

Making a Language One's Own That is Not One's Own:

Mahesh Dattani's Tryst with English

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is credited with giving visibility to 'invisible issues', long hidden in closet and tabooed. However more commendable is his achievement in negotiating with the language for expressing his creativity. There is no hesitation in admitting that despite prevalence of rich regional theatre, writing in English rather theatre in English remained marginalized till very recently. Writing in English undoubtedly gave wide audience and readership but also made one susceptible to questions on one's identity. English, after all, is a colonial language and synonymous with Western civilization. It was tool to control, manipulate and efface the culture of the colonized; a fear and apprehension expressed eloquently by Ngugi wa Thiong'O. Thus anything remotely connected to colonizers was met with resistance. Colonial and postcolonial India addressed this problem by returning to their roots to assert their 'Indianness'. In drama it manifested in the birth of 'theatre of roots' in a big way. English as the 'Other' evoked ambivalent response from writers of all genres. It is against such strident posturing that Mahesh Dattani need to be understood for a proper appraisal. His chosen language was English and sprinkling with cultural nuances aptly

Indianising English and remained so. He not only experimented with the language but also dared to vocalize topics hitherto swept under the carpet and emerged as someone who could not be ignored any longer. The Sahitya Akademi felicitation is testimony to it.

Invisible issues; language; Indianness; colonial India; theatre of roots

Few would disagree with the fact that it was Mahesh Dattani who to a great extent, opened up a new vista in the annals of Indian theatre in the late 1980's by choosing to interrogate and negotiate two important issues, one which were and are still to some extent buried within the paradigm of "invisible", relegated to closets and secondly the language chosen for creative expression that till this date is a contentious issue not only in literary circle but in Indian polity. Indian plays in English has had a troubled existence if one is to remember that Sultan Padamsee awardee Cyrus Mistry's play *Doongaji House* written in 1970 could see the light of the day only in 1990's.(Mukherjee:17). Thus the state of English theatre as late as 1970 was not very encouraging. Responding to a question on the 'future of Indian drama in English' Mahesh Dattani in an interview to *The Times of India* accepted that 'drama does not travel as well as poetry or the novel...there are several reasons apart'. The reasons are numerous for the slow growth or not having a vibrant theatre in comparison to other genres in India. Girish Karnad himself accepts that "writing in English about characters who are presumably speaking in an Indian language for audiences for whom English is a second language is not a situation conducive to great drama".(Dharwadker 1995:365). It is against this backdrop that the felicitation of Dattani by Sahitya Akademi in 1998 for his "brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English" assumes immense significance.

The genesis of this attitude or aversion to the use of English language lies in colonialism. The Kenyan playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his seminal work *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* wrote that "the real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth-what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of language of real life.[...] But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world[...] To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self- definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture,

their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and[...] the domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations(1986:16) and therefore a person compelled to speak in English under colonial rule is akin to being "forced to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition"(1986:17). Ngugi's argument has parallelism among writers in India too. This is true not only in the case of India, but is best mirrored and documented in the narratives of almost all colonized nations. Folklorist A.K.Ramanujan averred that English was synonymous with "colonial India and the West".

As far as theatre is concerned, irrespective of slow "spread", despite being denied the status that it deserves is by all reckoning a powerful site for negotiating, emotionally and intellectually our milieu, our predicaments, our angst, our understanding of relationships, for mediation of social processes and change. And it therefore becomes an effective tool for control and containment, manipulation of the lives as well as in the dissemination and assertion of the supremacy of culture and authority of a nation over others.

But then, it's equally interesting to note that theatre also became an instrument in the hands of the colonized to resist and challenge, retaliate or snub the same colonial authority and assert their independent identity and culture both pre and post-independence. Herein begins the journey of conflict between the colonizers and the colonized, a tussle to deconstruct hegemony and keeping the identity intact. In India it led the artists revisiting their roots, to indigenous traditions, an attempt at "the discovery of the self through theatre". Habib Tanvir, one of the architect of modern drama unequivocally admitted that "theatre forms borrowed from the West[were] totally inadequate for effectively projecting the social aspirations, way of life, cultural patterns and fundamental problems of contemporary India"(1997:6) and vociferously advocated for "our own plays about our own problems in our own forms."(1961:59). But much earlier to these calls, Macaulay's Minutes on Education of February 1835 and the subsequent passage of Bentinck's English Education Act had made it mandatory for natives of India to submit to the study of English literature. This was essentially a heady mix of political and functional agenda and thus an ambivalent attitude towards the English language prevailed in the Indian mind. Since Bengal played a dominant role in the British Indian life, we find that support for the English language and

