
UNIT 1 AN OVERVIEW OF INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to familiarise you with the challenges that the Indian English dramatist faces and to take you through the history of Indian English drama. This will enable you to both appreciate the contribution of Mahesh Dattani and place him historically.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Before we look at the history of Indian English drama, let us ask ourselves what we know already about it. How many Indian English playwrights have you heard of? Take five minutes and write down as many names of Indian English playwrights as you know:

Were they two lines too many? You must have written Mahesh Dattani's name because we are studying his play *Tara*, but did you come up with any other names? We don't really have to think only of the past, can you name any of Dattani's compatriots?

How many names did you come up with? Do they all write in English originally or are they translated into English? Girish Karnad, for example, is a Kannada playwright who translates his plays into English himself. A number of playwrights who write in other Indian languages are translated into English – for instance, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mahashweta Devi, Badal Sirkar... Did you write their names by any chance? Among them, Girish Karnad is an interesting case because he translates his plays himself and makes changes while translating. These changes he then sometimes takes back to his Kannada originals! Hence a case can be made out to include him in the Indian English list. But none of the others should make it to a list of Indian English playwrights. But don't worry if you came up with no name other than Dattani's. Ask any reasonably knowledgeable person to name some modern Indian English playwrights, and it would be surprising if they name even one English language playwright. S/he may take Mahesh Dattani's name, and that would be, because of his Sahitya Akademi award. The avid theatregoer may have watched his plays and appreciated them as good theatre as well as because he addresses

contemporary concerns of the Indian middle class in the same way that playwrights in other Indian languages do.

Another contemporary Indian English playwright whom people may remember is Manjula Padmanabhan whose play *Harvest* won a major international award, The Onassis Prize. Others who have written plays whose names you may recognise are Nissim Ezekiel, Cyrus Mistry, Gieve Patel, Gurcharan Das, and Dina Mehta. Ezekiel and Patel are well known poets and Das is a novelist as well. Dina Mehta and Mistry are also known for their short fiction. They have all tried their hand at writing plays with varying degrees of success, but none of them has taken to the theatre as their main focus of writing.

1.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY THE INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMATIST

1.2.1 The Problems

Have you ever wondered why Indians have written so few plays in English? Well, before any of you say to yourself that you didn't know that, that you assumed that there were many published plays, let me be more precise and ask why so few plays in Indian English are ever staged? This question again assumes that you watch plays, and that your town has a healthy theatre. Even if that were so, you would have realised that all is not well with theatre in India and that it needs great commitment and interest to keep theatre going. Since there is so little incentive monetarily, there is a dearth of good dramatists in India, and English is no exception.

But does the Indian English playwright face special problems and challenges because of the very language that s/he uses? What could they be? Again take five minutes and jot down your thoughts in point form:

We will be able to speak with some degree of confidence about this after we study *Tara*, but let us compare a few preliminary notes.

Indian English drama has an in-built inhibiting factor – the fact that most of our life is spent speaking other languages. English is usually associated with certain functional spaces – certain offices or academic institutions. Even in these spaces English is not even the only language used any longer, except in written documents. Though these may have great impact on our lives, think of exam results for instance, the dramas of our lives are played out in a melange of languages, very often in languages other than English. In this circumstance, how is the Indian English dramatist to create convincing theatre? So, our first point could be that the Indian English playwright has to write dialogues in a language that his characters may not speak all the time or even in the specific circumstances that the playwright has created.

You may have put down as your second point that not so many people are proficient in English, proficient enough to go and watch plays in English. While this may seem true enough, the fact is that the audience that there is for good theatre is an extremely tolerant, extremely curious audience. They would watch plays in any language! The fact is that English plays, just like English films, do have their audiences. Perhaps the audiences for English plays will never be enough to sustain independent theatre but that is true of almost all language theatres in India. Hence the second point could be

better reformulated to state that since English is seen as the language of the elite, sponsors might only put up money for what they see as entertainment for the elite.

Did you have a third point? Was it about the lack of trained actors in English? That is a valid point and should be a cause for concern when there are more Indian English playwrights and plays.

This leads to the fourth point, which is directly related to the first, which is that there is as yet no accepted Indian English for the writers to use confidently and consistently. What can writers do in this peculiar circumstance? Write British English as far as possible or try and create credible Indian characters with Indian accents and Indian ways of speaking English? How well will this be accepted?

You may say that the Indian English novelist lives and writes in the same circumstances and yet manages to write quite well and successfully. I'll only point out one major difference here between the novelist's craft and the playwright's. The novel is published and read individually by readers. You as the reader will use your imagination to create characters and their speech patterns. You may even imagine them speaking in languages other than English. But a playwright writes for the stage. You watch live actors moving around in front of you, living out their lives in English, speaking the language in all kinds of circumstances. How credible would it be for a normal Indian character to speak in English to the maid, or vegetable seller, or to the autorickshaw driver, or even to grandparents? How credible would you find it if these characters spoke impeccable British English or mouthed some kind of American English? But how would you react to Indian regional accents?

Is it of any surprise then that Indian English theatre is such a low yielding field that if it were not for the growing global influence of the language it would have been abandoned long ago as not worth cultivating? Official patronage, whatever there has been, has always been extended to theatre in Indian languages. The National School of Drama in New Delhi for instance which is the premier institution in this country for training actors and directors for theatre, requires its students to know and function in Hindi. Theatre costs money and private patrons like industrial houses have to be wooed to sponsor shows by theatre groups who do not have official patronage. They have increased their support for English plays in recent years but only for those which have great entertainment value and are already accepted as plays worth going to. It is not in their interests to sponsor controversial or disturbing plays. So while there is more of English theatre in these years of liberalisation, there is still only one Dattani who has made it successfully to the stage and to our consciousness.

1.2.2 Solutions

In a recent conversation between them, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani had many interesting things to say about theatre in India (*Indian Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 6, Mar-April 1999). One of the major challenges as they see it is to write credible dialogues. As Girish Karnad puts it, "You write spoken dialogue – you just don't write dialogues." What Karnad means is that what the playwright writes has to sound like it could be spoken by the given character in the given circumstances. It should not sound stilted or text bookish. The dialogue need not, should not, obey the rules of written English. As Karnad says, Indian English playwrights should not write, "as they may have learnt in an English class."

Mahesh Dattani too feels that the biggest of challenges "is to reflect the language the way she is spoken and not harp on the 'correct' form." In the newspaper article where he says this (*The Sunday Times of India*, New Delhi, March 15, 1998), he also adds that the limited reach of English theatre is a cause for concern. He feels that English is still a city-based language and the only way to reach the common man is to make the language and content more accessible. This is easier said than done. What do you

feel about it? How can Indian English plays be made accessible to a wider audience? Take a minute and write down whatever strikes you:

You may feel that it is only a matter of time before English asserts itself over all of us the way it has never done before. In these days of globalisation, English has slowly taken over the role of lingua franca of the world. So as more and more Indians learn English and use it in some context or the other, the audience of Indian English plays will increase accordingly. This may or may not happen. The only other way is to translate the plays into as many Indian languages as possible and stage them in those languages. What I am arguing here for is something that Indian theatre artistes have accepted for quite some time, that the only way they can build an Indian theatre is to translate plays from various Indian languages into each other, English is no exception to this rule for survival and construction. This may not be the answer you thought of or expected but so long as English has the limited reach it has in India, there can be no other.

Comparing the situation with that of the novel once again, do you remember or know what Raja Rao saw as the task of the Indian English novelist, the challenge that he wrote about in 1938, in his preface to his novel, *Kanthapura*? He said that the main challenge for the writer was to "convey in a language not one's own the spirit that is one's own." He also cautions that we cannot write like the English and that we should not do so, we must write as Indians. But how can one do this? The novelists did this by inventing their Indian Englishes. People do not talk the way Rao's characters or Mulk Raj Anand's do. But this fact, while it may put off some readers, will and does not matter to the majority of sensitive readers. You realise that the writers are translating a certain context into English and trying their best to retain the specific flavours and nuances of their locations. But in theatre the character who asks, "Why are you eating my head?" or says that his head is circling is bound to elicit laughter rather than sympathy. A book can be read over a period of time, at a pace convenient to the reader who can also go back and forth, but a play is acted out in real time. The audience of a play sees everything in a linear progression and there can be no action replay. So the language spoken has to be clear and have immediate impact. You cannot have audiences laughing at characters you want them to take seriously; not laughing for the wrong reasons.

Hence it is important for a playwright to tread more carefully than a novelist. A playwright must take risks but cannot take as many as the novelist. A novelist can frame a character, can write around the character, make comments on and explain the character to the reader. A playwright cannot do this but has to convey everything through the spoken dialogue and then depend on the understanding and competence of the director, actor and audience. The playwright has to make the language seem natural to the character portrayed. The character cannot be seen to be trying to speak in a language not his or her own. The spirit cannot be conveyed so easily or at all if the language is seen to be different. Hence the Indian English playwright has to write in a language that is recognisably Indian, and recognisably belonging to the social milieu portrayed.

As you would have seen in recent Indian English novels there is a greater availability of a range of acceptable Indian Englishes. Our overall attitude to purity of languages has changed and we are willing to allow our languages to pollinate each other. In fact we make instant decisions to shift from one language to another as well as to use words from a language different from what we are speaking. These are instances of borrowing and shifting. Can you think of instances when you do the two and think of reasons for them? Try to write down as many instances and reasons as you can below:

I am sure that if you belong to a multilingual milieu, you very often decide to speak a certain language on the basis of inclusion or exclusion. What I mean is that you may speak a particular language to a person to give that person a sense of belonging to your group, or you may decide to speak a language known only to some of you so that others may be excluded from your conversation. You may also shift to a language to establish a sense of belonging especially when you want to get close to someone or have some work done by that person. You may shift to English or the regional official language to mark the official nature of your talk and shift away from it to move on to personal topics. Sometimes you may shift to a language like English when you don't want to be identified by your caste or regional location. You may also speak in English to keep the conversation formal, to maintain distance, to help avoid easy familiarity. You may also speak English because of the prestige attached to it, to impress people.

The words you borrow could also be for similar reasons. Usually you will retain all kinship terms from your language when speaking English. This will be true of curse words as well! What about food items? Dosai may become dosa, and vadai become vada (this only proves the reach and dominance of Hindi), but little else would change. What I am saying is that the pronunciation may vary according to the region where these words are spoken and both the speaker and the audience. Technical terms tend to be retained in whatever language you speak and so do everyday items like 'powder'.

You knew all this already and are perhaps wondering what it has to do with writing plays. Or you may have already realised that characters would become more credible if they spoke English the way you do – slipping from one language into another easily and as circumstances demand. Various things can be established through this – the geographical and cultural location, the relationship between characters, the desires of characters...In short, the use of this kind of language will go towards not only establishing the ambience of the play but also in the construction of characters. As more and more playwrights do this (and Dattani has shown the way), Indian English drama may appeal to more people; and its history may be one of successes rather than attempts.

1.3 HISTORY OF INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA

1.3.1 Pre-Independence

Perhaps the earliest Indian English play was written in 1831, when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote **The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes illustrative of the present state of - Hindoo Society in Calcutta**. Look at the year the play was written. Obviously English plays could only be written after the English established themselves in India. Further, there should be enough people proficient in English to constitute an audience. So, like the first poetry, this play comes after the establishment of Hindu College in Calcutta, after nearly a generation had been educated in English and been sufficiently influenced by western ideas. The tide of reformation had begun and this

play illustrates this movement – it is about the conflict in the mind of a young man, a Bengali, between orthodox Hindu practices and modern ideas inculcated by English education.

Modern theatre came to India with the British and the first theatrical companies were established in those areas which first came under their influence. The first modern production in Bengali was in November 1795, when two plays **Disguise** and **Love is the Best Doctor** were performed in Bengali translation. Curiously these translations were done in collaboration by a Russian, Lebedoff, and an Indian, Goloknath Das. By 1831, a Bengali theatre (the Hindoo Theatre) had been established which began by staging portions of Shakespeare's **Julius Caesar**. What this theatrical activity led to was the birth of modern theatre in various Indian languages and not in Indian English. The felt need for English drama was obviously fulfilled by original British plays.

You may remember that poetry and drama have always been close companions. Is it any wonder that the first recorded play in English by an Indian in almost a generation after Banerjee is by a poet? This is by a famous poet, one who is famous in his own Indian language as a pioneer and an innovator, one who is famous for abjuring English to write in his own language. Can you name the person? It is Michael Madhusudan Dutt of course. But Dutt's **Ratnavali** (1858), itself a version of Harsha's Sanskrit play, is a translation of his Bengali original. He also published another translation of a Bengali play written by him, **Sermista** (1859). Another of his plays **Is This Civilisation** came out in 1871 and is considered by S Krishna Bhatta, who has written a critical study on Indian English Drama, to be a major play in English. A fourth play, **Nation Builders**, was published posthumously in 1922. In fact, just one more play, Ramkinoo Dutt's **Manipura Tragedy** (1893) completes the list of Indian English plays from Bengal in the 19th century.

