

A Comparison between Shakespeare and Mahesh Dattani with a Postcolonial Perspective

G Jeyalakshmi

Govindammal Aditanar College for Women

Tiruchendur

9952885711

lakshmingam1973@gmail.com

Both Shakespeare, the British dramatist of the Elizabethan age and Mahesh Dattani, the Indian dramatist of the present age, have altered the conventional conception of theatre, with their innovative bent, artistic perception and originality of vision. The echo of their theatrical art both in terms of form and content has made their prominence in the theatrical world at the global level. The flexibility and ease of expression in their works breaking the barriers of tight-fisted dramaturgy and initiating a penetrating insight into the psycho-philosophical aspects of human behaviour affecting human relationship at personal and interpersonal level, added new dimensions to the area of theatrical canons. In their dramatic world, drama instead of being an expression of art has become a realisation of life.

This article aims at exploring the idea that the plays of Shakespeare and Mahesh Dattani reflect the socio- political scenario which has created spaces to identify all the people of their respective societies and to promote human dignity and divinity by uplifting self-respect and individuality. Shakespeare shows mirror to the people with their whims and fancies while Dattani wants to articulate the voice of those whose identity remain unacknowledged under the hegemonic and authoritative voice of the elitists, showing superiority in the name of caste, gender, race, religion, economic status or any other paradigm of the manifestation of power.

In the postcolonial socio-political context, the centre-margin binary includes the awareness of living conditions, language construction, social recognition, power structure and the control over the resources of productivity. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, marginality can be acknowledged in terms of 'silence and speech'. With the persistent annals of subordination, the marginalized groups were devoid of mental strength of self-affirmation. They were forced to lead the life of subalterns. In view of Spivak, subalternity denotes the general attribute of subordination in south Asia whether this is expressed in terms of caste, class, gender, religion or any other way. There have been organized collective efforts to make the representation of the conditions of oppressions and to stir the consciousness about their suppressed self so that they might be inspired to seek spaces in the mainstream of life. In this process, the emphasis is not on political liberation only but also on the emancipation from the psychological impact of oppression. It anticipates the shift of margins and proclaims the emergence of new man who can assert himself against irrational domination of elitists' ideologies. Nandy, the eminent postcolonial critic, postulates that the psychological liberation is more significant than socio and political liberation:

The colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalize the concept of the modern west from a geographical entity to a psychological category. The west is now everywhere within the west and outside in structures and in minds. (83)

Dattani is a typical postcolonial author as he has dismantled the structures of the West by introducing multifarious innovative dramatic techniques like voice-over, multi-level stage set-up, use of mask, revealing the past and the present simultaneously and merging reality with imagination. Thus, he has dissented from the dominant pattern of

the western drama in order to establish an identity for himself as a writer. He has also tried to reconstruct Indian values, culture and history so as to give identity to India and its people. Shakespeare also can be regarded as a postcolonial writer in his style and subject matter. He has violated the three unities followed by the classical writers. His techniques like soliloquy, monologue, symbolism, and dramatic irony make his plays realistic and they show him as a deviator from the traditional dramatists. In *King Lear* Shakespeare has used 'stream of consciousness' a technique used by James Joyce in *Ulysses*. He has also used Herold Pinter's style of employing cryptic dialogue filled with spaces and silences. The breathless dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth after the murder of Duncan is Pinteresque:

I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry. Did you not speak?

When?

Now.

As I descended?

Ah

Hark! Who lies in the second chamber?

Donalbain.

This is a sorry sight.

No, a foolish thought, to say a sorry sight.

With the globalisation and arrival of digital technology, the world has become a global village and English has become the lingua franca of this global village. At this time of globalisation, Indian stage and theatre has been globalised only with the efforts of Dattani who has Indianised his English plays. As his plays are written in English, they are enjoyed by the multilingual community of India and abroad. Though Dattani belongs to the colonized country he can write scripts for BBC, the popular broadcasting

corporation of the colonizer. His achievement with a universal recognition has made him belong to the dominant elite class – a colonizer in the true sense. Thus, he has proved to be a postcolonial author with a hybrid identity. Shakespeare can also be regarded as a postcolonial author with a hybrid identity. He belonged to a colonizer's country, but he has raised his voice in favour of the colonized. In *The Tempest* Shakespeare condemns the ideologies of the colonizer through the character of Prospero. G. P. Wikes in his essay, *The Tempest and the Discourse of Colonialism* says: “*The Tempest* can be readily seen as a text which is complicit with colonial power. Prospero is the usurping invader (42).” His gentle behaviour towards Caliban in the beginning, and Caliban's forced enslavement by Prospero after he gets the knowledge of all the secrets of the island parallels the attitude of the colonizers who first make friendly relationship with the downtrodden nations in the name of business and then gradually colonize and exploit them. Throughout the play Caliban curses himself for trusting Prospero and letting him know all the secrets of the island. By using the knowledge he got from Caliban, Prospero enslaves Caliban and after making him a slave, he ill-treats him. Thus, the play, by portraying the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer, attempts to highlight and condemn the existing ideologies of colonialism. Finally, when Prospero releases Caliban and Ariel he reflects the spirit of postcolonialism. Thus, Shakespeare has the hybrid identity of postcolonialism.