culture came from there before it could be registered elsewhere. Raja Ram Mohan Roy in order to understand the superiority of British and their cultural roots studied English privately. Another surprising votary was Rabindranath Tagore who on his eightieth birthday on May 1941 made an impassioned appeal "...I am struck by the change that has taken place in my own attitude and in the psychology of my countrymen-a change that carries within it a cause of profound tragedy. Our direct contact with the larger world of men was linked up with the contemporary history of the English people...It was mainly through their mighty literature that we formed our ideas'; as it 'nourished our minds in the past' so does it continue 'even now convey its deep resonance to the recesses of our heart'. (Jawaharlal Nehru. *The Discovery of India*: 1982). R.K.Narayan as an Indian writing in English felt no need to offer an 'apology': 'We have fostered the language for over a century', he says, 'and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the English language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression'. (Selected Essays: 1988:197). In *The English Teacher* (1945), the English head teacher finds himself at loggerhead with the protagonist Krishna, who had abandoned his teaching career, and disowned the education which 'has reduced us to morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbages'. (*The English Teacher*:220)

Nonetheless, Narayan later admits to imagining the English language arguing vehemently for itself: 'I will stay here, whatever may be the rank and status you may assign me-as the first language or the second language or the thousandth. You may banish me from my classrooms, but I can always find other places where I can stay...I am more Indian than you can ever be. You are probably fifty, sixty, or seventy years of age, but I've actually been in this land for two hundred years.' (Selected Essays: 15)

Further, contrary to the expectations that after independence and with the departure of the Britishers, the hold of English would automatically fizzle and die a natural death, we have seen its stupendous growth and firm entrenchment in our daily life across the length and breadth of the country. It was thus inevitable that contestations over what constitutes 'Indianness' became a big challenge especially in the arena of theatre because of its immediacy and potential impact. It resulted for example, in the beginning of writers revisiting the theatre of their roots, a search for

thanathunatakavedi coined by C.N.Sreekantan Nair in the 60's to differentiate it essentially from the theatres based on Western dramaturgical structures. Thanathu loosely translated means 'one's own'; nataka stands for 'drama', 'story' or 'play'; and vedi implies 'stage', so thanathunatakavedi means 'one's own theatre'.⁷ (Mee:2008:8). This concept gained impetus in the hands of K.N.Panikker who used thanathunatakavedi as a means through which 'our own identity [can be] established, reassessed and recreated' (9), a ploy to regain control of our ethnicity, a 'discovery of the self'. This concern found sympathizers in playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Vijaya Mehta, B Jayashree, Maya Krishna Rao, Satish Alekar to name a few. These individual efforts later evolved into an earnest search for a 'national theatre' that became synonymous with the 'theatre of roots' movement as Dr Suresh Awasthi the man who coined the term stated. The aim and objective was to reflect a 'liberation from Western realistic theatre'. The agenda in fact, had earlier been set forth by the first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru himself who gave signal for the establishment of Sangeet Natak Akademi, the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama in Delhi with specific aim to forge 'unity in diversity'. This was corroborated in an article 'Emergence of a National Theatre in India': [A] contemporary theatre has emerged, not in any one or other corner of this diverse and large country but simultaneously in all major centres[...]which bears a definite stamp; a unity if not a uniformity; a character that can only be called national, since it is composed of so many varying facets'.(Mee:11). Ananda Coomaraswamy, the art historian aptly puts it that coming in the wake of independence, the efforts of all the practitioners of various genres was to "try to believe in the regeneration of India through art, and not by politics and economics alone". (Mee: 19). Moreover as Mee asserts the "debate over language acknowledges that language carries culture and culture carries a set of values and a way of perceiving the world. Speaking, reading and writing in a foreign language induce a foreign way of conceptualizing the world." (15). "To write in the mother tongue and translate one's plays into English is to be an Indian playwright who makes one's work available to a wider readership. To write first in the colonial language and translate back into the mother tongue is to be 'Westernized'" (15) was the popular assumption. Perhaps the pang of taking birth in the frenzy of colonial-postcolonial experiences necessitated the 'theatre of roots' to reject English to begin with. This is not to deny that the theatre of roots movement did not had its share of controversies given the cultural and linguistic diversity of India. Big debates raged over what constitutes 'Indian', or the dichotomy between 'theatre in the village'

and ‘theatre in the cities’, the urban/ rural divide. The residue of all these prevalent assumptions was that plays written in English are not “Indian” and this ultimately led to the marginization of many playwrights including Mahesh Dattani.

