

# The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking  
Double-blind, Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English



Vol. 5 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2025 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 30-36

[www.literaryherm.org](http://www.literaryherm.org)  
[www.cavemarkpublications.com](http://www.cavemarkpublications.com)



## Reframing India: Mahesh Dattani's Exploration of Cultural and Social Diversity in Contemporary Theatre

Sanjay Kumar

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4791-3128>

**Corresponding Author:** Sanjay Kumar, Assistant Professor of English, Feroze Gandhi College Raebareilly, UP, India, [kumarsanjayrbl99@gmail.com](mailto:kumarsanjayrbl99@gmail.com)

### Research Article

**Keywords:** Indian theatre, cultural diversity, social identity, pluralism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, gender, sexuality, communalism, marginalization, hijra identity

### Article History

**Received:**

June 1, 2025

**Revised:**

June 14, 2025

**Accepted:**

July 1, 2025



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



### Abstract

**Aim:** This paper aims to explore how Mahesh Dattani's dramatic oeuvre reconfigures Indian identity by engaging with the complex cultural and societal dynamics of contemporary India. The focus is on how Dattani challenges monolithic narratives rooted in patriarchal, heteronormative, and hegemonic structures through plays such as *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, and *Dance Like a Man*.

**Methodology and Approach:** The researcher adopts postcolonial and multicultural theoretical frameworks to analyze Dattani's plays. The study involves a close reading of primary texts supported by critical secondary sources. Attention is given to Dattani's dramaturgical techniques, including non-linear narratives, naturalistic dialogue, and Brechtian distancing, to understand how these elements contribute to his critique of societal norms.

**Outcome:** The analysis reveals that Dattani's theatre foregrounds marginalized voices—women, LGBTQ+ individuals, religious minorities, and hijras—while exploring the tensions between tradition and modernity. His plays challenge communalism, gender inequity, and social exclusion, presenting India as a pluralistic society that embraces diversity.

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** Dattani's work positions theatre as a powerful medium for fostering dialogue and inclusivity. By reimagining Indian identity through the lens of heterogeneity and social justice, his plays advocate for a society that acknowledges and celebrates difference. The study suggests that future theatrical and literary research should continue to focus on marginalized voices to further enrich the discourse on Indian identity.

**\*Correspondence:** Sanjay Kumar, [kumarsanjayrbl99@gmail.com](mailto:kumarsanjayrbl99@gmail.com) © (2025) All rights are reserved with the author(s) published by CaveMark Publications. This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any form or medium, provided that the original work is appropriately cited or acknowledged. This paper is available online at [www.literaryherm.org](http://www.literaryherm.org), and CaveMark Publications, India, published it.

Mahesh Dattani, a pioneer in Indian English theatre, has transformed the theatrical scene by tackling modern urban challenges through a perspective of cultural and social variety. Creating in a post-independence India shaped by globalization, religious tensions, and shifting gender roles, Dattani's plays—staged worldwide and translated into various languages—provide a complex depiction of a country navigating its diverse identity. In contrast to conventional Indian theatre, which frequently relies on mythological or folk tales, Dattani's works address the everyday experiences of contemporary India: its urban middle class, sidelined groups, and socio-cultural divides. This study explores how Dattani's play redefines Indian identity as a vibrant, inclusive concept, emphasizing voices suppressed by dominant narratives.

Through a detailed analysis of *Tara* (1990), *Final Solutions* (1993), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999), and *Dance Like a Man* (1989), It examines Dattani's exploration of gender, sexuality, communalism, and caste. Utilizing postcolonial and multicultural perspectives, this analysis underscores Dattani's creative theatrical methods and their significance in reshaping Indian identity as an embrace of diversity amid social complexities.

Dattani's theatre functions at the intersection of postcolonial and multicultural perspectives, providing a strong lens for evaluating his reenvisioning of Indian identity. Postcolonial theory, as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, emphasizes hybridity “the blending of cultural identities in response to colonial legacies” (112). In India, these traditions appear as inflexible social structures, such as caste, gender, and religious divides, which Dattani's plays dismantle by highlighting characters who represent blended identities. For instance, his urban characters navigate the interplay of traditional values and modern aspirations, reflecting Bhabha's concept of the “third space” where new identities emerge. Multiculturalism, as defined by scholars like Charles Taylor, advocates for “the recognition of diverse cultural identities within a nation-state” (Taylor 25). Dattani's India is a tapestry of religious, gendered, and sexual identities, yet it is riddled with exclusionary customs that sideline minorities. His play resonates with multiculturalism's demand for inclusiveness, elevating the perspectives of women, queer individuals, and hijras. These lenses shape the

examination of Dattani's works, demonstrating how they contest conventional notions of Indian identity and promote a diverse society. The present paper works on these perspectives, emphasizing Dattani's depiction of cultural and social variety and his utilization of theatre as a conversational platform for reenvisioning Indian identity. Dattani's plays unfold in urban India, capturing the intricacies of a society experiencing swift social, economic, and cultural shifts. His characters—middle-class households, queer individuals, religious minorities, and hijras—represent the multifaceted nature of modern India, while his stories reveal the conflicts that challenge its diversity. Below, we examine five significant plays to demonstrate how Dattani redefines Indian identity.

