

CHAPTER VII

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Drama is a performing art. The enactment of a play is more interesting to the audience than the readers who read the play because the spoken words through the mouths of characters create a real life situation before the audience. The performance by the actors on the stage influences the audience. Unlike any other genre of literature like prose, poetry and fiction where the written words are impressive, in drama, the written words themselves are not sufficient. In drama, the technical aspects like stage setting, dialogues, light, sound, time shifts and the use of symbols make the message reach the audience effectively. As Mark Schorer says, “Technique is the only means [the writer] has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it” (387). Mahesh Dattani, as a theatre person effectively uses them. Dattani is a tireless innovator, who bravely experiments with the techniques of presentation to achieve the desired results. He believes that the magic of the theatre is in reconstructing space, time, weight and flow of the essential components of life itself.

In Dattani’s plays, the titles are significant; they are meaningfully related to the story. In *Where There’s a Will*, even after Hasmukh’s death,

his family is forced to live according to his will. Dattani plays on the word ‘will’. This pun on the word indicates Hasmukh’s wish as well as his written will. In *Dance Like a Man*, Jairaj’s desire to become a professional dancer, is thwarted by his father in a devious way; hence the title is ironic. *Tara* is named after the titular protagonist. It would be convenient for the author to name the work after the protagonist but except in *Tara*, Dattani doesn’t resort to this technique in any other play. Dattani says about the change of title from its original one, “It used to be ‘*Twinkle Tara*’ but Alyque Padamsee suggested that this might make it sound like a children’s play, which it isn’t” (Dasgupta). So he renamed it as ‘*Tara*’. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is based on the English translation of the Hindi poem *Jhansi Ki Rani*. The title is applicable to both the sisters Dolly and Alka. Both fight bravely though their enemies are different. The title *Final Solutions* is highly suggestive, because it makes the audience think and question, is there any final solution for the communal riots and the religious intolerance. The title for *Final Solutions* is taken from *The Third Reich and the Holocaust*. In the play *Do the Needful*, the title confirms the desperate need of the two families to make sure that the marriage happens. “The most they have to do is “do the needful”, for a marriage of convenience. “Do the Needful” is uttered four times in the play, [...]” (Joshipura 233). The title *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is of symbolic

significance as it suggests the sacred ritual during the marriage. The reader or audience will immediately recognise the reference to marriage and understand the chanting of marriage mantras and the sounds of fire at the beginning and at the end of the play. The title is also ironic as the marriage puts an end to the life of hijra Kamla. “The very title *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is ironic and is in paradoxical reversal to the story” (Ramani 269). The title *Thirty Days in September* refers to a nursery rhyme of a child. Here, Dattani highlights the horror of child sexual abuse which traumatizes an innocent child’s life. The play *Morning Raga* is woven around a signer’s ambition to sing the raga ‘Sindhu Bhairavi’, in a concert in city. In English, *Ek Alag Mausam* means *A Special Season*. When people know they are HIV positive and are going to die shortly, the others around them should make the intervening period a special occasion for them that they should cherish and live every moment of it with dignity and self-respect.

In drama, unlike fiction, there will not be a narrator, as the characters express themselves through dialogues. Mahesh Dattani changes this tradition by introducing a narrator, Dan, in his play *Tara*. Through him, the story unfolds. “Dan the older Chandan is a narrator figure who is writing a play about his twin sister Tara. The narrative is non-linear and the play is predominantly a recall of memory with a predetermined closure.

It moves back and forth in time and arrives at a starting point" (Mathur 166). In *Thirty Days in September*, the story is told in retrospect through the eyes of the survivor. Dattani here focuses on the happenings inside the minds of the characters in sub-textual style. There are no heroes and heroines in his plays; only major contemporary issues hold centre stage. Each one of Dattani's plays has a family at the centre portraying the changing, evolving or disintegrating relationship within the family. "The setting for all of Dattani's plays then, is necessarily embedded within the mechanics of the middle class Indian family" (Chaudhuri, Asha 24).

Mahesh Dattani insistently takes the family unit as the setting and home as the locale for his plays. Dattani's plays start in the drawing room of the family and the action takes place in the house. In *Where There's a Will*, the locale is Hasmukh's house. *Dance Like a Man* is set in Ratna and Jairaj's old fashioned house located in the heart of the city. The play *Tara* is set in Patel's house in Mumbai and Dan's bedsitter in London. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Act I is set in Jiten's drawing room and Act II takes place in his office, in Act III, the action again moves on to the drawing room in Jiten's house in a posh locality, in the suburb of Bangalore. The locale for the play *Final Solutions* is Gandhi's household and the street outside his house in Amargaon. The play *Do the Needful* is

set partly in Mumbai and partly in Bangalore. The locale for *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is Kamlesh's flat in Mumbai with Mumbai's skyline as the backdrop of the stage. *Ek Alag Mausam* is also set in Mumbai. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is set in Bangalore. Mala's home in the suburb of Delhi is the place of action for *Thirty Days in September*. The locale for the screen play *Morning Raga* is rural. The action is set in the interior village on the banks of Godavari River in eastern Andhra Pradesh. "Morning Raga is the only play of Dattani, composed in rural background marked by simplicity and sublimity. It prepares a background for spontaneity and spirituality that Dattani intends to manifest in defence of Carnatic music" (Agarwal 130).

Dattani observes great care in giving elaborate stage directions and stage layout. He clearly explains the stage set-up for each act in his plays. Dattani says, "[...] I always direct the first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instructions which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors" (qtd. in Nair). He finishes his plays only after the first performance of the plays because this helps him to realise what kind of material help like sound, light and music is needed in certain points of the play to make it effective. Then he adds necessary stage directions in his plays which help the other directors who direct his

plays. It also helps the readers a great deal to understand his plays so that they can think of the visual effects of the performance, while reading the plays.

