

Preface

Of late, one of the important phenomena in the arena of Indian English literature is frequent appearances of the plays of Mahesh Dattani in academic syllabi across the globe, apart from their growing popularity on both page and stage and also film adaptations of a couple of them. The following pages are my humble attempt to contribute “something” to the rather thin corpus of critical literature on Dattani’s plays.

While some theatre critics go so far as to deny any meaning of plot/action outside moments of its performance, it is generally held that a play outgrows textual control during its evolution from its inception in the playwright’s mind to its reception by spectators. It is altered/interpreted by the director, enacted/given meaning by actors, sometimes censured by the state authority, modified by available stage props and may finally become to the audience a public statement. In the given context, the source of my delight in discussing the plays chiefly as texts/words written pages may sound discrepant. However, the experience, far from diluting the richness of the potential performance texts acquired an added dimension since the act of reading itself acquires a performative quality in the readers’ discursive identity and imagination, especially since “when the words are Dattani’s, the flesh is already contained in it” (Walling) and also since, as a reader, my focal point has been the playwright’s exploration of “invisible *issues*.” This is not to diminish the importance of stage for his plays.

“Unlike the American we may claim that we are rigid and pure, but we are the most flexible and impure of all races. The sooner we come to terms with fact the sooner we can get on with the rest” (Aiyar). Rather a reluctant writer -- his plays chiefly growing out of a necessity of addressing contemporary issues, Dattani chose themes that cross borders of “pure” Indianness as well as a language that is more or less spoken by the average urban citizen of this multilingual and multicultural country. Bringing Indian English theatre down from its exclusivist and elitist height, Dattani has also contributed to what Mee calls “a decolonizing process” “without retorting to the politically driven necessity to return to the indigenous aesthetic or dramaturgy” (Quoted in Chaudhuri 76). Hence, reading in his plays the ever-renewing orchestration of the familial and the personal, the individual and the social with their ever-shifting borders and irreducible, has been an educating and rewarding experience.