In Mumbai (then Bombay) the first theatre, The Bombay Amateur Theatre, was built in 1776 but was exclusively for performances by visiting European companies. Marathi theatre made an early start because of this. Vishnudas Bhavé's **Sitasvayamvara** was produced in 1843 though Annasaheb Kirloskar's production of **Shakuntal** in 1880 is seen by many to be of crucial importance. The Parsi Natak Mandali was established in 1852 and The Elphinstone Dramatic Club and Victoria Natak Mandali followed. The first recorded play in English from Mumbai is a verse-play. This is **The First Parsi Baronet** by C.S. Nazir produced in 1866. The only other plays that have survived from this early period are D.M. Wadia's **The Indian Heroine** (1877), which is based on the events of the first war of independence (1857), and P.P. Meherjee's **Dolly Parsen** (1918).

In Chennai (then Madras), the Madras Dramatic Society was founded in 1875. It mainly encouraged amateur European theatrical productions. The Oriental Drama Club was established in 1882, and The Sarasa Vinodidini Sabha, an amateur dramatic society, was founded by Krishnamacharya in 1895. The Madras theatrical scene seems to have been quite active and a number of playwrights came to the limelight. These playwrights wrote on social as well as historical and mythological themes. Some of the plays, for example, are **Urjoon Sing or the Princess Regained** (1875) by P.V.R. Raju, **Dasaratha or The Fatal Promise** (1901) by Krishnamacharya, **Harischandra or The Martyr to Truth** (1912) by A. Srinivasacharya, **Lord Clive** (1913) by Krishna Iyer, **Nur Jahan** by T.B. Krishnaswamy, and **Harischandra** (1918) by K.S. Ramaswami Sastri. But the most productive of these playwrights was V.V. Srinivasa Aiyangar. Two volumes of his plays entitled **Dramatic Divertissements** appeared in 1921. These plays expose the behavioural patterns of the middle class. They seem to have been written as light entertainment or farces. The collection includes the following plays: **Blessed in a Wife**, **Vichu's Wife**, **The Surgeon-General's Prescription**, **The Point of View**, and **Wait for the Stroke**. Aiyangar writes highly entertaining one-act and two-act plays but doesn't let his talent loose over a full-length play.

What we can see is a pattern we should recognise. All the early playwrights turn to historical and mythological themes to construct the idea of the good (Hindu) Indian, the Indian we must reinvent. The impact of colonialism was to challenge the intellectuals into constructing a past militaristically and morally equal if not superior to the British. As part of this agenda they write to reform their contemporary society as well. You may have already read about this part of our history, about the impact of British colonialism on Indian intellectuals in earlier blocks. In any case you could refer to the books in the suggested reading list that comes at the end of this unit.

When we talk of pre-independence theatre, there are two colossal figures who left their mark in many varied fields who have to be taken into account. They are Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's real impact is in Bengali and the plays that are well known in English translation like **The Post Office** and **The King of the Dark Chamber** were not even translated by him. He was a great literary and cultural figure and his impact on his contemporaries was enormous but I don't think we should look at him in such a short survey of Indian English drama. Sri Aurobindo wrote five complete and six incomplete verse-plays between 1891 and 1916. The five complete plays are **Perseus the Deliverer**, **Vasavadutta**, **Rodogune**, **The Viziers of Bassora**, and **Eric the King of Norway**. As you can see from the titles themselves Aurobindo's plays are not confined to India at all -- past or present. **Eric** is set in ancient Norway and **Vasavadutta** in ancient India, while the other three are set in the Middle East. **Perseus**, **The Viziers**, and **Rodogune** belong to his Baroda period (1893 -1906) while **Eric** and **Vasavadutta** were written between 1912 and 1916. It is of interest to note how this England returned revolutionary and philosopher moves from **Perseus** to **Vasavadutta**, from the western classics to Sanskrit texts. But Aurobindo is better known as a poet and philosopher, his plays trying to emulate Shakespeare and unable to pull it off. But obviously with a writer of his distinction, these plays do reward readers with flashes of brilliance.

The other major playwrights from before independence are Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, T.P. Kailasam, and Bharati Sarabai. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya may be better known to you as Sarojini Naidu's brother but he was an accomplished poet in his own right. He has many plays to his credit beginning with **Abu Hassan** (1918), a light fantasy. He has seven verse-plays to his credit on the lives of Indian saints: **Pundalik**, **Saku Bai**, **Jayadeva**, **Chokha Mela**, **Ekanath**, **Raidas**, and **Tukaram**. These were included in his **Poems and Plays** (1927). He presents episodes to highlight the individual's search and fulfilment as opposed to societal curbs and hierarchies. They make good reading. A member of the Progressive Writers Movement, Chattopadhyaya's socialist sympathies come to the fore in his five social plays. These are **The Window**, **The Parrot**, **The Sentry's Lantern**, **The Coffin**, and **The Evening Lamp**. **The Window** is dedicated to "The Brave Textile Workers of Parel, Bombay" and is about the exploitation of poor labourers by industrialists. While **The Parrot** examines morality, the bondage of customs, **The Sentry's Lantern** is about the evils of imperialism and is dedicated "To all the victims of Imperialist Gallows". The three characters in the play, a merchant, a bourgeois poet, and a worker, give us their thoughts before they are hanged. It is the worker who faces death boldly. **The Coffin** which is "Dedicated to the progressive writers of India" satirises a bourgeois artist and shows us the responsibilities of writers. **The Evening Lamp** is an ironic sketch of a young romantic. He has four other plays -- **The Sleeper Awakened** (n.d.), **The Saint: A Farce** (1946), **Kannappan or the Hunter of Kalahasti** (1950), and **Siddhartha: Man of Peace** (1956). His deep social commitment is evident throughout, as he exposes social evil and celebrates the achievements of the lowly and the downtrodden. He is good at writing crisp dialogues and his plays do manage to impress the modern reader.

T.P. Kailasam has a role to play in two histories of literature -- Indian English and Kannada. He is and will always be better known for his contribution to Kannada drama than Indian English. He chose Kannada for his contemporary social plays and English for a rendering of tragic heroes from the epics. Further the ease with which he writes his Kannada is missing in his English. He wrote in the spoken language of

the middle class in Kannada, so much so that it seemed like a mix of Kannada and English (he called it 'Kannadanglo'). In English however he tried to heighten the language with Sanskrit terms. Obviously he reserved his wit (he called himself "Typical - ass - am") and humour for his Kannada plays. His English plays are **The Burden** (1933), **Fulfilment** (1933), **A Monologue: Don't Cry** (1933), **The Purpose** (1944), **Karna or the Brahmin's Curse** (1946) which is the only full length play published by him in his lifetime, and **Keechaka** (1947). Kailasam has chosen most of his main characters and dramatic episodes from Indian epics. **The Burden** is based on the **Ramayana**, and depicts Bharata's feelings on hearing about his father's death. **Fulfilment** and **The Purpose** are based on the Ekalavya story from the **Mahabharata**, which supplies the story for **Karna** and **Keechaka** as well. Though Kailasam went to the epics for these plays, he champions the underdog, and gives us refreshingly different views of these characters.

Bharati Sarabai's two plays, **The Well of the People** (1943), and **Two Women** (1952), show the impact of Gandhi. The first play was inspired by a story in the **Harijan**, and depicts an old woman who unable to go to Kashi and Haridwar decides to build a well for the so called 'untouchables' instead. The second play depicts two women, Anuradha, the wife of the anglicised Kanakaraya, and Urvashi, a widowed girl who has become a devotional singer. The play seems to advocate that spiritual peace can be found here and now, and complete fulfilment isn't to be found in giving up the world and material ties. Both the plays, the first written in verse and the second in prose, show Sarabai's spiritual and religious beliefs. Both the plays show a society in transition while the first seems to do it far more effectively. Verse-drama has had a chequered history but if it has to be successful Sarabai's natural speech patterns would be worth emulating.

As you can see from the above, admittedly sketchy, history of pre-independence Indian English drama, Indian English dramatists like their counterparts in other genres were involved in constructing an ideal India. For this they mined the epics and puranas, the lives of saints, and history. They explored and reinterpreted their chosen texts in order to create the India and the Indian who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the English. The Indian they constructed was necessarily Hindu because of the past that they were uncovering in its glory. They were actively engaged in constructing a new society, one that went beyond their specific locations in terms of caste and region. Their territory was India and their audience Indian. This would explain why T.P. Kailasam wrote his engaging rooted social plays in Kannada but his epic character sketches in English. Their India had a Sanskritic past and an English present, their regions had other histories and other needs. This is perhaps why Indian English drama never took off while theatres in other Indian languages flourished during this time. Indian English dramatists couldn't serve or create any needs among audiences. The audience that wanted theatre in English could see European productions or even Indian productions of English/European plays. The audience that wanted Indian theatre could watch theatre in Indian languages. The only way Indian English theatre could have succeeded was to become theatrically provocative and interesting, address local realities in local Englishes. This was hardly ever done. Not only do they make no theatrical innovations, and write mainly short plays, they do not even look to Indian dramatic techniques even while they look to ancient Indian epics for characters and episodes. Their dramaturgy doesn't even seem to extend beyond the Elizabethan!

There are of course many other playwrights and plays. More than three hundred Indian English plays were written before independence. There were dramatists like A.S. Panchapakesa Aiyar who were popular in their own times. You can read more about these playwrights in the books suggested at the end of the unit.

1.3.2 Post-Independence Indian English Drama

It is not as if things changed a great deal after independence. While the first five-year plan did give conscious thought to the performing arts, and the National School of

Drama and various State Akademies were set up, obviously the stress was on theatre in other Indian languages. The few Indian English dramatists who achieved some success were actually staged abroad. The first major Indian English dramatist after independence (many would say the first Indian English dramatist of any consequence) was Asif Currimbhoy who wrote more than thirty plays. Other playwrights of note (other than those we mentioned at the beginning of this unit) are G.V. Desani and Pratap Sharma.

G.V. Desani, the author of the hilarious novel **All About H Hatter**, which you must read if you haven't, has one play, **Hali** (1950), to his credit. **Hali** was a critical success when produced in England and is a play about human longing and fulfilment. An abstract play (it has no visible actors on stage, only voices), described as a 'poem play', **Hali** is an allegorical play of every person's quest. Hali, named after a Muslim saint, wears long hair and bangles and anklets and is also named a very feminine Hindu Girija. Hali thus stands for all humanity. While Maya comforts him for a while, and Rahu tests him, Hali loves and loses and finally achieves true understanding. Unfortunately, this seems to have been a one-off experiment by Desani, for he could have brought great stylistic innovation to Indian English theatre.

Pratap Sharma's **A Touch of Brightness** (1968) was again performed abroad (it was actually banned for some time in Mumbai). A picture of the Red-light district of the then Bombay, the play is bold in its theme and treatment. The dialogue for once is in the speaking voice and the play presents the goings on in a brothel in a straightforward manner. It is a stage-worthy play and at least deserves a reading. The other play by Pratap Sharma, **The Professor Has a Warcry** (1970), is again interesting in terms of stagecraft and dialogue. In this, a young man, Virendra, comes to know that he is the 'illegitimate' child of a mother who was successively raped by a Muslim and an Englishman after having been deserted by her lover, a Hindu Professor. Finally Virendra and the Professor kill each other off. In an interesting technical innovation, Pratap Sharma uses the demon from Kathakali to represent Virendra's inner state.

Asif Currimbhoy also achieved success abroad and he too had a play banned in Mumbai. Currimbhoy's plays deal with contemporary political events and social issues. **The Doldrums** (1960), the play which was banned for a while, is about the hippie culture and Anglo-Indians. The play depicts the extent to which youth can feel alienated, and the resultant mess they can land up in. **The Captives** (1963) is about the Sino-Indian conflict. **Goa** (1964) is a play about the invasion/liberation of Goa by India. **Monsoon** (1965) is about colonisation, while **An Experiment with Truth** (1969) is about the freedom struggle and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. **Inqilab** (1970) is about the Naxalite movement, while **The Refugee** (1971) and **Sonar Bangla** (1972) are about the fallout caused by the conflict between the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and its western counterpart. **Om Mane Padme Hum** (1972) is about China's occupation of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's flight to India. **Angkor** (1973) is on Indo China, **The Dissident M.L.A.** (1974) is based on a contemporary student agitation in Gujarat. **The Miracle Seed** (1973) is on a famine situation in Maharashtra. **The Tourist Mecca** (1959), **The Hungry Ones** (1965), and **Darjeeling Tea?** (1971) are about the East-West encounter. **The Hungry Ones** attempts to show the similarities between American beatniks and Indian yogis, the Black Muslims of America and Bengali Muslims. Among his other plays are psychological plays like **The Clock** (1959) and **The Dumb Dancer** (1961). The latter is about a Kathakali dancer and has been performed successfully.