Dattani uses multi-level stage sets. He carefully segments the stage into different areas which are associated with one or more character or the same character at different points of time. He distributes the action among different levels on stage, which not only makes his plays visually exciting but makes them move at a snappy pace. Dattani's innovations and experiments in stage craft are essential for the communication of ideas:

Sacrificing the traditional pattern of stage, he creates split stages to decode the fractions of human consciousness. [...]

There are multilevel sets arranged in the background of family. The divided spaces help him to reconstruct the past and the present in quick successions of memories. (Agarwal 189)

The stage design for the play *Where There's a Will* consists of three spaces. The main action takes place in the lavish house of Hasmukh Mehta. The first space is the dining cum living room, the next is the

bedroom of Hasmukh and his wife Sonal and the third is the ‘hideously trendy’ bedroom of their son Ajit and his wife Preeti.

In the play *Dance Like a Man*, the stage is divided into three layers. Up centre is the entrance to the room with a huge arched doorway. There is a rear panel with a telephone and a modern painting on it. When the rear panel is slid, there appears a garden. Upstage left is a dance practice hall. Upstage right, a stair case leads to the bedroom. Downstage right exists the kitchen. The furniture in the room are old fashioned.

The play *Tara* is also performed on a multi-level set. The main action of the play is played out in the lowest level of the stage which occupies the major portion of the stage. It represents the house of the Patels’. It is seen only in the memory of Dan. The next level represents the bedsitter of Dan, the older Chandan, in a suburb of London. This is the only realistic level. The action of the play unravels through the memory of Dan. The highest level has a chair in which Dr.Thakkar, who has separated the twins through surgery and has changed Tara’s fate, remains seated throughout the play. “Although he doesn’t watch the action of the play, his connection is asserted by his sheer God-like presence” (T 323). The downstage right represents the galli outside Patel’s house.

In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the stage is divided into three acting areas. The main space is the living room of Dolly and Jiten Trivedi located in a posh suburb of Bangalore. The room is tastefully decorated but ill maintained. The bar occupies the central and major portion of the upstage, “a glowing blasphemous shrine to alcohol” (Walling). On the next higher level is Baa’s bedroom. Upstage left is a large window which overlooks the front portion of the house. Downstage left leads to the kitchen, and on the right is the main door of the house.

The play *Final Solutions* begins with detailed stage instructions. The stage is divided into two separate acting areas. The stage set is exhaustive because it projects both the exteriors and interiors. Dattani uses space very skillfully, sometimes confining and sometimes widening. He moves from one part of the stage to another, from one level of the stage to another and he lights up different areas of the stage at different times. As he does this, his characters move in time. Age becomes youth, 1990s become 1947 and past, present and future come together. The first area is “a horseshoe or crescent-shaped ramp, with the ends sloping to stage level” (FS 165). This level is mostly occupied by the mob, and all the scenes that are located on the street are played here. The second level is the house of the Gandhis’. This level is further divided into three acting spaces with imaginary wall in

between them. Another level is the level of Daksha with her writing desk and an oil lamp, indicating the period of time as the late 1940's. According to the stage direction, the grand mother should be positioned and lit in such a way that the entire action of the play is seen through her eyes. "Hence the stage settings are contrived to amalgamate the multiple layers of the societal, the familial and the historical contour of such a location" (Chaudhuri, Asha 39).

In the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* also, Dattani presents multi-level sets to show the different parts of the house corresponding with the mental states of the different characters. In this play, he uses a dark space called 'shoonya' where the characters reveal their innermost thoughts. The acting area in *Thirty Days in September* is divided into four spaces. First one has a chair and a table for the councilor. The second one is Mala's living room, the third is the pooja room hidden behind the screen and the fourth one is the flexible level which represents many places like two restaurants, Deepak's home and a party house.

In *Morning Raga*, Dattani's stage directions show that the personal relationship between the individuals is heightened through music. "The

duality of image – individual and society, has been projected through the division of the stage in the form of interiors and exteriors” (Agarwal 177).

Elaborate stage direction is Dattani’s important device in his plays. Dattani explains the situation of the plays and the moods of the characters through stage directions:

Dattani reveals stage setting with a view to create an appropriate background for the gravity and sentimentality of the issue. There is a microscopic description of details of stage setting because such details are essential to decode the impression of the characters. This sort of speculative dimension of theatre suggests that Dattani uses stage to propagate the techniques that are true to the real life experiences. (Agarwal 179-80)

Action is an important aspect of theatre. The action makes the theatre dynamic. Dattani uses simultaneous actions and overlapping conversations. The past and present exist simultaneously in his plays at various levels of the stage. The action in *Where There's a Will* is simple. “The play is nearest to the traditional drama as far as the unfolding of the

action is concerned" (Joshipura 88). In *Dance Like a Man*, the action moves from present to past by simply wrapping around a shawl and the sliding of the rear panel. The actions in the present are enacted in the living room and the actions of the past are enacted in the garden. Dattani bends time and space to suit the plot of his plays. Time swings between past and present or simply stands still. In *Dance Like a Man*, the action shuttles effortlessly between the past and the present, dissolving the different time shifts; it travels back and forth between generations. In *Tara*, the action takes place mostly in the memory of Dan, older Chandan. "Old newspaper cuttings, telephonic conversations, snippet from a television interview with Dr.Thakkar who records the progress of the medical advancement with a self assured indifference all build up the action" (Mathur 166). The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is divided into three acts. Act I is named "The Women", Act II "The Men" and Act III "Free for All". The action in the first two acts occurs simultaneously at two different places – in Dolly's drawing room and in Jiten's office. "The dramatist has attempted to present simultaneous actions occurring at different places at the same time. However, the playwright has consciously divided both the actions in two different acts for clarity" (Joshipura 88). Past and present exists simultaneously. When Baa speaks from the past, her words alternate with those spoken by Jiten and Nitin in the present. Similarly in *Final Solutions*,