*Tara* is a moving examination of gender bias within a middle-class Indian household. The play focuses on conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, surgically divided in a procedure that prioritizes Chandan's life over Tara's, mirroring society's preference for male offspring. Dattani challenges patriarchal systems that diminish women, a widespread issue in India where female infanticide and gender inequality persist. Tara's exclusion is clear in her mother's role in the surgery, revealing the acceptance of patriarchal values. Chandan's remorse, conveyed through a non-chronological narrative shifting between past and present, emphasizes the personal impact of societal pressures. As Dattani notes, "The play is about the self, split not only by gender but by choices forced upon us by society" (67). Mahesh Dattani subverts the male-centric narratives prevalent in Indian theatre by foregrounding a female protagonist, thereby reconfiguring Indian identity to encompass women's agency and lived experiences. My study explores how the play's universal exploration of familial tensions achieves global resonance, while its incisive critique of Indian patriarchal structures firmly anchors it within a localized socio-cultural framework.

*Final Solutions* tackles communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims, a persistent issue in India's diverse society. Set amid riots, the play centers on the Hardika family, who provide refuge to two Muslim youths, Javed and Bobby, uncovering entrenched biases. Dattani uses a Brechtian chorus of masked figures to embody communal clichés, making societal prejudices visible. The character of Daksha, whose 1947 journal entries expose her own bigotry, demonstrates the inherited nature of communal animosity across generations. A pivotal moment

occurs when Bobby challenges Hindu orthodoxy by touching an idol, asserting, “This is not your God alone. It is mine too” (Dattani 231), advocating for shared humanity. Dattani’s employment of authentic dialogue conveys the subtleties of communal friction, while the play’s unresolved conclusion—where reconciliation stays uncertain—reflects India’s persistent challenge in achieving unity. By presenting interfaith encounters, Dattani redefines Indian identity as fundamentally diverse, encouraging viewers to face their prejudices and foster coexistence.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a pioneering play that delves into queer identities in urban India, a subject seldom tackled in Indian theatre during the 1990s. Set in vibrant Mumbai, the play tracks a group of gay and lesbian characters grappling with romance, concealment, and societal exclusion. Kamlesh, caught between his affection for Prakash and the expectation to wed, epitomizes the conflict between personal longing and cultural conventions. Dattani contests heteronormative notions of Indian identity by portraying queer relationships as intricate and legitimate. A pivotal moment, where Kamlesh’s sister Kiran learns of his sexuality, exposes the social stigma around queerness, yet her gradual embrace signals potential for progress. As Nair notes, Dattani’s “sensitive portrayal of gay characters humanizes a marginalized community” (152). The play’s city backdrop and authentic dialogue anchor it in modern India, while its delve into universal themes such as love and betrayal widens its resonance. By amplifying queer voices, Dattani redefines India as a nation that must accept sexual diversity, confronting the stigma upheld by laws.

*Seven Steps Around the*, initially a BBC radio play, centres on the hijra community, a marginalized group frequently overlooked in mainstream Indian stories. The play tracks Uma, a sociology scholar, probing the murder of a hijra, Kamla, exposing the systemic prejudice transgender individuals endure. Dattani presents hijras as nuanced characters with autonomy, defying their clichéd portrayal as humorous or pitiful figures. The title, alluding to the Hindu wedding ritual of seven steps, condemns the exclusion of hijras from social structures. Uma’s realization that Kamla was murdered to hide an upper-caste marriage underscores the convergence of caste and gender oppression. As Agarwal argues, “Dattani’s focus on hijras redefines Indian identity by centering those at the

margins” (45). The play’s radio format elevates underrepresented voices to a worldwide audience, while its stage versions highlight its theatrical potency. By emphasizing hijra identity, Dattani redefines Indian identity to encompass those long excluded from national stories.