Currimbhoy was a playwright with great potential and his career and output illustrates the deficiencies caused by the lack of a living Indian English theatre. He didn't play around with spoken Indian English very much because he didn't get to work with Indian actors very often. As he was performed less and less his plays began to be written to be read rather than performed. His later plays read more like T.V. or movie scripts, making almost impossible technological demands of the stage.

Since some of his plays were produced abroad, he never achieves any kind of cultural confidence with his symbolism. But Currimbhoy through his sheer fecundity, and his sheer dramatic quality that he displays at his best, remains a dramatist to be respected.

As mentioned earlier, Nissim Ezekiel, the well-known poet, has also written plays in English. He displays his ease with the language as spoken in an urban middle and upper class milieu. Where he falls short is in his handling of plot or dramatic structure. His plays **Marriage Poem: A Tragi-Comedy**, **Nalini: A Comedy**, **The Sleepwalkers: An Indo-American Farce**, **Song of Deprivation** (all 1969), and **Don't Call it Suicide** (1994) deal with social issues and personal relationships but fail to grip in spite of their accessible language. But they make for a pleasant reading experience. This is a pity because he has the feel for spoken language so necessary for drama and doesn't lack dramatic vision but sublimated his dramatic impulse in his poetry.

On the other hand, Gurcharan Das's **Larins Sahib** (1970) is a much performed much acclaimed play. In this three-act play, Das delineates the life of Henry Lawrence, a British Resident in the court of Dalip Singh in Punjab in 1846-47, who progresses from enlightened liberalism to authoritarianism. This is a historical play and according to the author the events were reconstructed from documents and letters exchanged by the principal characters. **Larins Sahib** is one of the few rare successes of the Indian English stage and this can be attributed to its lively dialogue, its plot construction, and its historical subject matter, but where it really scores is bringing to life characters who arouse interest in the audience.

Larins Sahib, Dina Mehta's **The Myth-Makers**, and Cyrus Mistry's **Doongaji House** are all winners of the Sultan Padamsee Award for playwriting. A lack of theatrical opportunity means that it is only competitions and awards that will unearth and encourage new playwrights. **The Myth-Makers** was published in the journal **Enact** (in 1969) which ceased publication after the death of the indefatigable Rajinder Paul who brought it out. Dina Mehta's radio play (which of course is quite different from a regular play in terms of craft) **Brides are not for Burning** (1971) was named the best play in a world wide competition held by the BBC. **The Myth-Makers** is a three act play about the violent demonstrations in Bombay against migrants from other states, especially from the South. A play of great topical interest, it shows the level to which parochial politics and politicians can fail. The play ends abruptly leaving the audience to imagine what could happen to the female protagonist who is sickened by the conduct of her husband.

Cyrus Mistry's **Doongaji House**, which though written in 1978 was first produced only in 1990, is on the other hand about a specific community – the Parsis. The play addressed the situation of the Parsi community in a nation where the communal divide is seen in terms of Hindu and Muslim. The play shows the disintegration of the family and the emotional trauma of newly reduced circumstances. **Doongaji House** looks hard at an India that is divided on the basis of language, religion, community, and class even as it searches for a common heritage.

Among the more recent playwright, Manjula Padmanabhan merits mention not just because her play, **Harvest** (1997) received the first Onassis International Cultural Competitions for Theatrical Plays but also for the fact that she has written for the theatre with consistency. **Harvest** is her fifth play and at least two others, **Lights Out** and **Gaslights** have been performed to great acclaim. Manjula Padmanabhan is a playwright of great promise (she is also an illustrator and cartoonist as well as writer of short fiction) but one who needs to work consistently with a theatrical company to realise her undoubted potential. **Harvest** is a play set in the future and explores a situation when citizens of the developed world shop for body parts in the third world. It is a dark and bitter comedy worth reading. **Lights Out** on the other hand is about

the callous nature of the urban middle class. Padmanabhan has the vision and talent to disturb us with credible scenarios.

Again the sketchiness of the above history of post-independence Indian English drama should not fool you into assuming that there are no other playwrights or plays in this period. You must read other books to get a more comprehensive history. (You must also make an attempt to read at least the available contemporary plays even if you are not in a position to watch them in performance.) You should have noticed that I haven't even mentioned Mahesh Dattani. I haven't mentioned a number of other playwrights either. In fact what I have attempted to do is to show in what important ways the post-independence Indian English theatre has differed from the pre-independence theatre. It is in the depth of individual voices and focussed contemporary concerns and in the evolution of an acceptable and accessible spoken language. In post-independence Indian English drama too we can see the repetitions of older attempts to create an India through the exploration and construction of Hindu historical figures. There are a few plays on saints as there are on episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. One of the biggest theatrical spectacles of recent years was the staging of **The Legend of Rama, Prince of India** by Amir Raza Husain (1994, New Delhi). As you can see from the title itself, Indian English theatre still feels part of the construction of the nation and national identity. The history that I have marked out highlights the many playwrights who focus not on the nation as a whole, or even make the construction of the nation an overt part of their theatrical agenda, but those who focus on certain communities, classes, local situations. It is to this group of playwrights that Mahesh Dattani belongs.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

There are many challenges that the Indian English playwright faces – from the lack of opportunity and trained actors and sponsorship to the demands made by the language itself. The audience and theatrical companies that want plays in English have always had the choice of British and American plays available to them. Hence Indian English drama hasn't grown in the way drama in other Indian languages have. The history of Indian English drama demonstrates the presence of individual talents and sporadic theatrical activity. Like other genres in the language, Indian English drama shows the impact of British colonialism on Indian intellectual to re-imagine India and the Indian. Always a drama of the middle and upper classes, Indian English drama seeks more and more to be a drama of local spaces and communities.

1.5 QUESTIONS

1. What are the obstacles that Indian English theatre faces?
2. What are the specific challenges that the Indian English playwright faces because of the language itself? How can the playwright overcome them?
3. Name some major pre-independence Indian English playwrights.
4. When were the first theatres established in the major centres and when were the first Indian English plays performed there?
5. What did the pre-independence Indian English playwrights write about? Is there a discernible pattern in their writing?

6. What could be the reasons for the failure of pre-independence Indian English theatre as compared to the success of theatres in other Indian languages?
7. Name some prominent post-independence Indian English playwrights and some of their plays.
8. Name the prize that was given to three of the plays discussed in the above unit. Which plays won this award?
9. What are the differences between the pre-independence Indian English playwrights and post-independence playwrights? Discuss this highlighting the contributions of post-independence playwrights.

1.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

Bhatta, S. Krishna. *Indian English Drama: A Critical Study*, New Delhi: Sterling, 1987.

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UNIT 2 A PREVIEW OF DATTANI'S DRAMATIC WORLD

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Plays
- 2.3 Themes
- 2.4 Techniques and language
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to engage with other plays by Dattani to mark the contours of his dramatic world – to establish his major concerns as a writer and the techniques he uses as a dramatist. We'll also look at his use of the English language.

2.1 INTRODUCTION



Mahesh Dattani is a Bangalore based playwright and director. There are two published texts of Dattani's plays – one a collection of plays and the other your prescribed text. We shall talk about *Tara* in detail later, so we shall concentrate on other plays by Dattani now. *Final Solutions and Other Plays* contains four plays – *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Final Solutions*. Recently his plays have been collected in a single volume called *Collected Plays* published by Penguin. This includes his radio plays which were not published earlier. I suggest that you read these plays even before you read *Tara*. These plays showcase Dattani's concerns as a writer and dramatist. In other words, they

demonstrate his continuing thematic concerns as well as his exploration of, and experimentation with, stagecraft.

2.2 THE PLAYS

Even a cursory reading would have created an impression on you of a vigorous mind enquiring about contemporary urban concerns in a language not too different from what we hear or speak. What do you think are his characteristic concerns? If you have already read his plays, take a few minutes and write down your answer in point form:

Whether you've read the plays and answered the above question or not, let us go on to discuss the plays (albeit briefly) to see what themes reveal themselves to us.

Where There's a Will has as its protagonist a rich businessman, Hasmukh Mehta, who dies in the first scene itself and then stays on the stage as a ghost! He ruled his household when alive, and has attempted to do so after his death. This he does through his will, which installs his former mistress in the household. The play explores the lives and motivations of his son, his daughter in law, his wife, and his mistress who have to collectively exorcise his ghost. Mehta, it transpires has been sick of his son's namby pamby ways. His daughter in law is interested only in the money and may have hastened his end by substituting vitamin tablets for his blood pressure pills. The son, Ajit, resents him while Hasmukh Mehta's wife is under her sister's thumb and gives him no satisfaction. It takes the entry of his mistress into his family for Hasmukh's ghost to be laid to rest. Hasmukh is finally dismissed as no more than his father's creation, a projection of an image, a prisoner to somebody else's needs rather than an individual of his own making.

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani examines the life of a couple, both of whom are Bharatanatyam dancers. Jairaj had gone against his father's wishes in order to learn dancing and dedicate his life to it. Amritlal, the father, thinks dancing a feminine occupation and manages to buy off Jairaj's wife, Ratna, to thwart Jairaj's dancing career and sets the couple off on a life of petty manipulation – the lot in any case of all artistes in this age of bureaucratic patronage. Jairaj is forced to live with a sense of mediocrity as well as his wife's treachery. Both Ratna and Jairaj have to live with the knowledge of their sacrifices and sins having led to nothing more than a sense of frustration. They have even lost their son in their pursuit of fame. But their ambition lives on in their daughter, Lata, who has fallen in love with a sweet wallah, Viswas. Will she have the career they didn't or will she have the successful family life that they never had. Or can she manage both? We don't know because the play ends with the birth of Lata's daughter.

Bravely Fought the Queen (the reference to the famous poem on the Rani Of Jhansi should be obvious to all educated Indians who've done some Hindi in school) shows us the boredom of suburbia, the emptiness of lives caught up in the swirl of capitalism (the Trivedi brothers run an advertisement agency). Each of the characters has to face up to this emptiness, to his/her needs. But the women have a special fight on their hands, a fight for agency, a fight to structure their own lives. And bravely they fight – but should they fight like the men or create a different space, adopt a different strategy? The story revolves mainly around the Trivedi brothers, Jiten and Nitin, and their wives, Dolly and Alka, who are sisters. Lalitha and Sridhar are the outsiders who get caught up in the action of the Trivedi family. There is Baa, the mother of the Trivedi brothers, and a few other characters, both imaginary and real. Of the real characters, two do not ever come on stage. They are Daksha, daughter of

Jiten and Dolly, and Praful, the brother of Dolly and Alka. The undercurrents of 'normal' family life are revealed to us; we see the results of the examples parents can set and the turf battles that they fight. It turns out that the father was a violent man and the first son, Jiten, turns out to be like him. Even Praful is shown to have been violent with Alka when admonishing her for mixing with boys. Nitin is ultimately revealed to be a homosexual who has been duped into marrying Alka (and she him) by his partner, Praful. Where will it all end?

Dattani's *Final Solutions* takes on a larger theme of Hindu-Muslim hostility. Dattani resists easy schematisation in this dramatisation. There are no good Hindus or bad Hindus, no good Muslims or bad Muslims. What we have are people caught in the trap of conditioning and past experiences. Again the situation is worked out through a family and the way in which the past controls its present. In the Gandhi household which consist of Ramnik, his wife Aruna, their daughter, Smita, and Ramnik's mother Hardika, two intruders enter. They are Muslim youth seeking refuge during a riot. How does the liberal humanist Ramnik deal with the situation, or for that matter the religious-conservative Aruna, or the rabidly anti-Muslim Hardika? It turns out further that Smita knows one of the youth, Babban alias Bobby, fairly well (she may be in love with him but can she face it?) as well as the sister of the other, Javed. Javed is in town as an agent provocateur, and is intensely anti-Hindu. Babban is the seemingly acceptable face of Islam but he is actually ashamed of his religious roots, which is why his preferred nickname is Bobby. As each one of them comes to terms with the present, the past reveals itself including the terrible family guilt that Ramnik carries about, an event which had wrongly soured Hardika against Muslims altogether. His father who had asserted his patriarchal authority over Hardika to stop her from meeting her Muslim friends had actually made use of riots to obtain the shop that had belonged to Hardika's friends. Can such historical situations ever be righted? The play ends with this question.

Can you see any common threads running through these plays? What are they? Write down your thoughts (briefly) here and we shall compare notes later.

I shall not discuss this immediately but go on to tell you in a few lines about Dattani's later plays – plays written after *Tara*. You realise of course that with a living and successful playwright like Dattani you will have to look out for newer plays constantly and learn to read them with the confidence gained from reading his earlier plays here. What may happen also is that the newer plays could make you re-read/re-evaluate the earlier plays.