the dialogues of Daksha from the past alternate with that of Hardika in the present. The different spaces of the stage indicate different time spans. “Creation of sense of simultaneity by juxtaposing the past and the present and the use of overlapping conversation demands subtle and specific maneuvering. At such juncture, linear time is given up for emotional or non linear time also known as compacting time” (Mathur 163). In this play, the past is not represented as flash back but as the observation of the same person as young and old self of the same character.

In *Final Solutions*, the past actions are shown as recorded in the diary of Daksha. “Technically, this play is a great innovation. It is the enactment of a woman’s diary recording two separate stream of events with a considerable time gap between the two” (Joshiipura 97). In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the action of the play runs smoothly. Scenes are rather short and the action moves rapidly from one scene to another. The action often shifts from interior to exterior. In the play *Thirty Days in September*, the narrative moves back and forth with multiple stage sets. The play has three zones with regard to time. The play begins with the therapy of Mala and follows a flash back of four years where Mala is in first session of her therapy and in the last zone, Mala is present in various locations like a party, at a restaurant and at Deepak’s home. In the play *Do*

the Needful, the narrative begins in the present and then drifts into the past and ends in the present. In most of Dattani's plays, the past is a constant presence in the character's consciousness; mostly past is relived in the memory or narrated through the dialogue of characters. "The manipulation of split scenes and flash back techniques is a convenient device to capture the flux of conscience in past and present" (Agarwal 99). Thus the concept of time plays as important role in Dattani's plays. It is clearly shown that the dark shadows of the past exist in the present. The memory of the past gives insight into their mistakes, causes regret on guilt in the present and leads to development and resolution of the plot. "[...] None of his plays is static within its time frame. They move between past and present, even between life and death, with the ease with which a character enters and leaves the stage" (qtd. in Mc Rae: 55-6).

In most of Dattani's plays, there are some secrets in the past of the family which come back and haunt the present life of its members. In *Dance Like a Man*, "... retired dancer couple ... come face to face with the human cost of the pursuit of their career and the terrible memory of the death of their infant son due to their negligence" (Benegal 61). Similarly, in the play *Tara*, the guilt-ridden mother Bharati showers affection on Tara to compensate for the grave injustice she has done. In *Bravely Fought the*

Queen, Daksha's grandmother suffers because of her guilty conscience that she is responsible for Daksha's spastic condition. The old people in these plays are the carriers of the past living with attendant guilt and shame. Mala and Shanta in *Thirty Days in September* suffer silently because they both are the victims of child sexual abuse in the past which casts its shadow on their present life. In *Morning Raga*, Swarnalatha lives the life of self-exile because of her guilt. She feels that she is accursed and is responsible for the loss of her son, her friend and also many other villagers. The memory of the past is so powerful that she could not cross the bridge for twenty years. Here Dattani also uses flash back technique. "The action in the play split between past and present, floats in order of flashback and flash forward in a symmetrical order corresponding with the flow of consciousness of different characters" (Agarwal 130).

Simultaneous conversation occurs at two different places indicated by two different levels of the stage. The play *Final Solutions* shows Dattani's innovation in technical aspects. The grand mother is projected as two characters. One is the young bride Daksha and the other is the old Hardika. At one point of time, both the characters are presented on the stage at the same time. Dattani innovatively uses Lata and Viswas to play

young Ratna and Jairaj during the time shifts, and old Jairaj takes the role of his father, Amritlal:

In *Dance Like a Man* during the first flashback, the actor who plays Jairaj instantaneously turns into Amritlal by simply wrapping a shawl around his shoulders. The young version of Ratna is her daughter Lata, while Lata's fiancé steps into the role of young Jairaj, when time shifts to the present, the young Ratna exits, calling out to Jairaj, and the older one enters, taking up from where she leaves off. (Meena 9)

Dattani observes classical unities of time, place and action in his plays. In *Final Solutions*, unity of place has been carefully observed as the entire action occurs within the household of Gandhi. The action is also confined to one night. With respect to unity of action, "Parallelism of theme in three different streams of action makes them one united action" (Joshipura 139). However, the action moves backwards in memory to portray Hardika's younger self. "On the whole, the play has a close knit structure. There are no superfluities of any kind. Aristotelian law of probability and necessity has been meticulously observed" (Joshipura 139). In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani through the past protrudes into the

present in the form of memory. The action of the play starts in the evening and ends before midnight. The duration of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a few hours of an evening. The place of action is Kamlesh's flat. By using the techniques of flashback and memory, Dattani keeps up the unity of time in most of the plays and depicts what happens in the present. This technique is especially so useful in the plays like *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, and *Morning Raga* which cover a long span of time.

In *Tara*, the scene shifts from India to London; in *Morning Raga*, from a rural village to the city. In all the other plays, Dattani adheres to the same location where the plays are set. In most of his plays, the focus of main action is a single protagonist and the ups and downs in his or her life except in plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the focus of action is divided between the life of Dolly and Alka. *Dance Like a Man* is the story of two generations with the same kind of ambition.