*Dance Like a Man* delves into the convergence of gender, tradition, and modernity through Bharatanatyam, a traditional Indian dance. The play centres on Jairaj and Ratna, a couple whose love for dance is suppressed by patriarchal and societal pressures. Jairaj’s father, Amritlal, rejects his son’s dance aspirations, deeming them unmasculine, while Ratna faces criticism for challenging conventional gender roles. The play’s non-chronological narrative, alternating between past and present, reflects the characters’ fractured identities as they grapple with personal and cultural tensions. A pivotal scene unfolds when Jairaj confronts Ratna’s role in prioritizing her career over his, exposing the internalized patriarchy that weakens their bond. Dattani’s use of Bharatanatyam as a symbol of gender fluidity contests rigid norms, redefining Indian identity to celebrate artistic and gendered diversity. As Mee notes, “Dattani’s integration of dance into play creates a uniquely Indian theatrical form” (112). The play’s examination of tradition echoes India’s continuous balancing act between cultural legacy and contemporary ambitions.

Dattani’s play methods amplify his examination of diversity, crafting a conversational arena for viewers to confront intricate issues. His authentic dialogue mirrors the subtleties of urban Indian speech, merging English with local expressions to showcase cultural fusion. For instance, in *Final Solutions*, characters’ everyday conversations expose communal prejudices, anchoring the play in a distinct socio-cultural setting. Non-chronological storytelling, evident in *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*, reflects the disjointed identities of characters torn between tradition and progress. Brechtian techniques, like the chorus in *Final Solutions*, detach viewers from the story, prompting critical engagement with societal challenges. Dattani’s simple stage setups, often with minimal props, highlight character dynamics, underscoring the human aspects of diversity. His plays often conclude open-endedly—*Final Solutions* leaves harmony uncertain, and *Tara* provides no definitive resolution—urging audiences to wrestle with unresolved questions about identity and inclusion. These approaches establish

Dattani's theatre as a vibrant space for redefining Indian identity, encouraging dialogue among varied audiences.

Dattani's play redefines Indian identity by embracing its diversity while condemning the forces that erode it. His emphasis on marginalized communities—women, queer individuals, religious minorities, and hijras—contests the dominant narrative of a uniform India grounded in Hindu, patriarchal, and heteronormative ideals. By crafting plays in English, Dattani connects local and global viewers, enriching a worldwide conversation on diversity. His works have been staged globally, from London to New York, highlighting their broad resonance. Additionally, adaptations like the film *Mango Souffle* (drawn from *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*) expand his influence beyond theatre. Yet, Dattani's work encounters obstacles. Traditionalist audiences in India have at times opposed his daring themes, especially his depiction of queer and hijra identities. "His urban focus, while reflective of India's growing metropolitan culture, may overlook rural diversity" (Sengupta 347). Furthermore, the restricted reach of English-language theatre in India limits its audience to privileged groups, a conflict Dattani recognizes in discussions. Despite these hurdles, his plays continue to be a crucial contribution to Indian theatre, presenting a vision of India as a diverse, inclusive nation.

Mahesh Dattani's plays redefine Indian identity as a lively, diverse entity, capturing the cultural and social richness of modern India. Through works like *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, and *Dance Like a Man*, he amplifies underrepresented perspectives, confronting patriarchal, communal, and heteronormative conventions. His creative theatrical methods—authentic dialogue, non-chronological storytelling, and Brechtian techniques—establish a stage for conversation and introspection. By addressing the conflicts between tradition and progress, inclusion and marginalization, Dattani's theatre critiques social injustices while honouring the variety of Indian identities. As India wrestles with diversity challenges, Dattani's plays serve as a compelling plea for inclusiveness, reenvisioning the nation as a vibrant tapestry of voices, stories, and ambitions. His enduring impact stems from his skill in turning theatre into both a reflection and a spark, mirroring India's intricacies and motivating a fairer future.

### Works Cited and Consulted

- Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A Study in Thematic and Theatrical Innovations*. Book Enclave, 2020.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. Penguin Books, 2000.
- Mee, Erin B. *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*. Seagull Books, 2008.
- Nair, Anita. "Mahesh Dattani: The Invisible Observer." *Indian Literature*, vol. 43, no. 5, 1999, pp. 147–156.
- Sengupta, Ashis. "Urban Limits: Mahesh Dattani's Theatre and the Question of Rural India." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2012, pp. 345–360.
- Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton UP, 1994.

### Sanjay Kumar

Sanjay Kumar is Assistant Professor of English at Feroze Gandhi College, Raebareli, Uttar Pradesh, India. He holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Lucknow. He teaches English literature, including Indian English literature, and has a keen interest in cultural studies, literary theory, and contemporary literature.