In *On a Muggy Night in Bombay*, Dattani's latest stage play, one of the characters sings, "When makes a man a man?" Kamlesh is a homosexual who is comfortable with his gayness. But he is in a turmoil because his sister is going to marry his former lover who pretends to be straight (a heterosexual). In Dattani's one-act play, *Night Queen* (published in *The Telegraph Autumn Collection*, 1996), Ash sleeps with Raghu whose sister he plans to marry. In his radio play *Do the Needful* (broadcast on BBC in 1997), Alpesh reveals his homosexuality to Latha, his future wife. She has a married lover herself and agrees to marry Alpesh. They make a marriage of convenience and continue to meet their lovers. In another radio play, *Seven Circles around the Fire* (broadcast on BBC in 1999), Dattani looks at hijras, who are treated as less than human by the majority of society but who nevertheless are used as sex objects.

2.3 THEMES

Homosexuality

It must be clear by now that the major preoccupation of Dattani, the predominant theme in his later plays, is homosexuality. Is this related to some of the themes that you may have noted down? Homosexuality is dealt with in *Bravely Fought the Queen* as well (there too a former homosexual partner marries a sister, but the circumstances are very different). Have you put down patriarchy as one of the recurrent themes? You can see that the autocratic (if not tyrannical) father is present in more than one play of Dattani's. You have Hasmukh Mehta in *Where There's a Will*, Amritlal in *Dance Like a Man*, Jiten's father in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, as well as a host of hurtful husbands. So if family life is oppressive (and did you write family as well as oppression as major themes?), it is mainly due to the operation of patriarchy embodied in the figures of the fathers and other males (remember Praful in *Bravely Fought the Queen*?).

Gender Identity

This leads automatically to another of Dattani's concerns – gender identity. How are men and women constructed in terms of gender? What are the definitions of their roles? How meaningful are these definitions? Hasmukh Mehta does not think his son Ajit manly enough in *Where There's a Will*, and Amritlal does not think dancing is for men in *Dance Like a Man* (and crucially even Ratna thinks her husband Jairaj isn't much of a man). *Bravely Fought the Queen* foregrounds this whole issue with its very title. This seemingly awkward translation of the well-known Hindi poem that supplies the title to this play is rendered by Lalitha:

'We'd heard her praises sung so often
So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi
So bravely fought the manly queen...' (Act 3)

Our attention is immediately focussed in the ensuing dialogue on the supposed manliness of the queen. What this does is to question what we have always lived with, our traditional ways of defining ourselves. Why should the bravery of a queen make her manly? Why should a man who wants to dance Bharatanatyam be effeminate? What is manly and what feminine? Why should it be so? Why can't women go out in the world? Why should men be masterly and women subservient? Why can't men and women be open about their sexuality? Dattani raises these and a host of other questions regarding gender and social stratification and hierarchy and sexuality.

Revelation of Past

Dattani's plays are revelatory in nature. The past rides the shoulder of the present and not only has to be dislodged and laid to rest but has to be faced fully for what it was. There is always some action that has been suppressed, some deeply damaging action that has contributed to the warped growth of characters and the conflicts between them. If in *Where There's a Will* it is the ghost not of Hasmukh Mehta but of his father that has to be recognised, in *Dance Like a Man* it is the collusion between Ratna and Amritlal to thwart Jairaj's ambitions as also Ratna's hand in the death of their son. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* it is a host of issues that have to be revealed and faced – from the homosexuality of certain characters, to the violence of the father, to the hand of Jiten in the maiming of his daughter, Daksha. In *Final Solutions* there are again various revelations, the most important being the heinous behaviour of Ramnik's father and grandfather. But while it may seem that this is almost Ibsenian, this concern with direct but suppressed causality, Dattani is actually more tangential. He is not so much interested in the causality – who can say that these are necessarily the only possible effects – as in the process of revelation. His concern is to show what

lies beneath, what took place before, in peeling the layers and showing us unexpected complexities.

Middle- Class Life

He shows us the hollowness of middle-class lives. His plays explore what lies below the facades characters and families put up to fool the world, reveal the essential loneliness of people. Dattani presents to us the vulnerability of characters, the emotional price they pay in their quest for successful appearances, in their need to belong. His characters are displaced, disenchanted. They are dangerously normal, average, people who are in search of happiness, and fulfilment. They need love and affection; they need to feel sexually fulfilled. If they seem to need the family only as much as one would need a terrible pain somewhere in the body, they need to work out their destinies within the family unit, as it is the basic unit of society. The family in Dattani stands for society at large. Dattani's characters search for security and acceptance, to be true to themselves and yet belong. These are everyday concerns of every person.

Family

Dattani's is not a world of simple dichotomies. There is a great deal of conflict in relationships and no one is willing to be an easy victim. In this world of patriarchy, women emerge as pretty strong characters. The home is a battlefield with uneasy (and perhaps disastrous) alliances being forged by various parties and everyone fights as many of the others as possible for individual turf. In Dattani's world the socialisation process initiated in the family unit has as its aim the stunted growth of a bonsai tree. The family is there to stifle all natural instincts and inclinations, to suppress and oppress, and to curb freedom and growth. All we can produce are ugly dwarves.

2.4 TECHNIQUES AND LANGUAGE

One thing that emerges immediately in Dattani's career is the fact that while he writes about everyday lives, he does not attempt an impossible realism. He in fact revels in the possibilities that the stage (as well as the fictive mode) offers him. A playwright who begins his career with a ghost present almost through the play obviously has no interest in replicating the drawing rooms of the world on the stage. In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani has the ghost addressing the audience directly with the actor playing the ghost picking up a victim in the audience to inform that his/her shoes need polishing (Act II, scene ii). In *Dance Like a Man* there are rapid shifts not only in space and time, even actors change roles instantaneously.

In his note to the play, Dattani gives us this direction:

The play requires four performers, and the parts should be distributed as follows:

THE YOUNG MAN, early twenties, plays Viswas and the younger Jairaj.

THE YOUNG WOMAN, early twenties, plays Lata and the younger Ratna.

THE OLD MAN, early sixties, plays the older Jairaj and his father, Amritlal Parekh.

THE OLD WOMAN, early sixties, plays the older Ratna.

It is important that the above role-switching be adhered to, as it is vital to the structure of the play.

Dattani's caution at the end of the note is important. It would be impossible to create the same impact if the switches in role are not performed the way he wants. In the first flashback in Act One, the actor playing Jairaj wears a shawl to change into his father. Viswas becomes Jairaj, and Lata changes into Ratna. Their ages remain the

same as the previous characters they played. A shawl, lighting, and a lightning change in the setting and we are in the 1940s. At the end of this flashback the younger Ratna exits calling for the younger Jairaj, Amritlal takes off his shawl and becomes the older Jairaj, and the older Ratna enters calling out to him. There are such rapid and effortless shifts in time and space throughout the play.

In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, past and present commingle as does the office and the home in Act II. The level that represents Baa's room in Act I remains in Act II even though the locale has changed to the office of the Trivedi brothers. Even the well stocked bar from the previous act is retained though now as part of the office. In this act you see the interaction between Baa and the women that took place almost off stage in Act I. You hear them through and in between the conversation between the men; and Baa's comments on her sons and her husband are heard as we watch the men in action. Baa's voice from the past intermingles with the present conversation between her sons and frames it in ways otherwise impossible.

In *Final Solutions*, Hardika and Daksha, the old grandmother and her younger self, exist on the same plane. When the play opens the younger (fifteen-year-old) Daksha is reading out what she has just written in her diary, while the sixty-year-old Hardika is seated at the same level. Again, Dattani's stage directions are worth noting:

On another level is a room...This belongs to the young Daksha, who is in fact the grandmother, also sometimes seen as a girl of fifteen. There are several instances when Hardika – the grandmother, and Daksha – the young bride, are on this level at the same time, although they are the same person. Hardika should be positioned and lit in such a way that the entire action of the play is seen through her eyes.

The past and the present both co-exist, and while the past has fashioned the present the present helps the characters to re-read the past. So the play has to be seen through Hardika's eyes; the play should be seen as Hardika's education and tragedy. We are meant to see the social processes of oppression and hatred as they operate on Hardika. Hence even in a play which was meant to be about the construction of communal hatred, a play which was meant to be on a large scale, choric in character, Dattani's stage techniques are aimed at making the audience intimate with the life of a family – its trials and tribulations and debilitating secrets. This is perhaps why John McRae notes in his Introduction to *Final Solutions and Other Plays* that while Alyque Padamsee's production of *Final Solutions* was spectacular and choric, Dattani's (he is a director himself) was small-scale and intimate (p 8).

You must have noticed in the stage directions that we discussed above, as in the directions to other plays, that Dattani likes to divide his stage into different levels. This enables Dattani to mingle the past and the present as well as stretch available space to show different locations at the same time. This may help both – a narratorial linearity as well as simultaneity. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, for instance, in the scene we discussed earlier, the brothers are shown talking to each other in the office, while at the same time their mother is shown in her interaction with the women at home. This simultaneous action in two different locales helps us to evaluate the characters as the action builds up to the moment when the mother and the brothers speak through each other and some of the past is revealed. The influence of their mother's life and views on them and their lives is seen as a continued presence through the device of having her bedroom at a higher level and keeping it visible throughout the play.

As we have seen, Dattani exercises great care in ensuring through his detailed stage directions that readers and potential directors understand all this. This division of the stage allows clearly demarcated space for certain characters, or time periods, as well as for different locales. He specifies the use of lighting for a similar purpose. This allows Dattani to cut from one character to another, one time frame to another, one

locale to another as well as to fuse everything together when he needs to. This helps him to build tension as well as further the action. The stage also becomes emblematic of the layered nature of our lives. In *On a muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani allows for at least three levels, including one called 'shunya' where the true selves of the characters are revealed. C.K. Meena says, in an article on Dattani, "Unmasking the Middle Class: The Drama of Mahesh Dattani" (Indian Review of Books, Vol. 8, No. 6, 1999), that this distribution of "the action among different levels on stage... not only makes his plays visually exciting but makes them move at a snappy pace." What do you think?

Have you also noticed how often Dattani uses an outsider as catalyst to the action? He also experiments with symbolism (for example, the use of bonsai plants in *Bravely Fought the Queen*). He departs from his usual style to include a chorus in *Final Solutions*. And the same actors visibly play different roles in *Dance Like a Man* as we have seen. Dattani isn't averse to experimentation and is an evolving playwright. What we have established is that though Dattani seems to favour the well-made play as a vehicle, he doesn't mind playing around with it, bending and twisting it to his will. The well-made play is tailor made for Dattani because it essentially suits his kind of theatre where the character is foregrounded and key actions are revealed in climaxes. This structure helps him to build tension and to reveal things gradually till the tempo is heightened to the climax.

But at least two other things need to be said about Dattani's craft. Do you know what they are? We haven't mentioned his humour as yet, nor have we talked about his use of language. Dattani is essentially a comic writer. There is a great deal of humour in his plays, from the subtle to the slapstick. Kusum Haider points out in a review essay, "Essentially a Comic Muse" (*The Book Review*, Vol. XXII, No. 3), that the tone of Dattani's "plays is light, there is bright comedy within often sombre bounds." The comedy arises from Dattani's essential subject matter – human behaviour. There is often comedy in the way people talk to each other as well as in the way they present themselves to and perceive each other. But the amusing dialogue does give way to dark truths. I would like to think that Dattani makes you examine the spring-wells of your own sense of humour. Humour and laughter too are ways of dealing with the world and its unpalatable truths.

The most important contribution of Dattani is perhaps his use of language. The note to his very first play, *Where There's a Will*, reads as follows:

Should the play be read in classrooms, I sincerely wish that English language teachers... will not dismiss my syntax as bad English, or worse still as incorrect. While knowledge of the rules of grammar is important, the richness and variety of the spoken word is a study in itself.

The characters, I am sure, would love to speak in Gujarati but have unfortunately been conceived by a mind that thinks in English. This is not an apology, but a definition of reality. In fact, it is this misfortune that puts all such works on edge, creating challenges for both the performer and the serious student...