One of the cardinal constituents of drama is the proper use of language which is essential to bring the feeling of reality on the stage. "Dramatic language is not a tool for communication of ideas but a process to reconstruct life on the stage. The dialogue should be natural outcome of

the genuine responses" (Agarwal 175). Dattani uses simple prose without obscurity. The language is in conversational mode as naturalness in dialogue is the target of the dramatist. Dattani chooses to write in English. The English he uses in his plays comprises the natural cadences of the middle class Indian bilingual speaker. "[...] Whether the character is Gujarati, Kannadiga, or de regionalized urban, the speech patterns and vocabulary are both expressive as well as indigenous" (Multani, Introduction 19). Dattani's dialogues are free from archaic expressions and highly philosophical speeches. Use of broken sentences, incomplete expressions and interference of telephone creates a sense of real life-like situation which fills the gap between real life and drama. Dattani's characters speak the homogenized, convent-learned language of the Indian middle class persons and it is limited in range and nuance. "One of the most striking aspects of Dattani's character is that they use English which is neither stilted, nor archaic, nor uncomfortably directed only towards a really elite and upper-class audience" (Multani, Introduction 12).

In some of his plays, Dattani uses words from regional languages like Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada written in English spelling. He does not attempt to translate the words. In *Final Solutions*, the name of the singing bird is given as 'koel' and Daksha uses the expression 'Baap re!'. In *Do*

the Needful, Alpesh uses an expression in Hindi, “Teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup”. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* has a lot of Hindi dialogues. In *Tara* and *Do the Needful*, Kannada dialogues are used. In *Morning Raga*, the English language is mixed occasionally with Telegu which gives southern flavour to the play. The code-mixing gives an Indian flavour to the language of Dattani’s plays.

The dialogues in Dattani’s plays are easy flowing and assured. They are short, pointed and meaningful. The language in the theatre is not merely verbal language. The dialogue brings the characters life like on the stage. Dattani avoids lyrical expression and bombastic words. He proves that even simple, clear, meaningful prose can provide concentrated action and desirable results on stage.

In Dattani’s plays, there is a great deal of smart repartee, the humour which can easily be understood by the audience. Apart from that, pathos is presented in a delicate manner. “The tone of his plays is light, there is bright comedy within often sombre bounds. It is not a jokey, slapstick humour but a comedy arising from a wry look at human behaviour” (Haider 25). A serious thought presented in a comic mode elates the pleasure of a live theatre. In the play *Where There’s a Will*, the humour is

through the character of Hasmukh especially after his appearance as ghost. Direct utterances made by Hasmukh when he is alive as well as a ghost evoke laughter among the audience. The play is a boisterous comedy. “When Hasmukh speaks to the audience, (Puffs on his cigarette). At the rate I’m puffing, I should be dead in forty minutes” (WTW 456). Actually he dies in less than the specified time. After his death, his ghost waits in the room to watch his wife to discover his death. Sonal thinks, “Of course, he’s asleep. He just has to lie down on the bed and he is dead to the world!” Hasmukh’s ghost comments, “She has a way of saying things” (WTW 476). Dattani’s innovative technique of bringing a ghost on stage and its role as commentator adds comic element to the play.

This is a clever device of the ghost who acts as a commentator on the action, albeit a very biased one, whose statements evoke laughter from the audience that meanwhile has learnt more. The culturally rooted idea of ghosts hanging from a tamarind tree is used to bring more fun, even directly poking fun at the audience. (Chaudhuri, Asha 110)

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani uses subtle humour:

It is humour which gently illustrates the barely perceptible, yet crucial swinging of power between Jairaj and his future son-in-law, Viswas, just as it is an essentially homourous situation where a statement made by Ratna to her father-in-law seals Jairaj's fate as a dancer, cementing his father's determination that his son will be a man, not a Bharatanatyam performer. (Multani 23-4)

The funniest bit in the play comes when Ratna informs her father-in-law that the next day Jairaj is going to learn a new dance form Kuchipudi in which men dress-up as women.

In the play *Tara*, the disabled twins outwit others and distinguish themselves, with their proficiency in English, from their neighbourhood friend Roopa. The conversations between the twins and Roopa have comic as well as serious repercussions. Dattani's delightful humour and quick repartee add comedy to the action of the play. The words and phrases like "Ogler", "Combatible", and "Peas in pot" provide amusement.

Another experimental device in the play, *Do the Needful* is the introduction of 'double' dialogue. Through this method, in a dialogue, the

first reaction of the character is given as ‘thought’ and then the actual utterance at that moment is mentioned as ‘speech’. Lata when questioned about her culinary talents answers, “(thought). Madhur Jeffrey and Tarla Delal. (speech). My grandmother” (DN 135).

Dattani has evolved a device of ‘thought’ and ‘voice over’ to reveal the inner thoughts in the minds of the characters instead of the traditional ‘aside’ and ‘soliloquy’. The ‘voice over’ comes from the back stage representing the thought of the character. The technique of thought helps to fill some gaps. Sometimes, the main surface story itself does not make adequate sense; at that point, the ‘thought’ comes in handy.

In *Do the Needful*, ‘thought’ appears only in two characters, Lata and Alpesh. Lata often lapses into thought and thinks about her lover Salim and expresses her feelings. Alpesh also submerges himself in thought, while he is unhappy over his parents’ boasting about his business to Lata’s parents.

In *Tara*, Dan’s ‘voice-over’ shows his strong emotions for his twin sister Tara and the injustices done to her. He requests Tara to forgive him. The technique of ‘thought’ followed by ‘voice-over’ is skillfully employed

in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The protagonist Uma is researching about the life of hijras. She ponders over the origin of hijras in her ‘thought’. The play aptly ends with Uma’s thought in the form of ‘voice-over’.