Every individual possesses the divine sparks of human sensibility, and its wilful suppression might lead to volcanic eruptions. In postcolonial literature, the critics and writers directed their efforts to restore the humanity of those who are dehumanized and are subjected to all humiliations and injustice. Shiller defines the term 'postcolonialism as a method to acknowledge the humanity of dehumanized. In his view, each individual human being carries within him potentially and perceptively an ideal man, the archetype

of human being, and it's his life's task to be, through all his changing manifestations, in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal.

Dattani launched his dramatic voyage to find out a way of 'Decolonizing Theatre' escaping the shadows of as Mee said, politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy. Deviating from the conventions of conventional morality within the pages of his plays, Dattani reconstructs the spaces for marginalized groups of society. He admits that each individual wants to be a part of society, of the mainstreams but it must be acknowledged that it is a forced harmony. Within the dramatic texts of Dattani, the voices of marginalized groups like the minority religious groups, community of Eunuchs, the victims of AIDs, gays lesbians, and women find expression with a view to get their individuality.

Similarly, Shakespeare wants to respect every human being in the world, irrespective of race, religion, caste, and colour. The marginalized people in England in the sixteenth century especially Jews and Africans, were often feared and despised. The characterizations of members of these groups on stage both reflected and reinforced these attitudes. But Shakespeare always looks at the human aspects of the marginalized characters. Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, has been portrayed not as a Jew but as a human being. Though the people around him look down upon him, he realizes his greatness as a man. Shylock's speech in *The Merchant of Venice* proclaims his humanity as a Jew: "Hath not Jews eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, senses affections, passions? ... If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that" (3.1.55-7,62-4). Like Shylock, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* also finds his identity and pleasure in being a marginalized black man. He does not suffer from self-hatred because of how he is perceived. Rather he takes pride in his blackness:

Is black so base a hue?

...

coal-black is better than another hue,

In that it scorns to bear another hue. (4.2.71, 100-1)

Thus, the marginalized characters are given voice in the plays of Shakespeare.

Both Shakespeare and Mahesh Dattani are longing for the dignified life of all the people and make the characters of his plays lead a life with self-respect and individuality which are the main elements of postcolonial literature. In most of the plays, the characters are propelled on the right path with self-respect. In Dattani's *Where There is a Will*, all the characters, including the chauvinist, Hasmukh, realize the greatness of their own selves. They also understand the uniqueness of their individuality in order to live a meaningful life with satisfaction and happiness. In all the other plays, most of the characters have self-respect and individuality. In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* the main characters, Isabella, Claudio, and the Duke Vincentio, and the minor character Maria all respect their own selves and their individual lives.

Dattani is against both the atrocities of the dominating and the submissiveness of the dominated. The unnecessary submissiveness of the dominated is as dangerous as the arrogance of the dominating. Submissiveness will only lead to more and more domination and cruelty. Hence Dattani wants the dominated to resist, which is one of the main features of postcolonialism. Resistance is shown first at the inner world of the characters, then through the words and finally through action. In *Final Solutions*, resistance becomes rebellious but in *Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen and Dance Like a Man*, it does not go beyond word-quarrel. By resisting Tara has proved that she has equal rights with Chandan and Bharathi has proclaimed her equality with her husband. Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* are able to make their husbands understand

the injustice done to them. In *Where There is a Will*, resistance of Ajith has been used to prove his individuality. Sonal's resistance shows her equality with Hasmukh. Preeti's resistance through exchanging the tablets of Hasmukh with her own vitamin tablets is highly venomous. Dattani suggests that this kind of resistance is destructive and not productive. Hasmukh's resistance through the 'Will' has changed the purposeless life of everyone into a respectful and happy life. Kiran's resistance against her husband by having an illegal affair with Hasmukh has given her only the tactics of survival though it gives financial support to her husband and moral support to Hasmukh's family. In *Final Solutions*, Javed's resistance against the injustice done to the minorities has made others realize the importance of unity in diversity.

Shakespeare also makes the subaltern fight against the atrocities of the dominating characters. Hamlet's resistance against Claudius for murdering his father, Antony's fight against the Republicans for the murder of Julius Caesar, Iago's angry resistance against Othello and Cassius for not being promoted, are destructive but Isabella's argument against Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, Paulina's anger against Leontus in *The Winter's Tale* and Portia's argument against Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* are useful for themselves and for the people around them.