Dattani defends his use of English as spoken by people in India but also goes on to make another serious statement. He says that his characters "would love to speak in Gujarati" and his challenge as a writer is to convey their Gujaratiness without distortion in English. His *Where There's a Will* is thus a Gujarati play in English set in Bangalore. Dattani's characters speak the kind of English that most middle class Indians do. And they would obviously speak in it in the same situations that we would. The challenge that Dattani faces is not to allow the audience to feel that his use of English limits his range or that of his characters. He has to attempt the same feeling of authenticity, of range and of nuance, as a Gujarati playwright writing about the middle class. Do you think that Dattani manages this or do you think that his

characters end up speaking a homogenised convent English? Does his language remain a perennial limitation? I feel that Dattani manages to meet this challenge successfully. He is getting to be freer in his use of language to the extent of cracking interlingual jokes. As his characters begin to move freely from English to Gujarati and Kannada (do not forget that he is a Bangalore based playwright), much as middle class Gujarati residents of Bangalore, his theatre becomes visibly (audibly?) more representative and accessible and acceptable. Dattani, I think, has over a period of time managed to extend the range of his language and made it more suitable for his theatre.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Mahesh Dattani's plays usually deal with middle-class life in urban India. While the plays are usually based in Bangalore, they are peopled with Gujarati characters. The major issues he deals with are homosexuality, gender identity and construction, the pressure of the past, the hollowness of middle-class life, and the family as a battlefield. He uses all the resources of theatre at his command, from creating different levels on the stage to giving double roles to actors, to effective use of lighting and music. All this allows him to collapse the past and the present as well as geographical locations. He is also able to achieve fluidity of movement, which gives his plays a cinematic quality. He also uses Indian English with great confidence and captures the rhythms of the spoken language.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Name Dattani's published plays.
2. What according to you are the major themes in his plays?
3. Discuss Dattani's treatment of gender in his plays other than *Tara*.
4. Why does Dattani divide the stage into different levels or acting areas?
5. What are the various devices that Dattani uses to show the continuity of the past in the present?
6. What according to Dattani are the challenges that language poses to the Indian English dramatist?

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Bentley, Eric. *The Theory of the Modern Stage: An Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968

Dattani, Mahesh. *Final Solutions and Other Plays*, Madras: Manas (Affiliated East-West Press), 1994 (You will find the introduction quite useful.)

UNIT 3 READING *TARA*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Act I
- 3.3 Act II
- 3.4 Themes
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will discuss *Tara* and identify its themes. We will see how Dattani structures the play and develops the characters. Our discussion of his other plays will also help us in this task.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The first thing to do is to check your memory. Without looking up the text of *Tara* (this is assuming that you have read the text at least once) write down the story of the play. Notice that I am saying story, so don't follow the action of the play but write down the story as you understand/remember it, from the birth of *Tara* and Chandan.

Did you mention Roopa in the story? Did you need to? Can you write the story without mentioning Roopa? Did you mention Bharati's father? Did you need to? If you mentioned one and not the other, or if you mentioned neither, can you think why? Is neither character important? Roopa does appear on stage and has a role to play but is she more important than the absent grandfather? What I am pointing your attention to is the old fashioned but still relevant distinction between story and plot, which is that while the story tells you the sequence of events, plot tells you the why as well. When you write down the story you may also have decided to leave out characters who are only mentioned in passing as well as such incidents. You may have decided not to mention Prema or Nalini. Or you may have mentioned both the grandfather and Roopa as they both play a part in the story but who has the more important part, the greater impact on the lives of the major characters on stage? Obviously, it is the grandfather. Why do I say so? Think it through but we'll come back to it later.

What is your reaction when you read the opening stage directions of *Tara*? We have already seen the importance of stage directions when discussing some of Dattani's



Chandan and Tara
(*Tara*: A Scene Stealers Production Jan.1997)

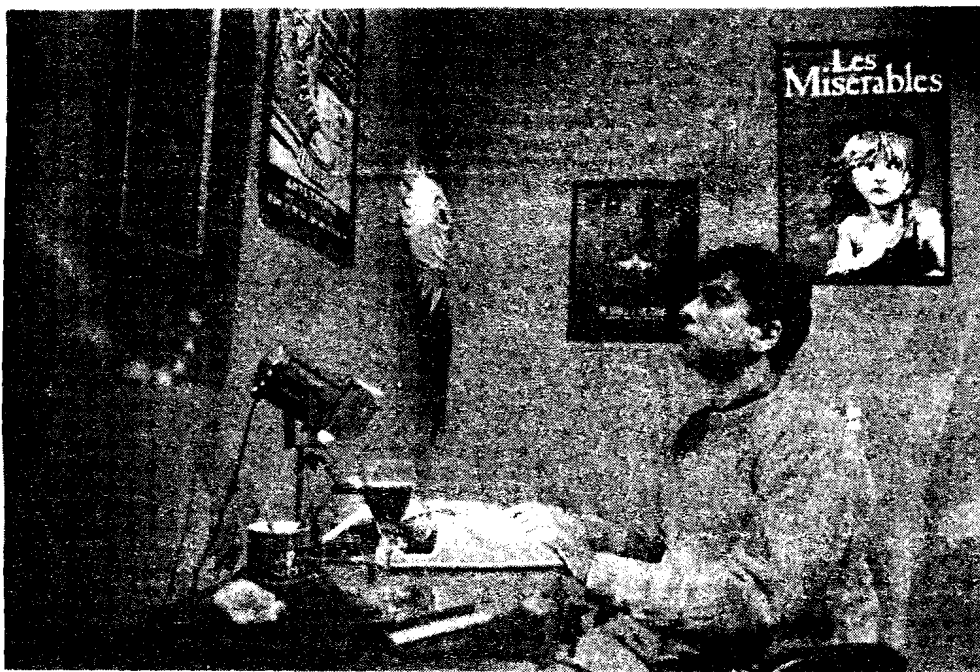
plays, so perhaps you don't need the admonishment or advice to read the stage directions carefully when you read plays. You know that stage directions are indications of the intentions of the playwright. A novelist can go on and on about character and mood and location and motivation. A playwright has to show all this through dialogues and character interaction. He can sketch in the setting and put down (short) notes to how the scene should be played/read in the stage directions. These stage directions also alert us to the playwright's world view and theatrical philosophy.

You can see from Dattani's first stage direction itself that he is a playwright for whom the set is an integral part of the action. It is also clear that while he segments the stage to show various locales and times. One of the levels, the one that represents Chandan's London bedsitter, is the only realistic level. This is then obviously Chandan's play. Dr. Thakkar sits behind on a higher level throughout the play and as Dattani points out, he has a "sheer, godlike presence." This alerts us to the fact that while Dr. Thakkar will have a major role to play as perhaps a catalyst he is not important directly to the emotional drama. The lowest level represents the Patel residence, which "is seen only in memory." There is a galli outside the house "which can be suggested by cross lighting." This is where the past is played out and revealed. If you've missed noting this in the cast of characters you will realise now that there is an older (called Dan to avert confusion) as well as a younger version of Chandan in

the play. The stage direction itself alerts us to the fact that this is not a straightforward realistic play but one in which memory and flashback will play a major role.

3.2 ACT I

Let us go through the action of the first act of the play quickly. You realise of course that this will be different in structure from the story you wrote down. We're now looking at the sequence of action on stage. The play opens with Dan. We've already been alerted by the stage directions to the fact that this is Dan's play, for his level is the only realistic level in the play. Dan is busy typing when the play opens and addresses the audience directly immediately. We are told that (i) he keeps reliving an experience trying to put it on paper, (ii) that he lives in London mainly to put distance between him and his past, (iii) that the play he is writing is called "Twinkle *Tara*" (and you know that this play is called *Tara*, and that '*Tara*' means 'star') and is composed of his memories, (iv) that what he had tried desperately to suppress so far was the fact of having had a twin sister, *Tara*, who was inseparable from him – "The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb." He also talks of his freakishness, that he is a freak. In this longish soliloquy, we are made aware of the pain and anguish caused to Dan by past events, events that have to do with his twin sister, *Tara*. We are also told that Dan and *Tara* had shared one body – that they were Siamese twins.



Dan in his apartment in Condon
(*Tara*: A Scene Stealers Production Jan. 1997)

The action (and the lighting) moves to Mumbai and to the past. Bharati has finished her morning pooja, and Patel is getting ready to go to work. In Dattani's plays, men go to work and women safeguard and ensure the continuation of tradition and rituals. These are stereotypical gender roles and Dattani makes full use of them as such. Dattani sketches in an immediate conflict between husband and wife regarding her father. Bharati also seems more concerned than Patel about *Tara*'s diet and health. The children have a health problem and there is mention of publicity that had surrounded them in the past. Roopa is introduced to us in all her glory while it is also made clear that Patel would like Chandan to follow in his footsteps. As *Tara* explains to Roopa about the conversation between father and son, "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the

Tara

cave." Chandan seems to have different plans and wants to be a writer. And *Tara* would like to be "Strong. Healthy. Beautiful." We're made to understand that it is Bharati's mental health that Patel is worried about.

There is a break in the action here and we go back to Dan who is presumably remembering all that we have witnessed and he decides to get back to essentials. It is



Tara and Chandan with Bharati Patel
(*Tara*: A Scene Stealers Production Jan. 1997)

Tara that he wants to focus on and we're told that nature hadn't been fair to either of them. Perhaps nature intended them to remain united, but "preserved in formalin for future generation to study." Dan decides to begin with Dr. Thakkar who had taken on God and Nature. In the nature of a TV interview Dr. Thakkar (the interviewer being Dan) relates to us the case history of Chandan and *Tara*. He talks of having had to operate on them when they were only three months old. When he talks of their being of different sexes, Dan remarks about being "A freak among freaks."

This is the cue for action to move back to the lowest level. We see *Tara* being asked to exhibit her artificial leg. In the ensuing dialogue between her and Chandan we learn a lot of facts but most importantly that Bharati fusses over *Tara* and that *Tara* resents what she sees as lack of interest in her father towards her. One of the girls who inspected *Tara*'s leg turns out to be Roopa who makes her re-entrance on stage. We learn that Patel and Bharati belong to different states, Gujarat and Karnataka respectively. We see Bharati bribing Roopa to be friendly with *Tara*. Roopa runs off to tell her friends that Bharati is the odd one in the family. We flit to Dr. Thakkar and then cut to Patel hearing over the phone that a donor has been found for *Tara*'s kidney transplant. It turns out that Bharati wants to donate her own kidney but that Patel doesn't approve of it.

We see the husband and wife quarrel and the husband say bitterly that her father's money was always Bharati's strength against him. When Patel tries to force Bharati to see a psychiatrist ("You'll have to obey me. It's *my* turn now." He says.), Bharati threatens to reveal something to *Tara*. Patel gives up but asserts that it would be from him that they should hear the revelation. Soon afterwards we see Bharati with the children and she tells Chandan that Patel doesn't care so much for *Tara* and that even though their grandfather had left them money, *Tara* would need a career to retain her own self esteem. She has tried to prevent Roopa from saying something to *Tara* and

it turns out that this was popular belief that when Patels didn't want daughters they would drown the babies in milk. Bharati herself seems to have a lot of love for *Tara* and she says, "*Love can make up for a lot.*"

Reading *Tara*

During this talk Bharati has been knitting a sweater for *Tara* and Chandan points out that she has dropped a stitch. Patel enters when Chandan is helping his mother with her knitting, and this calls forth his views on gender identity and the confusion that he feels his wife is creating. He has already made his plans for Chandan, that he would study further and go abroad. He accuses his wife of having taken over *Tara* completely and deliberately. The act ends with *Tara* who is the bone of contention falling into a dead faint.

In the first act itself there have been a number of revelations, as well as a number of hints about further dark secrets. How many of Dattani's characteristic concerns have you noted so far? In other words, how many of the themes that we said were important to Dattani has he picked up in this play as well as one evident from the first act itself? Write down your list first:

You must have written gender identity. It does seem to be quite important in this play. The roles that Patel seems to assume are natural to males and the roles that he assigns to women are vastly different. Why can't Chandan knit, and why can't *Tara* go to his office? Why are baby girls killed in our country? You must have also noted down the relationship between husband and wife or noted it down as family in conflict. This is typical Dattani, the husband and wife in conflict over an increasingly fragmented family. There is the pressure of past here as well as an unseen (dead) Bharati's father who seems to have played a role in their deteriorating relationship. The relationship between siblings is also important and you wonder what effect the turf battle between their parents (with them as prizes to be won) will have on them.



Mr. & Mrs. Tara and Chandan, Dan in background
(*Tara*: A Scene Stealers Production Jan. 1997)

You can see the familiar Dattani dramatic concerns and trademarks of the necessary revelation and of the suppressed past, of societal constriction, of normality, and of strong patriarchy. We'll re-examine this list after we look at the second act.

3.3 ACT II

This act opens with Bharati and *Tara* in conversation with each other. Bharati is going to donate her kidney to *Tara* in a soon to be performed operation. Bharati says she is doing this for love as well as to make up for (after a little hesitation) *Tara*'s father and all the things God hadn't given *Tara*. Dan looks through a scrapbook and tells us about the operation and of Bharati's indisposition after it. He ends with the comment that even nature had given *Tara* a raw deal. Dr. Thakkar tells us of the various complications that attended the operation of the twins. The action cuts to the return of *Tara* after surgery and the revelation to her that her mother has had a nervous breakdown. While Dr. Thakkar continues to talk of the operation to separate the children the action goes back to the Patel household. *Tara* is unhappy about her mother and refuses to go to physiotherapy or to fill forms for college. Chandan refuses to do either without her and Patel wants *Tara* to comply for her brother's sake. His plans for his son are still on and it is also revealed that the grandfather had left his house in Bangalore to both of them, but his money only to Chandan. Patel resents his father-in-law deeply and advocates the burning down of the house! While Chandan and *Tara* resolve the college issue, it becomes clear to us that while Chandan is not so affected by his lack of one leg, *Tara* longs to be normal in that respect. In the next movement, Dan talks about the dying having an understanding of and attachment to life. Dr. Thakkar continues to talk of the difficulties of the operation and the action moves to Roopa and Chandan. The usual talk of movies is about "Sophie's Choice", in which Sophie has to choose between sacrificing a son or a daughter. There is a mild attempt at petting that leads nowhere. *Tara* enters to defuse the scene but ends up throwing Roopa out, calling her ugly and deformed.