In *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani makes extensive use of monologues and incomplete sentences which reflect the internal turmoil of the protagonist, Mala. The monologue heightens the emotional impact. Mala’s speech to the councilor is powerful with disjointed images and telegraphic conversations which shows the distorted psyche of Mala. The speech provides an insight into her self-realization. Dattani in this play uses the healing process of Mala to show Mala’s psychological journey.

Dattani at times effectively uses silence which speaks a lot about the characters’ mind. “[Dattani] employs a language that is often pungent, clear and sharp, pushing the spoken word to its limits, and interspersing them with pregnant silences that only someone with an intimate inwardness with theatre can” (Chaudhuri, Asha 105).

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani employs a new technique which gives emphasis on silence, stillness, sound and movement. Ratna, in this play comes to know that her son has been administered double dose of opium,

she remains silent and is rooted to the spot in stillness for a moment and she speaks to Jairaj and then moves to the bedroom. This technique made a great impact in the performance on stage.

Dattani's plays are intertwined with music. Music does not merely form the background, but it also symbolizes the varying moods of the characters. *Final Solutions* contains the music of Noor Jehan, Shamshad Begum and Suraiya. In this play, music occurs as a metaphor from the beginning to the end. "Daksha's love for the songs of Noor Jehan expresses a longing for harmony" (Mathur 172). Naina Devi's Thumri is repetitively played in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. In the play *Tara*, the twins prefer western music. They used to hear music like Chopin's prelude, Brahms and Beethoven's concerts. This shows Dattani's love for the western classical music. In the play *Do the Needful*, famous Indian classical singer M.S.Subbulakshmi's Meera Bhajan's is played and there are some of the popular Hindi film songs sung by the lift man. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the music system in the living room plays some western music throughout the play and the wedding band outside plays film tunes creating a pleasant effect. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is full of songs sung by the hijras at weddings and child birth accompanied by the sound of their claps. These songs are in a coarse voice. The main plot of the play

Morning Raga is woven around music. “The duality of vision, carnatic and western, merges in a sublime union conveying a profound message for all those who are swayed by the passion for music” (Agarwal 129).

Music is very important in a radio play. As there is no visual effect, sound manipulation is so effective that it creates pictorial images in the minds of the listeners. In *Do the Needful*, sounds like mooing of a cow, sound of cow bells, sound of the motor of the pump set, splashing of water, grinding halt of the motor, cycle bells, noises of traffic, car horns, chirping and flying of birds, drumbeat, rattling of lift, sounds of cricket add realistic touch.

Dattani believes that emotions are expressed effectively by means of light and sound. He makes use of light and sound in order to heighten the emotional disturbances and to reflect tension. He shifts the focus of attention from one level to another and from one aspect to another and to express time shifts through lighting. He makes use of lighting to bring out distinct outcome. “The lighting creates more depth in the acting space” (Joshipura 31). In the play *Tara*, the lighting has symbolic significance. “His [Dr.Thakkar] connection with realistic level is established through Dan, the interviewer who is always located in darkness with the focus

being on the doctor. The distribution of light here communicates a message – Dr.Thakkar gets fame, while the twins suffer in the cloistered milieu of gender prejudice” (Mathur 166-7). Dattani here uses the lighting effectively to distinguish four different levels of stage. The light quickly crosses, fades from one acting area to another. Occasionally, focus beam is used.

In *Final Solutions*, the light is focused on the grandmother Hardika in such a way that the entire action of the play is seen through her eye. The sacred space of stage is defined, redefined and altered simultaneously by superb lighting design. In *Tara*, Dattani uses miming which is the speech of a character, addressed to an invisible interlocutor supposed to be visible to the speaker. All the miming takes place in the galli. Patel mimes talking to Mr. Kapoor enquiring about his health. Tara mimes showing her Jaipur leg to Roopa and her friends. Roopa mimes talking to her friends about the streak of madness which runs in Tara’s family.

Dattani in his plays uses symbols and avoids plain statements to indicate his views. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, bonsai is used as a symbol to show the grotesque nature of the characters, “Its bizarre shape, the grotesque becomes the objective representation of the mental condition

of different characters" (Agarwal 73). The bonsai suggests many layers of meanings. Outwardly, it represents curtailed or restricted growth and the inner suggestive meaning is - it is a symbol for the nature of men in the play. Another important symbol is mud mask. Dolly is wearing a mud mask. The white mask suggests blankness in the character. She is reluctant to smile because she is afraid, the mask will crack. This suggests her fear of expressing her hollow loveless life which confirms her passive doll-like appearance she shows to the society. The 'Queen' in the title refers to the manly queen, Jhansi Rani. In this play, Dolly, like the queen of Jhansi, fights her battle against her violent husband and tyrannical mother-in-law.

In the play *Final Solutions*, the mob/chorus located on the crescent shaped ramp comprise of five men. There are five Hindu masks and five Muslim masks. They wear either of the masks which substantiate the manner in which ordinary people get misled by the religious fundamentalism. In the same play, the "the oil lamp converted into an electric one on Daksha's desk itself is emblematic of progress and change" (Mathur170). Fire is sacred, and has a significant part in every Hindu ceremony. It appears as a symbol of purification in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. In *Where There's a Will*, in the end, the kicking of the baby in

Preeti's womb is the symbol of rejuvenated, revitalized life of Hasmukh's family.