Refusing to dance to the tune of men, Dattani's women characters seek to break the age-old silence and to stand on their own legs. They are ready to revolt against all kinds of tortures and restrictions in society. Simon De Beauvoir in her book *Second Sex* says, "He (man) is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other." (xix) It is from this otherised position that the woman has tried to understand and realize the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself. Dattani's characters, Tara, Kiran, Sonal, Preeti, Hardika, Smita, and Uma have decided to cast off their traditional roles of living under the shades of male

supremacy. Shakespeare's female characters like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* are ready to revolt against all kinds of tortures and restrictions

If European literature sees itself as constructing a universal framework that determines and shapes writing in general then postcolonial critics reject such a framework by stressing social, political and cultural differences between the communities. They argue that such western canonical literature cannot ever appropriate all the peculiarities of an age. The universal framework that the European writers construct for themselves, also extends to subsume within itself all other aspects of one's life. There is an overarching meta-narrative everywhere. Western norms, dress, lifestyles constitute a centre against which the deviation of other societies is judged, measured and eventually distanced and controlled. Postcolonial criticism dismantles the overarching narrative and deconstructs the centre-margin binary by shifting the focus towards the native culture. The emphasis on self-exploration shifts the equation in favour of those who occupy the margin. Both Shakespeare and Dattani have tried to shift the focus to their respective native cultures in their works.

Postcolonial criticism also unravels certain paradoxes relating to its own position. It disagrees with the concept of 'orient' that was constructed to alienate and distance the nations by imposing alien thought patterns on the native people. But it exploits its differential status to gain access into history. Otherness in this case becomes a concept that grounds heterogeneity and cultural diversity of the native's position. He is 'other' not in becoming the West's unconscious self or alter ego, but in becoming true to his own self and distinctive status. It is through this status that postcolonial criticism forms the idea of a nation, a concept of a shared community, one of which Benedict Anderson calls the imagined community. It enables the postcolonial societies to invent a

self-image through which they could act to liberate them from imperialist oppression. This kind of self- image has been created by Dattani and Shakespeare through their dramatic works.

Postcolonial criticism's next preoccupation is with language. It realizes that the language it uses to dismantle the European constructs is in fact a language that belongs to the colonizer. But it creates a language of its own that is at once unique and distinct, appropriating the western language and assimilating the native languages Dattani's confidence in English language rather than in his native language is indicative of his appropriation of the British ethos. His inclusion of western habits, customs in his plays prove that hegemonic control of the colonized cultures and peoples is unavoidable in the postcolonial era. Homi Bhabha views colonialism as a cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. When the colonizer and the colonized come in contact, they both influence each other. For instance, the cultural identity of the colonizer may be reflected or modified and projected in the identity of the colonized. Bhabha calls this 'hybridity'. It gives the fusion of cultural forms by which new cultures can come into existence. There is a fine fusion of tradition and modernity in the themes, characters, style, and technique of both Dattani and Shakespeare

Recently, post-colonialism has moved from the struggle against oppressor's culture to the struggle against native oppressive culture. It has dedicated itself in reconstructing the society and in reclaiming the rights of the subalterns. In the world of inequalities, postcolonialism attempts at articulation of the voice of silenced subalterns, as Robert.J.C.Young thinks, 'Post colonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being.(2)';

The notions and experiences that shaped the different conceptual categories of postcolonialism, as illustrated in the plays of Dattani and Shakespeare are very relevant

in the current World scenario. The discriminative concerns that form a fundamental theme of their plays are quite significant with reference to the contemporary political and social scenario.

Drama was the medium of both Shakespeare and Dattani for presenting the resistances of the marginalized. However, their observations have universal relevance even today because the world is now enduring the effects of diversified dichotomies between the self and the other, the colonizer and the colonized, the master and the slave, the state and citizens at an unimagined and sometimes an uninterpretable level.

To sum up, both Shakespeare and Mahesh Dattani deal with postcolonial aspects in their plays with focus on the issues of distinction between the self and the other, subaltern resistances, feminism, and hybridity. In addressing the issues of global concern, they have undoubtedly initiated a significant tradition in the world. It is certainly because of their global relevance that their plays have been very popular throughout the world. Their plays have significance at the global level in the sense that they deal with different aspects of postcolonial experience that continue to affect the world in various dimensions and at various levels.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Dattani, Mahesh. "*Bravely Fought the Queen.*" *Collected Plays*. By Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. 227-315.

Complete Works of Shakespeare. Oxford and IBH, Oxford, 1980.

Dattani, Mahesh. "*Dance Like a Man.*" *Collected Plays*. By Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. 381-447.

---. "*Final Solutions.*" *Collected Plays*. By Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. 159-226.

---. "*Where There's a Will.*" *Collected Plays*. By Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. 449-511.

Secondary Sources

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1983.

Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. London: Penguin, 1985. Print.

Wikes, G.A. *The Tempest and the Discourse of Colonialism*.
[https://www.bl.UK/Shakespeare/articles/postcolonial reading -of-Tempest](https://www.bl.UK/Shakespeare/articles/postcolonial%20reading%20-of-Tempest)

Young J.C. Robert. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