Dr. Thakkar explains to us that both the children would be sterile and then *Tara* wishes to die rather than have so much money spent on her. All she cares about is her mother, she says. This movement ends with her equating Chandan with their father and other men as "creeps." There is a phone call from Patel to Dan to inform him of Bharati's death. Dan refuses to go back and asks his father to come to London instead now that both *Tara* and Bharati are dead. *Tara* has been dead for six years. In the next movement, we see *Tara* accusing Chandan of indifference towards their mother. She tells Chandan that their father is denying her access to their mother. She thinks that her mother has a secret to disclose to her. At this moment of complete distance from them, Dr. Thakkar informs us that the separation was a complete success. Chandan and *Tara* defy their father and decide to go and visit their mother. Dr. Thakkar tells us that the greatest challenge was to keep the girl alive. And Patel decides to tell the children the truth. He says that all three were to blame -- the grandfather, his wife, and him. The twins had three legs between them and the third leg was fed by the girl's blood system. The chances of the leg's survival were greater with the girl. But Bharati and her father had decided to risk giving the leg to the boy. Patel couldn't protest strongly enough and the doctor was bought off with sanction for land in Bangalore by Bharati's powerful politician father. The leg had survived for two days while it could have been *Tara*'s forever. *Tara* is devastated by this revelation. The play ends with the spirits of *Tara* and Dan hugging each other.

You can see of course that in my description of the action there is a lot I have left out in the two acts. I expect you to fill in all that including Roopa's role in the last movement of the play. You must have also noticed that I have been talking of the play in terms of movements. The constant reference to music in the play suggested it to me that this was one way to talk of the shifts in locale and action.

3.4 THEMES

Let us now get back to our earlier short discussion about the themes that Dattani explores in this play. We started with gender identity, but is that the major theme?

What do you think now after looking at both the acts? What does the dark secret revealed in Act II have to do with? Of course this revelation itself is a major concern of the play – the exposure of the fact that people hide their motivations (and past actions) in their relationships with people. Bharati's excessive love for *Tara*, her concern for her future, her empathy and sympathy for her, her desire to donate her own kidney to *Tara* when there is another donor, her desire for *Tara*'s exclusive love – everything is motivated by the inhuman act of having decided to deny her one leg. It is the knowledge of having committed a wrong that leads to her mental breakdown and the deterioration of her relationship with her husband.

But is her husband free of blame? Why is he more interested in Chandan's future than in *Tara*'s? Why did he agree to his wife's and father in law's plan? Isn't he also complicit in their decision? Why? Isn't it because he too subscribes to the ideology of the patriarchal world? He can blame his wife and her father but he is no different from them. The male should always be given the greater chance. If Bharati's father had left the money only to Chandan, he is consistent in his actions. He always values the male higher. But what about Patel? He too makes plans only for Chandan's education and future career. Bharati may have taken *Tara* over because of her sense of guilt but Patel doesn't seem to have cared very much about it. Thus more than gender identity, it is gender hierarchy, patriarchy (which of course rules on gender identity) that seems to be the major concern in this play. It is to underline this that Dattani has Dan apologise to *Tara* at the end of the play: "Forgive me. *Tara*. Forgive me for making it my tragedy."

This is a play about the injustices done to women. This is also a play about the injustices done to men. The construction of gender, the hierarchisation, does as much harm to (sensitive) men as to women. The men in the play, here I mean Dan and Patel (Dan more than Patel), carry as much of an unfair burden as the women. Patel is complicit in the working of patriarchy but then so is Bharati. But, while Bharati's pang of guilt have changed her views, Patel continues to subscribe to patriarchal views almost as if in defiance of Bharati, to rub her nose in. Nothing in Dattani's plays is simple. Dan, however, the recipient of an ill starred, unwanted, tragic gift, will carry forever the burden of having wasted *Tara*'s leg and blighting her life by just the fact of being himself – a male. His life is profoundly affected by the decisions of other people, by the values of his/our society. He has to pay for the sins of his parents (and grandfather). Hence the play ends with *Tara* and Dan hugging each other, each with two normal legs now, beyond both nature and society (and its science). I say society and not science, though I do recognise the role of science within brackets, because it is society that decides the uses of science. Dr. Thakkar and his team could easily have taken the sound medical decision of leaving the leg with *Tara* but for his ambitions and the carrot of land held out to him by people who had decided on basis of gender and not on medical grounds.

The play is obviously also about the complications of family life, the facade of middle class morality and commitment to family values. What is the morality that the Patel family has practised? If the decision to give the leg to Chandan was taken by Bharati and her father, Patel had kept quiet because of Bharati's father's social status, as also because he had no clear-cut view to the contrary. His family has cut them off because of their inter-caste, inter-regional marriage. Hence, they are dependent on Bharati's father for both monetary and moral support. This in turn has led to a power structure within the family where Bharati and her father take the important decisions. Thus we see the couple bickering after the death of Bharati's father and after Bharati has felt the full force of her guilt in taking the decision about *Tara*. Having sacrificed *Tara*'s leg, Bharati has had to struggle to construct her maternal love and concern for her daughter, to assert her moral superiority over her husband, to carve out her space in the family. Her final act of donating her kidney to *Tara* is an act of expiation, even if ultimately futile.

What we see is that love itself is an instrument, not an end or a state of being. Bharati uses her love for *Tara* as a weapon against Patel, as well as an expression of her desire to compensate *Tara*. This should remind you of Jiten and his mother, Baa, in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and their frequently expressed love for Daksha, Jiten's daughter, who had received grievous injury when in the womb because Baa had instigated Jiten to violence against his pregnant wife. Can parental love be taken for granted? Can any love be taken for granted as a natural given? Can family relationships be assumed to be protective and loving and caring? Isn't any and every relationship actually a site for conflict? And isn't this a conflict for control and power? Most of these conflicts are hidden from the world and a facade of decorum and contentment is maintained. What all this puts in jeopardy quietly but completely is chances for individual growth and fulfilment.

The revelation of the skeleton in the cupboard is the typical action of a Dattani play. Here the skeleton points towards the gender issue. The action leads inexorably towards the revelation, and we see characters struggling to meet the imminent moment of crisis. Dattani doesn't seem so much concerned with characters per se as with the process of revelation, the unearthing of secrets, the unmasking of the supportive family. Individuals cannot exist in a vacuum, cannot escape the consequences of societal dictates and familial choices. Dattani is not interested in the angst of characters, in their tragedies. This play is not Chandan's tragedy, nor is it really *Tara*'s. There is tragic action in his plays, but that tragic action belongs to every day life. His is not the drama of heroes. Dattani's world and Dattani's characters constitute the normal middle class urban India.

Everybody yearns for a normal life, but nobody knows what that is in reality. Roopa is the counterpoint to *Tara* and Chandan in this play. She is normal and offensive and comic. She is offensive and comic because she is normal. Dattani deliberately creates an opportunity for the audience/readers to laugh at her, giving her an uncertain



Roopa and Tara
(*Tara*: A Scene Stealers Production Jan. 1997)

control over both English and Kannada. She has all the curiosity of a healthy adolescent girl and all the confusions and fears. But Dattani makes it impossible for you to ascribe normality as a positive attribute to Roopa. Her minor foray into sexual exploration with Chandan is played for laughs and otherwise she is portrayed as a mean and slightly corrupt figure, the kind who will grow up to constitute the ever interfering, ever watching ('ogling') society. She exploits Bharati's need while laughing at her (Dattani uses Roopa to show us Bharati's unhealthy obsession with

Tara's life). If this be normality, who wants it? Notions of normality and the implementation, the institution, of norms, are seen as vicious traps in the world-view of these plays. *Tara* declares that the rest of the world is ugly and she has a point.

What I haven't mentioned so far, and you must be wondering why, is that the play deals with disability and its consequences. At the surface level, the play seems to be about this in the beginning. The impact of the children's disability on the family and their own lives seems to be at the heart of the play. The problems others have accepting them for what they are – fun-loving, wisecracking growing children – and hence their struggle for acceptance and the levels of frustration that this brings on seems to be part of the central action of the play. The strain on the parents and the effect this has on their marriage seems to complete the picture. That the family has gone through tough times seems obvious and they seem to be reeling under the continuing strain. However, the play has other paths to traverse. But this does remain a major concern in the play, and Roopa's interaction with them is a thread that runs right through the play and is emblematic of how society receives them. Towards the end of the play, the last time we see Roopa, she is shown taunting them, calling them freaks and holding up a poster saying "We don't want freaks." We have a special ability to make various people unwanted, be it in terms of their religion or caste or community or different abilities.

Tara, like any other play, can be looked at in various ways. We have already looked at several themes in the play. But some approaches become apparent only in performance. Roopa can be seen as a merely comic figure on stage and the actress playing the role can walk away with the laughter and the applause. Hence Dattani has to work carefully in order to balance the play out in such a way that even if the audience roots for the actress playing Roopa, the play doesn't lose its impact. We'll look at the techniques that Dattani uses in *Tara* in the next unit. Obviously, techniques help to foreground his thematic concerns. So we may come back to some of our discussion in this unit once again.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked closely at the text of *Tara*, and discussed the various themes that inform the play. *Tara* is about disability and all that it causes in a certain social environment, it is about patriarchy, gender hierarchy and gender identity, about power play within the family, about middle-class morality, about the social role of medicine, about normality, about the pressures of the past, about sexuality, about youth and the imperfect world...

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Would it matter if the medical information given in *Tara* were absolutely wrong in reality? Give reasons for your answer.
2. How important is the family in Dattani's plays? Answer with special reference to *Tara*.
3. What is Roopa's role in *Tara*?
4. What according to you are the major themes of *Tara*? Discuss whatever you consider to be the most important of them.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

UNIT 4 APPRECIATING *TARA*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Techniques
- 4.3 Language
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to study *Tara* in order to identify the theatrical techniques that Dattani employs and their impact on our reading of the play. We will also examine the language of the play.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A play doesn't take too long to read. What I would like you to do is to re-read *Tara* as many times as you need to feel completely familiar with the text. This time around pay particular attention to the stage directions and the language. Techniques influence the ways in which we interpret any play. Music, costume, lighting – all help in shaping the way we receive characters and evaluate their motivations and actions. The language the characters speak help us in placing them in terms of their social and geographical environment(s).

4.2 TECHNIQUES

We have already looked at one of Dattani's evolving techniques – the division of the stage into various levels. The three levels are there throughout the play allowing Dattani to cut and splice action almost cinematically. Dan's level is described as the only realistic level and is furnished to represent a London bedsitter. We see the room of an aspiring writer. It is from this level that we watch the play. What I mean by that is that Dan is the narrator of the play, and in a sense the organiser of the action, much like a sutradhar. What we get to see at the other two levels is either imagined (Dr. Thakkar's level) or remembered, (the Patel household). This is Dan's play and we see it from his point of view. It is his remix version that we get of what happened in the Patel household more than six years earlier.

Dan is not only the narrator. He is also a character in the play. He is not just looking back but participating in the action. Dattani makes us very aware of the constructed nature of this narrative (as all narratives) by having a quick break in action and a re-start of the action to satisfy Dan's aesthetic (and is it only aesthetic?) requirements. Open your text to the page where the first episode in the Patel house ends with Patel expressing his worry about his wife. Read the stage direction: "*Cross cut to Dan who suddenly jerks as if woken from a nightmare.*" In the speech after that Dan talks of his mind wandering too much and tries again for a beginning and finds it in Dr. Thakkar. Dan is the interviewer at this level of action, where Dr. Thakkar holds forth proudly on his God-like intervention in the lives of *Tara* and Chandan. But action at Dan's

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Dan is not only the narrator. He is also a character in the play. He is not just looking back but participating in the action. Dattani makes us very aware of the constructed nature of this narrative (as all narratives) by having a quick break in action and a re-start of the action to satisfy Dan's aesthetic (and is it only aesthetic?) requirements. Open your text to the page where the first episode in the Patel house ends with Patel expressing his worry about his wife. Read the stage direction: "*Cross cut to Dan who suddenly jerks as if woken from a nightmare.*" In the speech after that Dan talks of his mind wandering too much and tries again for a beginning and finds it in Dr. Thakkar. Dan is the interviewer at this level of action, where Dr. Thakkar holds forth proudly on his God-like intervention in the lives of *Tara* and Chandan. But action at Dan's

level does not consist of only direct address to the audience. Dan also receives a phone call from his father who is in India. This is the phone call that tells him and us of his mother's death. We see Dan's mental and emotional turmoil, his desire to put as much distance between him and India and the past as possible. But the past is within, just an ever present (memory) level away. When the play ends, we are back with Dan in his real time, a Dan who has imagined all that we have watched. He still hasn't managed to put it down on paper. This framing of the action ensures that we see this as Dan's play, that we realise that the action has been constructed from Dan's point of view.

