the use of relative compounds like 'wife-beater', 'a child abuser'.

Bharati's mental disparity is expressive in her use of language too. Her sentences are filled with omissions, elisions, and break offs which suggest a psychologically disturbed mind heading towards neurosis.

Bharati: She... she must make more friends. Chandan in all right -- he has

his writing, but she ... He is different, he is sort of self-contained, but Tara ...

She can be very good company and she has her talents. (Dattani 2000, p.340)

Here, though she is speaking to Roopa, it discloses her inmost thoughts, and is narrated much in the manner of a soliloquy. She is as if speaking her mind aloud. Later her mental strain is portrayed in her inability to construct whole sentences.

Bharati. : ...I go out of my way to ... why that Roopa...she ... she...

What you're saying just isn't true! (Dattani 2000, p. 353)

This fact also refers to the female discourse of the impossibility to fit in the normative order of masculine language system. Thus Bharati's use of language, with its omissions and broken sentences provide an antithesis to the typical patriarchal discourse with its emphasis on order, syntactical regularity and grammatical correctness.

Yet another facet of cultural disparity is seen unfolding in the language used in the play. Roopa's warning Tara to remain away from Prema and Nalini highlights the fact .they are not really our standard, you know. Their English isn't that good. They won't understand your jokes like peas in pots and all that' (Dattani 2000, p.339). Here, speaking in English is a marker which supports the class and status to which individuals belong. Mahesh Dattani, wishes to deconstruct this notion of English as a superior language by making Roopa use all the malapropisms which is a constant dig at her knowledge of English. She fails to understand the phrase -- 'two peas is a

pot'. Other examples of her malapropisms are 'concoction' where she actually means 'decoction' and 'combatible' where the actual word should be 'compatible'.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani employs the dynamics of language as a powerful tool that bridges the gap between personal and societal conflicts on one hand and provides voice to the marginalized identities on the other. Through a unique blend of realism and expressionistic techniques in language, his characters expose the hypocrisies of social norms and meander through complex human relationships. The Eurocentric hegemony is strategically dismantled in his plays *Final Solutions* and *Tara* by weaving Indian-English dialects, regional idioms and cultural subtexts. Dattani resists the dominance of Western theatrical conventions and asserts the legitimacy of postcolonial narratives. Therefore, his use of language becomes an act of defiance – challenging elitist literary norms while authentically representing India's multicultural reality. Dattani's linguistic strategy not only enhances the dramatic impact but also decolonizes the stage, making his works a vital force in redefining contemporary Indian theatre written in the English.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2025 by Dr. Arpita Chakrabarti Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

- Dutt, R.C. *The Literature of Bengal*, 1895.
- Datta, K. K. *Dawn of Renascent India*. 1964.
- Dattani, M. *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000.
- Dattani, M. In an interview with Erin. B. Mee, 27 August,1996.
- Das, G. Interviewed by R. Parthasarathy, *The Indian Express*, 7 July,1973.
- Derrett, M.E. *The Modern Indian Novel in English: A Comparative Approach* Brussels: 1966.
- Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. *Salman Rushdie*, Macmillan Modern Novelists Series, Houndmills: Macmillan,1993.
- Kachru, B.B. *The Indianisation of English: The English Language in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1983.
- Mee, Erin. B. *Contemporary Drama: India*. New Delhi: OUP, 2002.
- Naik, M.K.1982. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982.
- Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Delhi: Orient Longman, 1938.
- Souza, E.D. 'Some Recent Indian Plays in English', *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* ed. M.K. Naik and Mokashi Punekar. Madras: OUP,1977.
- Verghese, C. P. *Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English*. Bombay: Somaiya, 1971.