One of the characteristics of Dattani's plays is 'absent' presences. In most of the plays, some characters play a vital role through their absence. These characters do not appear on stage at all; "they are present elsewhere but their influence in the action of drama is clearly felt" (Joshiipura 190). Dr.Thakkar, Prema and Nalini in *Tara* are such 'absent' presences. In *Dance Like a Man*, Chenni Amma is absent. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Praful, Daksha, Kanhaiya and the beggar women are mentioned but they do not appear on the stage. Zarine and Tasneem who decidedly play a role in the play *Final Solutions* but they are physically absent.

Dattani does not provide any ready made solutions or pat endings to his plays. All the plays end giving a kind of insight into the issues discussed. Dattani leaves the play with an inconclusive end, and makes the viewers delve deep into the problem posed. Dattani admits in an interview thus:

You can't treat a play like a roller coaster ride which even at its most terrifying moment you know will end soon and quite

happily when you hit terra firma. It's only when you are left hanging in air you start to question your own personality, perceptions etc. Like I said before, the theatre is a collective experience and the audiences have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began. (qtd. in Nair)

The play *Where There's a Will* ends with understanding and regeneration. Kiran, Sonal, Ajit and Preeti come together as one happy family excited by the baby kicking in the womb of Preeti. *Dance Like a Man* ends with a note that the couple dance in unison; they are dancing like God which they lacked in the past. *Bravely Fought the Queen* ends abruptly. Nitin's guilt about his homosexuality is somewhat soothed, when he sees Alka sleeping after her dance in the rain. *Final Solutions* is open-ended with a positive note of hope. The play ends with Ramnik's words, "If you call them they will come" (FS 226). At the end of *Thirty Days in September*, there is understanding and reconciliation between the mother and daughter. The play *Morning Raga* ends with the Swarnalatha singing the morning raga.

Theatre is a very complex language created by man. Drama must portray human condition.

Dattani's plays show the writer's progressive ease with form as he shifts from a decidedly naturalistic style to experiment with different innovations; playing with the unities of time and place through flashbacks, flash forwards and working on the physical realities of staging using split-level stage, hidden rooms and other devices like having the same actors playing different characters. The plays are crafted meticulously and the dramatic tensions carefully built up and regulated with small giveaway hints dropped from time to time leading up to the climatic revelation which makes it much more credible.

(Benegal 61)

Dattani effectively makes use of these techniques to highlight the women's issues. Women issues are more comprehensively and artistically presented in the dramas of Dattani, although they have a much wider thematic range. He holds disinterested, non-partisan views about women's issues. "Dattani maintains the stance of a non-judgemental observer and never intrudes into his plays he writes nor attempts to sermonize" (Chaudhuri, Asha 25-6).

Theatre is not only a mode of communication but also a process of transformation. In the campaign of feminism, there are certain important points to be noted. The first point is the awareness about the oppressed status of women and the determination to resist the forces of oppression including the rigid religious conventions, social taboos against women and the economic structure which kept women in a dependent status. The next level is to educate and motivate women to break the barriers of passivity and to show their individuality and discover the inner world of female consciousness. Grave issues concerning women have been sidelined and trivialized by many. Dattani feels that women's issues merit serious literary attention. His main objective is to sensitize men and women about the plight of Indian women. He is amazingly perceptive in finding out the root cause of women's problems.

Over the centuries, male-dominated culture has evolved a whole set of norms for women. Patriarchal norm of femininity is an enormous web of numerous concepts, thinking, ideology, behavioural patterns, roles and dress codes:

In patriarchy, a woman's life is defined through male constructed ideas, concepts and myths denying her even the

right of her individual self, and through different ideological interrelations, her conscious and subconscious minds are conditioned so completely that she sees herself and the world around only in the way man would like her to see. (Singh 147)

Any deviation from their allotted roles leaves them ostracized. Dattani feels that women continue to be in the same discriminated state in spite of the changes in the society. He wants to reform the status quo fully, so as to transform the existing power relation between men and women. It involves a fundamental change in the mindset of the society.

Dattani supports women and he gives voice to the voiceless. Most of the women in Mahesh Dattani's plays struggle for visibility, voice and social space not to be locked in society as stereotypes but to have freedom of choice as individuals. Dattani is bold in dealing with the issues of marginalised women. These women are spurned by the society; the issues concerning them are usually brushed aside or concealed under rugs. Dattani digs them out and brings those issues to the centre stage.

Marriage is no less than a cage for a woman. It is based on inequality and oppression. "In patriarchy, the definition of marriage for

both man and woman is totally different. A woman can never truly have the liberty especially when she becomes wife. [...] Marriage limits the space of women whereas the space of a man is always unlimited" (Singh 148). As an individual woman in the family, especially a married woman confronts the problems like loss of identity, loss of freedom, suppression of ambitions and domestic violence. If woman's subordination is the result of how the identity of woman is constructed in the society, then she should expose the roots of the construction – the patriarchal mindset. *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* take up the issues of loss of identity and loss of freedom in women.

Seven Steps Around the Fire exposes society's notion that woman's identity is only through man. Even an educated and working woman like Uma Rao is not exempted from this and she could only grumble. Daksha in *Final Solutions* is married at an adolescent stage. Hence, she becomes pliable. When she realises her condition, she could vent her anger and frustration, about the change of her name, only in her diary. She does not even protest.

Daksha in *Final Solutions* and Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are prevented from singing songs by the parents in-law and their husbands.

Singing songs even within the house is forbidden. Daksha could not protest as her husband does not support her. In a traditional joint family, the mother-in-law rules over the daughter-in-law. Baa is reminded of how an ideal wife should behave that ultimately she accepts the dominance of her husband. Whenever she tries to oppose, she is controlled by violence.