In our very first view of the stage, Dattani breaks the unity of place. He disregards the other two unities as well – the unity of time and the unity of action. He cuts between different times (including one which perhaps is totally imaginary and attributed in terms of time to immediately after the operation – this is Dr. Thakkar's interview), and different actions (this is not a straight forward narrative). As I said in an earlier unit, Dattani plays around with the form of the well-made play, shaping and reshaping it like plasticine. And yet there is a strong sense of unity in his play, the action moves inexorably towards the crisis, the ultimate revelation. All the levels come together in a crescendo towards the end, when you see and hear all the characters that have been on stage. While Patel makes his revelation, Dr. Thakkar moves to his triumphant conclusion, Roopa plays out her spite, Bharati shows us her over-compensatory love for *Tara*, and Dan expresses his revulsion. Everything comes together as the play comes to an end.

Dattani moves from one level to another with lightning speed using (yes!) lighting, and music. When the play begins a spot picks up Dan. As he begins to imagine the past music begins to play faintly and then a spot lights up the stage level and *Tara* and Chandan walk into it. Then the lights cross fade to the Patel's living room and the action moves there. Again, when Dr. Thakkar is introduced to us, the light picks him up while Dan fades into darkness. But Dr. Thakkar's interviewer is Dan who continues to speak from his level. Thus, we see how just by clever use of lighting the action can be picked up at any level without any breaks for change of scene. It is this that gives the play the feeling of unity of action. You can see how Dattani handles this throughout the play.

Dattani uses music as well to both create a certain mood as well as to make a point about certain characters. If you've read the play carefully, you'll remember that the music played at important moments is by Brahms. There is a pointed exchange between Chandan and *Tara* about the music. Can you recall it? Who is the other musician referred to there? Why is he referred to, do you think? Pause here for a minute and work it out for yourself.

If you remember, the first reference to Brahms is in the stage directions in the first act, right after the interview with Dr. Thakkar that ends with Dan describing himself (and obviously *Tara*) as a freak among freaks. To the "explosive opening of Brahms' first concerto" as the directions put it, *Tara* is made to expose her artificial leg to the three girls in her locality. She enters the house and after a little while comments on the music, listening to it with pleasure. She then says, "Beethoven must have been a passionate man." When she is told that it is Brahms' first concerto that they are listening to, she says, "Stop it. Turn it off. I thought it was Beethoven." After a while, after she has revealed to Chandan what had transpired outside and told him that one day she would tell those girls "exactly how frightful they look", she says, "Oh, play the music real loud. Beethoven was never as good as this."

You may have thought that this was just an exchange between characters, much as people talk about liking various musicians or singers or groups in real life, of no real consequence. But a play is not real life. Every word spoken on stage is significant.

You may or may not know western classical music well or know it at all, but just looking up the names of these composers in an encyclopaedia should reveal a few things to us. Both these composers were German and Beethoven is said to have influenced Brahms. But the important point to notice about them is that Beethoven started going deaf in his twenties, and wrote some of his greatest music when he was completely deaf. *Tara*, in her moment of deep hurt and resentment caused by the 'normal' world wants to hear only Beethoven. She identifies herself with the musician with a disability, the musician who established his greatness in spite of being unable to hear his own creations. The same music that she has enjoyed she wants to reject once she learns that it is not by this composer. But Brahms' first concerto is described by Chandan as having "his quality of high tragedy and romance – of youth bursting forth in the world with all its claim. A spring like freshness..." (He says this was written on the record cover!) After she gets rid of her feelings by talking things through with Chandan, *Tara's* natural longing for a fulfilling life reasserts itself and she demands that Brahms be played loudly again. Youth is once again making its claim on the world loudly and clearly. We seem to be discussing the theme of the play once again. This is why we say that technique and theme are wedded together. Could we say that Brahms' first concerto becomes the theme music of *Tara*?

When I started this discussion about music, I did say that many of us may not have heard of these composers or have heard western classical music at all. Even in the play only *Tara* and Chandan seem interested in this music and informed about it. What does this do to our evaluation of them as characters? Obviously they are more 'westernised' than the other characters in the play. (Notice that the older Chandan is an English Dan.) It also shows them at a tangent to the society around them; they have been pushed into a different trajectory of life. Does it make them stand out in the world of the play, showcase their status as misfits? Does it also make them appear more intelligent, more cultured than the rest of the characters? You do realise that your answers will also depend on your real life views. If you think that people who listen to western classical music are snobs, you may not see the characters in a better light for having the taste for such music. If you think it shows taste, you'll look at *Tara* and Chandan with a degree of more sympathy.

How else is music used in the play? You do realise that it is up to the director to choose what music to play when, except what has been written in by the author. There is at least one other instance when Dattani specifies a piece of music to be associated with one character. When Dr. Thakkar is introduced to us, A television style signature tune is played to set up the interview format as also to signal a different movement in the play. Dr. Thakkar will show us his public documentary self, be the revered modern icon. He'll share information with us – information that will show him in good professional light – and claim his fifteen minutes of fame. The information age has no sympathy for the humanity it claims to serve. Just like the television intrudes into people's lives, Dr. Thakkar intruded into their lives. By playing a signature tune, Dattani makes us ready for the TV interview format (and the voyeurism that it brings out in us).

We have already seen how Dattani uses a technique he has used earlier, the presence of two actors playing the same character but at different stages of life. This was through role switches in *Dance Like a Man*, but in *Final Solutions* the characters had been present at the same time on stage. In *Tara*, this technique is repeated, and we see Dan as well as Chandan on stage at the same time even if at different levels. This obviously underlines the fact that Dattani isn't writing a realistic play but it surely is meant to do more than that. One thing that strikes me immediately is that Dattani picks for portrayal that stage in a character's life in which some crisis has occurred. The person who undergoes that crisis continues to live in the older person, continues to haunt the action even much later in life. Chandan's life reached a crisis point when they were in Mumbai for *Tara's* kidney transplant operation. What Chandan realised then was not something he could come to terms with easily. However much Dan may

move away from that past in terms of distance and time, Chandan is there along with *Tara*, just below the surface.

You must have also noticed how Dattani deftly sketches in the social environment and geographical locale. This is a play set in Mumbai and London with a past (that is referred to) in Bangalore. The multicultural nature of Indian cities and especially Mumbai is easily worked into the play with the names of people – Narayan saab in the neighbourhood, Dr.Kapoor in the hospital, a kannadiga Roopa ... It is revealed to us that Patel and Bharati themselves belong to different states. And while on names, Chandan and *Tara* can be from many different places in India, but Chandan also stands for the coveted sandalwood. This resonates with his wooden leg, which is hardly an object of desire in the play. *Tara* means star and Twinkling *Tara* has hardly been treated as the star of anyone's eyes.

Did you notice the number of movies named in the play? What does this detailing achieve? Do you remember which character mentions the name of a movie first? It is Roopa of course. Cinema is a part of popular culture and the 'normal' and 'common' Roopa would obviously be obsessed with movies. When we first see her, she is shown talking to Prema's mother who is (we guess) denying her access to her friend. This is because Roopa seems to have planned to see "Fatal Attraction" with her without the mother's permission. Roopa's choice of movies is also dictated by her awakening sexuality. It is with Roopa that the world of movies enters the play and thus we have references to "Sophie's Choice", "Twins", and "Children of Lesser God." The last movie is about deaf and dumb people while 'Twins' is about twins with a difference. We've already looked at "Sophie's Choice." Each one of these movies comments tangentially on the central situation of the play. So while the VCR and these movies may actually detail in a time period, they also serve other purposes in the action of the play.

One of the techniques that Dattani uses to quickly and economically sketch in a dense environment in spite of using spare staging and fewer characters is reference to various unseen and unheard characters throughout the play. For example, Praful is never present on stage in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and yet he has a role to play in the action. Nor is the autorickshaw driver in the same play. This kind of reference allows a textual richness without dramatic excess and confusion. It suggests to us that there is a world out there in which the characters live. You can see this technique in other plays of Dattani's as well. Does he use this in *Tara*? Try and remember at least two characters who are named as being part of the world depicted in *Tara* but who are never represented on stage:

You must have thought of Nalini and Prema immediately even if you didn't remember their names correctly. Roopa is their representative on stage. But did you remember Praful? (Dattani does seem to have a fondness for certain names!) Praful is Patel's brother in England who is referred quite early in the play as the person who would take care of Chandan's future education. Chandan talks to his father later on, asking him not to talk to him through Praful but directly. There is also Narayan saab, the neighbour, with whom Patel speaks early in the first act. You should also remember Prema's mother with whom Roopa speaks before she talks to *Tara* and Chandan the first time.

Dattani tries to use all the resources of theatre at his command in order to make an effective dramatic statement. He is willing to experiment all the time, willing to use symbolism and stylisation if it can get an effect across. In the rapid movement of this play, as it reaches the climax, Dattani shows for a moment Bharati talking lovingly as if to an infant in her arms. Is this an image from the past, or an image from the dramatic present (she has had a nervous breakdown after all)? It doesn't matter for what we are meant to see is the image of a loving mother – an image she had worked so hard at making and maintaining. It is because of the way that he constructs the

play that Dattani can get away with the last piece of action in the play – *Tara* and Dan walking onstage without limping and then hugging each other in understanding and forgiveness. This is not a realistic play and hence it is not a mushy (Hindi film style) ending. I wonder if you remember the reference to the Hindi film style separation and reunion of siblings in the first act (this is in a conversation between *Tara* and Chandan, the same conversation in which they discuss Brahms). The siblings have been finally separated by nature and reunited by sentiment.

4.3 LANGUAGE

You could refresh your memory about language and Indian English drama by looking at earlier units. We have already looked at Dattani's views on language as well as the way in which he uses it in earlier plays. We see a similar sense of freedom in *Tara*, don't we? If Dattani had to use such a tag question ("don't we?"), he would have had his character say "isn't it?" for that is what is heard more often in Indian English. Dattani doesn't just make points with his use of English, he has moved far enough even to make points with his use of Kannada in *Tara*. Can you recall how he does it? It is Roopa who breaks into Kannada once she knows that the Patel family has come from Bangalore. But as a result of the incomplete hotch potch cultural education that we all get in this modern urban India, her Kannada is atrocious, as atrocious as her English. Her Kannada identifies her as presumptuous and half-baked.

While on the use of other Indian languages, there are jokes and wisecracks in this play which presume knowledge of Hindi, especially Bambaia Hindi. In the little long lost sibling act that *Tara* and Chandan play, when *Tara* calls out "Bhaiya" to her brother, Chandan retorts that she has just called him a milkman. Only that he doesn't even say milkman, he says "doodhwalla". If you don't know Hindi, 'bhaiya' means 'brother', and if you don't know Mumbai Hindi, 'bhaiya' would refer to a milkman there, a 'doodhwalla'. This isn't a major part of the play but it is refreshing to see an Indian English play move into other Indian languages and not just for local colour.

What did I mean by Dattani making points with his use of English? I explained about his use of Kannada and how that helps to characterise Roopa, as also how her English characterises her. As a matter of fact, Dattani makes cruel fun of the girl's lack of control over English. A number of jokes in the play are at the expense of her English starting off with "two peas in a pot." It would be an interesting exercise for you to mark all the jokes cracked at her expense. The last one is when she says that she and Chandan are not 'combatible.' The 'b' in the middle could also gesture to an inability to distinguish between 'b' and 'p' which is characteristic of some South Indians. This English places Roopa as a character inferior to *Tara* and Chandan. Roopa could also be shown as speaking strongly accented Indian (Kannadiga) English. So she would be an object of fun the minute she opens her mouth. This is certainly a class attitude in operation and perhaps that is the reason Dattani introduces the little Kannada that he does – to show her as linguistically and intellectually deficient in any case.

The English spoken in this play (perhaps even the fact that it is in English, or even the fact that it is a play to be performed in urban closed auditoriums) marks it as a play about the middle class, for the middle class (and the upper class as well!). What Dattani establishes and exploits theatrically is the fact that there is a certain level of acceptability to standard middle class Indian English. The stress and intonation need not be British, nor need the language be absolutely grammatically correct. There can be Indian words as well as allusions and metaphors. But this does not mean that any kind of English is acceptable. Deviations from this English are necessarily comic (almost all the humour in this play is linguistic) and point to the class aspiration and lower status of the characters speaking this deviant English.