A Gujarati by birth, Dattani grew up in Bangalore and since his parents were keen for their children to be fluent in English, the ‘school and the English language’ became the ‘present’ and the literature and language of Gujarat became a moment of ‘past’ (Me and My Plays: 9). His ‘beautiful relationship’ with theatre began after he watched Madhu Rye’s famous Gujarati play *Koi Pan Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo To* (Say the Name of a Flower) that left an indelible imprint on his mind. Instantly Dattani decided ‘to be a part of this magic!’ (7) and he launched his own drama group called Playpen. The deciding factor was not the plot but its mesmerising effect on the audience. The first English play seen on a public stage by Dattani was Alan Ayckbourn’s *Table Manners*. The play though entertaining did not have much of an impact but did make Dattani decide on the medium he would use to express his creativity and it was decidedly in favour of the ‘language I could understand better-the language I wanted to understand better, the language I spoke in with my friends and my sisters’ (12). He believed that “...you’ve got to be true to your expression also. English is for me a sort of given. It’s my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad.” (Menon and Prakash, 2003). Herein lies the beginning of Dattani’s ordeal which was not in conformity with the attitude nurtured by creative writers towards colonial language. English was not considered a viable medium for theatre. His predicament is akin to those

... many urban people in India, you are in this situation 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 are more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English[...but] I wanted to do more Indian plays[and that] became a challenge, because there weren’t many good translations- or, there may have been good translations, but they didn’t do anything for me. (Mee, 2002:14)

Dattani was caught in a dilemma which were compounded after watching a Hindi play at Prithvi theatre and experiencing its impact on the audience. He came back confident that this type of engrossment between the stage and the audience was due to ‘recognition’, because the “culture of the audience and the culture of the characters in the play was the same”. His anguish exacerbated further when he saw the kannada version of Hamlet performed and its effect on the audience. Again the conclusion was the same. It was the language, the language of the people that evoked instant rapport with the audience. On the other hand this realization also made him conscious of the absence of recognition in his own theatre. All his desire to be a part of the ‘magic’ was ‘doomed’ because he will never be able to have an ‘audience’ who could be swayed with ‘applause and laughter’, of ‘recognition’. And what was amiss was the “language. The kind of text based theatre I wanted to do could not be possible without a language. I guess my plight was a bit like that of an ambitious runner who suddenly discovers one day that he has no legs. I wanted to speak but I was mute.”(17) This resolved Dattani to do something to overcome it. He started attempting to write an original play and succeeded in writing a play for the annual Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. The play was *Where There’s a Will*. Finally Dattani had arrived. The response the play evoked amongst audience was ecstatic. The air resonated with ‘laughter, laughter and laughter. The laughter of identification that I had craved for. I was elated when people came backstage in huge numbers congratulating me for writing something they could identify with. They were all too tired of the fake accents on stage and the posturing that went on in the name of theatre in English. It looked like I had unwittingly pointed out that the Emperor had no clothes” (19). Implicit in this recognition and applause was an innate indictment of the plays that the audience had so far been subjected to. It gave confidence and bolstered the morale of a fledgling playwright like Dattani who had suddenly woken to discover an ‘idiom’, a language to “express his creativity– “Indian English” which they could claim their own. This was no ‘standard’ version of English, it was flooded with ‘cultural specificities’, ‘mother tongue influences’ with ‘varied registers’ drawn from English spoken and used in our daily life.(Mukherjee:18). The acceptance of Dattani as a playwright in English perhaps alleviates the anguish registered by Kamala Das (1934-2009) in her famous poem “An Introduction”:

I am Indian, very brown, born in

Malabar, I speak in three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? The language I speak
Becomes mine, mine alone. It is half English, Half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions.....

Today we can safely assume that the issue of the choice of medium problematized by Raja Rao in the 'Foreword' to *Kanthapura* (1938) stands vindicated: "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own; the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. 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. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it".

Mahesh Dattani has paved the way for Indian writers to write unselfconsciously in the English language without having to give reasons to justify their choice: "I am Indian: this is my time and this is my place [...] I'm reflecting that in my work, and that makes it Indian (Mee: 267).

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