In *Dance Like a Man*, Ratna an ambitious dancer is encouraged by her husband to improve her talents but the father-in-law objects and discourages her initially. Later, her father-in-law uses her as a pawn for his diabolic scheme of ruining his son's ambition allowing her to continue her dance. Swarnalatha in *Morning Raga* is treated as an accursed woman by the villagers. She too believes that and retracts from the society; she confines herself within the village and stops singing because of her superstitious belief. To remedy such a situation, one has to effect a change in the psychological make-up of both men and women. Having been raised to conform to a specific image of woman as inferior, woman's psyche is attuned to that. At times, psyche is a social product, a result of formative influences early in childhood rather than an expression of innate nature.

So the focus should be shifted from woman's nature and biology to nurture and culture. Woman should redefine her role as a wife – an equal

partner of man, and has to establish her autonomy. At the same time, she should learn relatedness, without fighting a war with the opposite sex. The result will be a world in which the individual characteristics are not gender-defined.

In Dattani's plays like *Where There's a Will* and *Tara*, men blame the mothers' baleful influence on their children especially on their sons and deny the mothers, the freedom to raise their sons according to their wish. But given freedom, some women misuse it at times as in the case of Tara's mother indulging in discrimination against woman. Aruna in *Final Solutions* fails to understand her daughter due to her narrow outlook. She goes to the extent of stopping Smita's studies because Smita already knows the boys who take shelter in their house. She never understands Smita's modern views about religion. Prema Gowda and Kusumben Patel in *Do the Needful* fail to understand the real problems of their children. They never try to look at the real problem behind their children's objection to marry. This leads to the young couple choosing a wrong path, setting a bad example to others after their marriage. The mothers are concerned about the society rather than their own children's personal life. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, an over possessive mother Baa turns out to be a

tyrannical mother-in-law and spoils the happiness of her son and daughter-in-law. Even the next generation suffers because of her.

Dattani not only supports women but also blames them for being hostile to other women. Infact, Dattani points out the falsity of the myth that only men oppress women. In some cases, women turnout to be the enemies of women. Dattani does not accept the stereotypical view of the selfless woman who exists without any ego. As much as he blames the patriarchal assumptions, he blames the women's manipulative tendencies. Woman as a mother is very affectionate towards her children; the same woman when she becomes a mother-in-law instead of becoming possessive, must learn to extend her affection to her daughter-in-law also. This will put an end to many problems faced by women.

Dattani accepts that domestic violence, physical or emotional, is a shameful blot on humanity especially when aggressive, strong males practice it on the weaker sex. While he strongly condemns the show of the male's assertion over the female body and mind in a brutal manner, he encourages the women to oppose it boldly and not to submit or succumb meekly in a welter of tears. In *Where There's a Will*, Sonal is abused emotionally by her husband. She lives under the control of her husband

and her sister. She becomes merely a shadow of her sister; finally Kiran helps Sonal to understand her real condition and Sonal gains self-respect. Though initially she misjudges Kiran, later she develops an affectionate bond with her. Bharati in *Tara* suffers because of her husband's autocratic nature. He does not allow her to donate her kidney to her daughter. Moreover, he takes necessary steps to isolate her from the children during her illness. Dejected Bharati never gets the chance to confess and relieve her guilt. Finally she becomes neurotic. Uma Rao in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is criticised for her barrenness.

Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* carry the stigma as the daughters of a mistress. Dolly is subjected to violence by her husband at the instigation of the possessive mother-in-law. Alka suffers in her married life because of the homosexuality of her husband. She tries to forget her disappointment, indulging in the pleasures of alcohol. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* depicts how Kiran suffers physically and emotionally due to her husband's violence. Her brother helps her to get out of her nightmares and to lead a safe life. In the play *Tara*, Tara is the victim of discrimination prevalent in the patriarchal society. Tara's mother Bharati's gender bias is the root cause of Tara's sufferings. Bharati feels guilty and later tries to

shower affection on her daughter. Tara is too young to object to the injustice done to her. She is helpless.

Mala in *Thirty Days in September* is the survivor of child sexual abuse. The scar of her abuse remains deep within her psyche which deters her from leading a normal life. She could not share genuine love with her lover. She behaves erratically and spoils her life by involving in affairs with strangers. Mala is a child at the time of abuse; she could not protect herself from the abuse. Hence, she succumbs.

Dattani points out that in many cases, the men who have the power in their hands to alleviate the sufferings of women, have only added to their misery. Tara has suffered because of her mother and maternal grandfather's decision to favour the male child. Tara's father could have saved his daughter but he remained silent; in a way he had failed to discharge his duty and support his daughter. Dolly suffers because of her loveless husband's arrogant nature. Alka's suffering is due to her husband's homosexuality. In both the cases, their husbands are to be blamed; they fail to understand the feelings of their wives and make them lead a miserable life. Alka's brother is also responsible for her pathetic condition because he hides from Alka, Nitin's homosexuality. He wants to

relieve his burden that he arranges for Alka's marriage as early as possible; in doing so, he destroys her happiness. Mala's sufferings are due to her maternal uncle who abused her. Her mother does not know how to protect her daughter because she is also abused by the same man. By being passive, she too becomes the cause of her daughter's unhappiness. Fortunately, Mala's lover helps her to come out of her mental agony.