Is the English spoken in the play limiting in any way? Remember that this is a family formed by an interstate marriage, the mother is Kannadiga and the father Gujarati. The children have obviously been to public schools where the medium of education and, more and more, the medium of all interactions is English. The medium of communication in such a family would be English. They have also moved around a bit – there is mention of an earlier stay in Mumbai and another in London. Again this makes it natural that they would speak English. Not that they do not know other languages but English is what they would be and are comfortable in. This is the new global world of the middle class and the lingua franca of this world is English. Having said all that, the question asked at the beginning of this paragraph still needs to be answered. Did you feel when reading the play that the language inhibits, limits, the dramatist in any way? Does it stop him from reaching certain emotional levels that are more natural to other Indian languages?

It is interesting here to recall the conversation between Karnad and Dattani that I referred to in an earlier unit. Talking of the performance of Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* in Karnad's own English translation, Dattani says, "...what was really refreshing...was that you gave so much to a group to work with, the language and the sheer simplicity of words...at no point did I feel that it was slipping into rhetoric or self-indulgent poetry." (*Indian Review of Books*, Vol. 8, NO. 6) Karnad's reply is that English is particularly sensitive to pomposity. What I am directing you to is the fact that Dattani may be deliberately eschewing 'high' emotion – "rhetoric or self-indulgent poetry". Hence if English is seen as limiting then in that particular case both Dattani and Karnad see it as a positive rather than a negative characteristic of the language – it imposes a certain emotional discipline on the writer.

Does Dattani manage to individuate characters by the English they speak? You have Roopa as well as Dr. Thakkar who are characterised by the language that they speak. We've looked at Roopa's language already; Dr. Thakkar's is the formal public speech English, the English of a scientist speaking to ordinary viewers. Chandan plays with the language more than the others (after all he is an aspiring writer); *Tara*'s English is that of the educated young people's (with its quota of slang); the parents speak a more studied English but even here Bharati is more apt to use Indian words. By the time Dattani came to write *Tara*, he is quite sure of what he can achieve with Indian English and *Tara* is a good example of what such theatre can achieve.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we saw how Dattani uses the theatrical resources at his command to control the way we view the action. We saw how he uses the segmented stage in *Tara* and how effective use of lighting and music allows him to use this stage to cut and splice the action almost cinematically. We saw how his techniques help him to present a character in a certain light and direct us to a certain response and evaluation. We saw how he plays with the structure of the well-made play and how he gives us a feeling of the real world without the features of theatrical realism. We also saw how he uses the language with great dexterity in order to individuate characters as well as to detail a social milieu. We saw that Dattani's humour is an integral part of his play.

Let us end with a question. Do you think *Tara* is a bleak play or an optimistic, essentially comic, play? Your answer by now will be as good as mine.

4.5 QUESTIONS

1. How does Dattani use music in *Tara*?
2. Discuss the use of stage levels and lighting by Dattani in *Tara*.

Tara

3. How does Dattani give texture to the play? In other words, how does he give you a sense of place, and time? How does he make you feel that these characters belong to a certain world?
4. Do you agree with the view that all Dattani characters speak the same homogenised convent English? Discuss Dattani's use of English in *Tara*.

Conversation with Mahesh Dattani

- Anjali: Hi Mahesh Welcome to Delhi
- Mahesh: Thank you.
- Anjali: And congratulations for The Sahtiya Award.
- Mahesh: Thank you Anjali.
- Anjali: And I think this is the first time an Indian English playwright has won this prestigious award.
- Mahesh: That's right it's unprecedented
- Anjali: So, What do you think this is going to do to the Indian English Theatre in this country?
- Mahesh: Well, I think this has been really the kind of endorsement that Indian English Theatre in the country has been looking for because up till now it seems as if it belonged to a fringe section of a society and that it was seen as not quite theatre, not quite art, that it was more of a kind of a theatre club kind of thing. And perhaps justifiably so. I am not saying that its not entirely unwarranted that feeling and opinion. But I think since so much has actually happened and there has been a serious attempt to, you know, have a kind of movement in this direction. Because there are enough English speaking people and there are enough people who want to do theatre, and right in the language, so this has been a kind of endorsement of that effort.
- Anjali: So what made you enter this fringe activity almost because when you started writing there was not really an active history of Indian English Theatre that was being performed at any rate in our cities?
- Mahesh: Well, I had no choice because my interest lies primarily in drama. So I didn't have a choice, that, oh, I'll write for drama, I will write a novel or I will write poetry. It has always been drama from the beginning because that's where my focus is and I began writing for the stage quite later, later on in my career so to say in theatre. I began as an actor, then I moved on to direction and then finally because there is a dearth of scripts written originally in the English language, Indian scripts. That's why I decided to try my hand at it.
- Anjali: How would you differentiate your work from the only other English playwrights who are known for original writing in India such as Currimbhoy and Nissim Ezekiel?
- Mahesh: Well, they are the forerunners of the Indian English writing for the stage movement and I think Nissim Ezekiel is really known as a poet and Asif Currimbhoy is extremely prolific and I think they were writing for their times in the sixties and early seventies I think and I am writing for my time so I think that's what we have in common and lot happened in our country in these thirty years, - almost forty years. And so I guess I am dealing with contemporary issues, which perhaps are different from the issues that were dealt with in sixties by these playwrights.
- Anjali: But the contemporary issues that you deal with also are not limited to just the eighties and nineties in this country for example one of your major theme is that of gender which you dealt with, in almost all your plays from *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Dance like a man*, right down to *Tara*. These are really limited to the nineties. But your treatment of this is very thing so. How did you change? Do you think, from the first play you wrote to *Tara*?
- Mahesh: Well, it changed quite a bit. Although I did deal with gender. It was really very much within the conventional set up and it was the housewife who had no option but to you know exactly follow her husband's instructions even after he died and he was literally ruling from the grave and she is just not the kind of woman who would have said to hell with you, I am going to leave you. You know ale

Nora or whatever started on to discover herself, but if you look at say *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the battles are far more visible, but at the same time they still can't leave, that's their battleground, that's their home and they are going to fight those battles and they are going to stay right there. But there has been a change even then - those five to six years between those took place and I think *Tara* although that came earlier to *Bravely Fought the Queen* actually is more rebellious in that sense.

Anjali: Yes, *Tara* in that sense is almost a final word on the gender issue because where a *Dance Like a Man* explores the stereotyping of gender for both man and woman, *Tara* really shows you the serious side of that discrimination. So *Tara* is a more extreme play, but was written before *Bravely Fought the Queen*.

Mahesh: That's right, yes

Anjali: So what gave you the idea for *Tara* I mean how did that come about? Well, basically, it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated, and, of course, they were invariably of the same sex and there was this thing about a fused leg and which had the qualities of both left and right so there had to be some careful consideration as to which twin was supplying the blood to the leg and the journal went into the detail because obviously it was a very unique operation and separation. Although that was the inspiration but I think by then having written *Dance Like a Man*, I was prepared to take on the gender issue head on, and I think that was a powerful metaphor. Again, you know, the play is misread and, you know, people tend to focus on the medical details but that's really not what the play is about. It's a metaphor either for being born equal as male and female and sharing so much more and with the surgical separation comes a cultural distinction and prejudices as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and female self and half the female self is, whether your gender is male or female, is definitely given the lower priority.

Anjali: Yeah, in the sense the distinction between the two between *Chandan* and *Tara* comes up even before they are born.

Mahesh: That's right.

Anjali: Because they are seen as two distinct children who are hugging each other in the womb and once they are born, of course, a process of gender discrimination carries on but what do you think is the most explosive scene in the play which makes it completely clear.

Anjali: Well, I think it is the revelation in the end about, you know, *Tara*'s love for her mother which until then was unquestionable. She suspected her father for having done something, you know, was in some way, but she had no idea what it was, but her love, her mother's love was unquestioned and she did not question that, so when she comes to know of the truth of what we, I mean, we only have the father's version. We don't know whether that is the real truth or no. Again, but it does sort of break her away like a shooting star from the mother, and I think with that she - that's the tragedy, she dies. We don't know how she dies, but we know that's the end of *Tara*, and I think that's somehow all the attitudes towards *Tara* and the relationship between her mother, her father and her brother, which we see through the play. In hindsight you could see where it was coloured or where it was blinkered or where it was being compensated for.

Anjali: Right, in any text there are also other scenes which somehow seem to actually coalesce all the major things after you have seen the whole play and those scenes are the ones that stand out as representative of

- all different things that anyone text is trying to convey at the same time. For you which would be those scenes in Tara.
- Mahesh:** Well, that's a little difficult because you do have various forms of prejudices which are, which come, which recur as a variation on a theme. So, you know, in one sense gender prejudice against feminine gender is a strong thing but you also have the class differences coming and, of course, all these prejudices are interrelated because ultimately it is about power, the patriarchal system, it's to, you know, to acquire and appropriate power, you know, for-for you know, what I call what Dan says in the end to live in the forced harmony. It's forced because it's not equal but at the same time there is a harmonious existence because as long as, you know, your status and you continue to play and stay within your station, then there is harmony. But there is also discontent and that's why needs the kind of ferment, which Tara is able to bring about but it still is a tragedy.
- Anjali:** Because, Tara deals as you rightly said with hierarchies of all kinds, also the hierarchy between the doctor with his knowledge as power which is set apart very clearly and the hierarchy between Rupa and Tara as well as between Tara and her twin, her otherself. So how did you deal with all these opposing things? How could you? What made the gender issue come up as most important over class, caste, religion and science. You know, mother and child and father and child.
- Mahesh:** Because I think that's the most visible form of discrimination in our country. Well, you could say that class is the most visible form, but in a way it is such, so ingrained the class system, that sometimes it remains unquestioned. You know, you can order your servants about nobody questions you. You know weapon to fight discrimination against her. If Rupa is going to stare at her when she walks across the road, when she limps across the roads. As she, you know, examines her artificial leg, and knocks on it and what not. Tara is going to pull her cards and say that, you know I speak English better than you do and hence you are inferior to me. It's such a you know, ridiculous system we have, but then that's the only weapon she has against Rupa, so in a way, she is buying a social perception of what is superior and what is inferior, the same way as Rupa is doing to her.
- Anjali:** And is the only possible end or harmony for Dan is to leave. Once he leaves the house, he still obviously is not free of the trauma of what happens.
- Mahesh:** That's right. That haunts him and continues to haunt him.
- Anjali:** But in the end the only reconciliation with Tara is possible after the mother has died.
- Anjali:** Yes, and after they have died as well because Tara has died and Dan dies, and then you have this vision of this union between the siblings of male and female uniting on a different time and plane.
- Anjali:** So what you are really saying at some level perhaps through Tara is that as long as we continue to do this kind of differentiation, there is no end possible in this world.
- Mahesh:** Absolutely, yes, because it is an artificial difference in that sense, you know, biologically there are polarities between the genders, you know, which is meant to seek the union of one another, but the cultural polarities are artificial, and actually the boundaries hinder the natural unions of male and female whether its body-to-body or within oneself.
- Anjali:** What would be the turning point you think where you in your play, when once you established that Tara is not a victim and that we have to look at her not as a girl who is physically handicapped but who is

just somebody who has been handicapped by the very fact that she has been born with gender she has.

Mahesh: Right, Well, we got to, there are several scenes in the play which deal with her furies and how she fights her battles when she talks about how she blackmailed her classmate into doing her homework for her and even very much earlier on when she shows up Rupa for her malapropism, her lack of usage of certain idioms and you get to know very earlier on that she is sort of fighting for superior position and then when she finally confronts Rupa and says how does it feel having one tit smaller than the other and let me see how it feels, you know, when other people stare at you. You know, the way they stare at my leg and how would you feel, you won't be able to come out of your house and what not. So those are the places where we get some insight into Tara's inner life and her anger basically. And you know, you, you, you know the idea is so easy to sympathise because sympathy is another way of polarising as well. You sympathise with someone, and you are saying they are not me you know, No I am in a different location, you know, I am the superior and I am the one to sympathise. So stay there and I will sympathise with you.

Anjali: Right, but you don't sympathise with Chandan. He does not call for that. Was that a deliberate characterization?

Mahesh: Again yes, yes, because I really felt that these, these, these people have their battles and they were fighting them and Chandan fought by withdrawing into his music, into his own world and later on he fights by again withdrawing, by going into another space entirely. So these you know are ways of fighting his battles and again I didn't want this entire notion of sympathy for them.

Anjali: Has Tara been your most successful play?

Mahesh: Well, actually its *Dance Like a Man* because that's somehow been commercially more successful but that does not mean that Tara has not had its share of success as such. So, it's a little difficult because the metaphor is so strong and overwhelming that sometime people get caught up in the metaphor and reject the play.

Anjali: Right, well, thank you very much Mahesh, it's been a real pleasure talking to you.

Mahesh: Thank you, Anjali.