

## **Mahesh Dattani's Characters: Prisoners of their Past**

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### **Abstract**

A study of Mahesh Dattani's plays show that his characters are prisoners of their past. Their view of the present is coloured by some experience, incident or their strong belief in a particular way of life. All their actions are governed by their past history though, most of the times, they do not have the courage to confront this past. They have carried this burden of the past throughout their lives and they want their next generation to do the same. In the present paper an attempt has been made to study how the past of the protagonists of Dattani's plays affect their present.

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Mahesh Dattani is a prominent English playwright. Through his plays he has mostly touched though social issues, which remain hidden. He believes that until and unless the society has the courage to face these truths, it cannot move ahead. Often the issues dealt in his plays are placed behind facades that need to be penetrated. The past has a strong influence on all of us. Dattani through his plays shows the struggle of the protagonists to come out of its shadows.

*Where There's a Will*, Dattani's first play is the story of a Gujarati businessman Hasmukh Mehta, a patriarch, who wants to control his family not only in his lifetime but also after his death through his will. His presence is so dominating that all his family members including his mature son Ajit, survive as subalterns who cannot speak. Ajit has a realization of his position but has no power to express his choice. He expresses his anguish, "Anything I do is wrong for you! Just because you are a self-made man and had a deprived childhood" (CP 454). Hasmukh Mehta becomes an overbearing father and domineering husband and is unhappy with everyone around him- with no one having lived up to his expectations. The reason behind this was his father who

trained him to act just as an instrument to fulfill his desires. Hasmukh's father exercised hegemonic power over the rest of his family and throughout his life perpetuated his own conception of the self. Hasmukh wants to emulate the same model. "Dattani brings in references to three successive generations of the male line, and indicates the compulsions under which Hasmukh behaves in the way that he does: on him lies the onus of perpetuating patriarchy and its stereotypes" (Kuthari 58).

*Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani's another famous play, shows violence against women, exploitation of the weaker and presents the picture of the mean, squalid corporate world. The main characters of the play are Dolly, Alka Jiten and Nitin and Baa, Jiten and Nitin's mother, Baa. Dolly and Alka are married to Jitan and Nitin. Baa is an invalid who has been ditched by her husband. Embittered that she is, she sets up her sons against wives and supports their violent behavior towards them. On her instigation, Dolly was beaten by her husband Jiten when she was pregnant and as a result her daughter is a mentally retarded child:

*Bravely Fought the Queen* seems to be approving Freud's theory about repression. Jiten, who had a very bad childhood, has turned into a demon of a man. He is violent, alcoholic, lecherous wife-beater inclined to kill at the slightest provocation. Nitin, who is a guy, is duped by his own best friend and suffers a guilt-ridden relationship with his wife Alka (Tyagi, 121).

*Dance Like a Man* is a play that deals with one of Dattani's pet concerns-gender-through one of his principal passions, dance. The play is the story of Jairaj, a man who shows the courage to take dance as a profession and goes against the society's perception that dance is only for women. His father, Amritlal cannot tolerate his decision to take dance as a profession and his dance teacher. Jairaj is married to Ratna who is herself an accomplished dancer of *Bharatnatyam* and wants to make it her career. Jairaj's passion for dance threatens all those stereotypes that his imperious father, Amritlal carries. The decision of Ratna to learn the ancient secrets of her art from an old devdasi infuriates him. All these contradictions are tortuous for Amritlal-the prostitute as an artiste and a man as a dancer.

The conflict in the life of Jairaj with his father is a conflict of colonial sensibility and progressive ideology, social expectations and individual choices. The traditional bondages of Amritlal do not permit Jairaj to exercise his own will. He challenges his father, “Reform, Don’t talk about return to our society; you would let them practice their own art” (CP 416). Amritlal stood for social acceptability and for Jairaj it was a matter of his own identity. The gender defined roles are so strongly rooted that Amritlal even does not accept Guruji’s long hair and the way of walking (Agarwal, 80).

In *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani has taken the issue of gender discrimination in India. The preference of a boy child over a girl child is rooted in Indian society. Tara, her brother Chandan, her mother Bharati and her father Mr. Patel are the main characters in this play. Tara is more confident, enterprising and capable to deal with her problems than her brother Chandan; nevertheless she fails in the race of favour.

While the major theme of the play is still gender discrimination, the action of the play dictates that we look at the family conflicts, about the motivations of characters, and the impact they have on each other. Bharati’s excessive concern and love for Tara, her concern for her future, her empathy and sympathy for her, her desire to donate her kidney to Tara even when there is another donor, her desire for Tara’s exclusive love-everything is motivated by her realization that she has denied Tara a leg, that it was her decision that caused this particular disability in her daughter. It is this horrific knowledge that leads to her mental breakdown as also to the breakdown between her and her husband, Patel (Prasad 141).

The play *Thirty Days in September* is Dattani’s shortest full length play. It was commissioned by an NGO called RAHI (Recovery and Healing from Incest) that helps survivors of child sexual abuse. The main characters of this play are Mala, Shanta, her brother Vinay and Mala’s boyfriend Deepak. Shanta wants Mala to get married to her lover Deepak as she thinks that

marriage is the only remedy to bring Mala out of the shadows of sin and guilt. But Mala is not ready for this marriage. Deepak fails to understand the reason behind her refusal.

In spite of Deepak's proposal to marry her, Mala fails to identify herself with him because of her past experiences based on her maternal uncle's sexual exploitation. Hence she refuses Deepak's proposal. Shanta, her mother fails to understand this. She too is a victim of her brother's incestuousness (Das 66)

This horrible past does not let both Mala and her mother Shanta feel at ease. It continues to follow them until they show the courage to face and accept it without a sense of guilt.

Dattani's *Final Solutions* is based on Hindu-Muslim communal disharmony, but inwardly it shows the mutual disagreements between the members of Gandhi family- Hardika/Daksha, her son Ramnik, her daughter-in-law Aruna and her granddaughter Smita. The disagreements emerge when Ramnik decides to give shelter to two Muslim boys Javed and Babban, who are being chased by an angry mob. All the characters have their own justification for their decisions.

Daksha (now the grandmother) hates Muslims because her father was killed in a communal riot, and because her overtures to friendship to Zarine, a young Muslim girl, were rejected after other communal riots that razed Zarine's shop, and which incidentally, was bought by Daksha's father-in-law. Javed, the young Muslim fundamentalist and member of a 'gang' has long nursed a resentment against the world because of the 'otherness' and the demonization of his community and religious identity by the dominant community and religious identity by the dominant community. Ramnik Gandhi, Daksha/Hardika's son is trying to atone for the sins committed by his father and grandfather, a therefore is a conscious 'secularist'. His wife Aruna is an 'ordinary devout Hindu. Bobby and Smita are oppressed by their own senses of history, and seem desperate to escape from its clutches, to leave behind the baggage of social, religious and communal identities that seem to dog them in all their relationships and actions (Multani 112).

Volume IV,  
Issue XII  
December 2016

**IJELLH**  
International Journal of English  
Language, Literature and Humanities

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
**ISSN : 2321-7065**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Thus the study of Dattani's plays shows that the reason behind the vindictiveness of his characters is their angry and sad past. The actions of these characters are rooted firmly in their past and it is really difficult for them to lose themselves from its tight hold. The future generation has to suffer because of the conflicts and frustrations of the elders. Shadows of the past are felt throughout the present and since past can't be undone there seems to be no end to it.

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SERIAL  
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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
**ISSN : 2321-7065**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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