Dattani explores the unpleasant and stigmatized life of the prostitutes, mistresses, divorcees and women who tested HIV positive in plays like *Ek Alag Mausam*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Where There's a Will* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. HIV positive people are treated like untouchables. People's ignorance about the medical facts makes them afraid of catching infection by mingling with the HIV positive people. The condition of HIV positive women is pathetic. The society views them as immoral and promiscuous. In *Ek Alag Mausam*, Dattani destroys the false notion about people who tested HIV positive. Infact he highlights how Aparna is infected by her husband and she suffers for no fault of her own.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai presents the status of a divorcee in Indian society through Kiran. Society often accuses woman for the failure of marriage. There is an unwritten rule in the society that woman must

endure her sufferings passively. There are some women who boldly put an end to the abusive marriage, but they are treated with contempt and suspicion. Kiran Jhaveri in *Where There's a Will* and Dolly and Alka's mother in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are yet another category of marginalised women. Kiran becomes the mistress to Hasmukh to solve her financial crisis. Hence Hasmukh's family suspects her role in the matter of Hasmukh's will but she proves her innocence andmingles with the family as one of its members. Dolly's mother unknowingly marries an already married man, who deceives her by hiding his first marriage. Even then she is criticised by Dolly's mother-in-law, and her daughters also suffer. In *Ek Alag Mausam*, poverty forces Rita into prostitution. Rita's efforts to lead a honourable life are ruined by certain rogues in the society. Apart from the social stigma, prostitutes are more vulnerable to HIV infection. The outlook of the society is very narrow; the society should change the erroneous view about these women. The fallacy and stigma attached to these marginalised women must go. These women are seen as sub humans or half persons. Dattani tries to rectify this distorted image of women and give them dignity as human beings. Infact men should be made to realize that women are not play things, the object of their desires, to be used and thrown out according to their whims and fancies. Opposing the 'object' position which demeans her womanhood and asserting her selfhood,

woman has to prove that she is not at the mercy of men and she is capable of taking control of her life.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani brings to light the pathetic plight of hijras who are ridiculed and marginalised by the society and branded as deviants. They are unjustly accused of all sorts of criminal activities and disposed off easily as if they are non-humans. People fail to understand that the condition of the hijras has a biological base; it is not their choice of life style. This play is a plea for broad out look and empathy.

Usually a woman as an alcohol addict is frowned upon and condemned on moral grounds. The society adopts double stand; it can tolerate a male drunkard but it does not accept a drunkard woman. Without being judgemental, Dattani takes up the case of Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and delves deep into the root cause of her addiction to drinks, which places the blame squarely on her husband. In *Dance Like a Man* and *Morning Raga*, Dattani maps the career graph of two artistically talented women, with its ups and downs and ecstasies and agonies. While he encourages women as professional artists, he cautions that the over-drive of these women could lead to mental depression, disaster and calamity. He

emphasizes the need to achieve a sense of balance without falling into the morass of cut-throat competition and professional jealousy.

Dattani shows the positive cases of men helping women. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* shows Kiran's brother Kamlesh helping her to escape from domestic violence. In *Thirty Days in September*, Mala's lover Deepak helps her to come out of her mental trauma and stop her erotic behaviour. Swarnalatha in *Morning Raga* breaks her psychological barrier and comes out of her self-imposed exile with the help of Abhinay and Pinkie. With the support of such men, these women find solution to their tangled problems and lead positive life. Men give encouragement and psychological support to these women to boost their self-confidence and self-respect. Dattani praises such men who help women and condemns women who ruin other women. He showcases the benefits of women being friendly with other women through Sonal and Kiran Jhaveri. If there is understanding and bonding between women, they can survive together and become pillars of strength to each other. They gain courage to win any battle.

Dattani attempts to uplift the position of women without indulging in the war of sexes. He remains neutral without taking any sides and

presents the reality as he has seen, by breaking the illusory image of the new Indian woman – a new brand of urban liberated, modern and westernized woman. Dattani in an interview says thus:

It's to do with my perceptions. I don't mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry around in our minds are politically generated images and we accept them to be as true. However I don't think so and my characters are simply a personification of my perception. (qtd. in Nair)

The general traditional ideal was a homely woman who sought fulfillment in expressing tribute to man's courage and strength through her own weakness. In sharp contrast to this, the modern woman is desperate to gain freedom from her hearth and home. The adventurous new woman with her physical and mental capacity and her social freedom occupies the centre stage in Dattani's plays.

Dattani's radical vision expands the range of theatre. He represents revolutionary and logical dynamics of women's issues. Dattani chooses theatre as a medium to communicate the problems and experiences of

women in the Indian scenario. His efforts for women's welfare are closer to women's point of view that some critics opine that Dattani is an avant-garde feminist or Pro-feminist. Though most of his plays obviously have feminist leanings, Dattani refuses to be categorized as a feminist writer. He thinks that the process of categorizing a writer kills the identity of the creator instantly. Dattani presents the new woman, who tries to shake off the irrational and traditional ties. The new woman is a rational creature with better balance between reason and emotion. She develops eagerness to know more about herself which indeed is a very positive sign. She thinks of a change, an improvement in her destiny, and has something remarkable to achieve, which marks the beginning of a new age resulting in the emergence of new woman.

Dattani feels that he has not come out with any theory or solution to solve all the women's issues. There is no 'one' answer to the questions related to women. Infact, each woman must confront the unique problems of her particular life and prove that she is capable of directing her life. It is in the hands of the women to change the definition of 'woman'. By addressing the women's issues, Dattani creates awareness among men and women. As drama has great impact on life, it can provide a better concept, show a better way of life and bring in a brighter world than the one we are

at present inhabiting. His plays interrogate the unequal hierarchy and the male hegemony, the asymmetrical and one directional mode of power vested in man, and open spaces for psychoanalytic explanation, cultural construction and move towards a shift in power through resistance or understanding. Dattani has strong conviction that drama as a powerful medium can bring about transformation in the society. His plays provoke new thinking and demonstrate the possibility of women walking hand in hand with men in equal partnership, making the world a better place to live in.