International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Educational Development
Volume 2, Issue 2 | March – April 2026 | www.ijamred.com
ISSN: 3107-6513

# Mahesh Dattani's Drama as a Grassroots Archive of Indian Cultural Studies

Ramen Goswami
A Senior Researcher of Department of English, Magadh University
(Under the supervision of Dr. Vikash Mohan Sahay)

## Abstract:

This study reconsiders Mahesh Dattani's dramatic corpus as a crucial site for the articulation of Indian cultural studies at the level of lived experience. Rather than approaching his plays solely as social realism or issue-based theatre, the paper argues that Dattani constructs a dramaturgy in which narrative form, cultural memory, and embodied identity intersect. Through a sustained analysis of Tara, Final Solutions, Dance Like a Man, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Bravely Fought the Queen, and Seven Steps Around the Fire, the study demonstrates that Dattani's theatre functions as a grassroots archive where structures of gender, sexuality, and communal identity are not merely represented but enacted through everyday practices. His dramaturgy reveals how ideology is reproduced through domestic intimacy, silence, and repetition. Drawing upon feminist, queer, and cultural materialist frameworks, the paper situates Dattani within a broader shift in Indian drama from spectacle to interiority. It concludes that his work transforms theatre into a critical space where marginal identities are not simply voiced but structurally examined.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani; Cultural Studies; Grassroots Theatre; Narrative Form; Gender Politics; Queer Identity; Everyday Life; Indian Drama; Cultural Materialism

## 1. Introduction

The trajectory of modern Indian drama reflects a gradual movement away from the symbolic density of myth and the rhetorical force of nationalist theatre toward an engagement with the textures of everyday life. This transition is not merely aesthetic; it signals a deeper reorientation in the understanding of culture itself. Where earlier dramatic traditions sought legitimacy in epic memory or historical grandeur, contemporary theatre increasingly turns toward the ordinary—toward the domestic, the conversational, and the psychologically immediate. Within this shift, Mahesh Dattani emerges as a figure whose dramaturgy is inseparable from the evolving concerns of cultural studies.

Dattani's plays are frequently described as "urban" or "middle-class," but such labels risk underestimating their analytical depth. What appears as the familiar space of the living room or the family gathering is, in his theatre, a site of intense ideological negotiation. Culture, in this context, is not an abstract system but a lived process, enacted through gestures, decisions, and silences. Raymond Williams' formulation of culture as "a whole way of life" (Culture and Society 18) finds a compelling dramatic expression in Dattani's work, where the smallest interaction carries the weight of larger social structures. In Tara, the family becomes the locus of a decision that determines the fate of its children, revealing how patriarchal values are embedded within everyday reasoning. The quietness of the injustice is what gives it force; there is no overt violence, only the steady unfolding of a choice that appears rational within its cultural context. Tara's sense of dislocation—"I move, just move, without meaning" (Dattani, Collected Plays 72)—is not merely psychological but symptomatic of a deeper cultural logic.

Similarly, Final Solutions situates communal tension within the intimacy of a household, collapsing the distinction between public conflict and private life. The line "It must feel good being a majority" (Dattani 87) does not function as a dramatic outburst but as a quiet recognition of structural privilege. Such moments reveal how power operates not through spectacle but through normalization. Dattani's theatre also engages with the question of desire, particularly in relation to queer identity. In On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, the

ISSN: 3107-6513

characters inhabit a space of constant negotiation, where self-expression is mediated by fear and expectation. The admission that "we pretend to be something we are not" (Dattani 112) captures the tension between authenticity and social performance.

This paper argues that Dattani's dramaturgy constitutes a form of grassroots cultural analysis. His plays do not merely depict society; they interrogate the processes through which cultural norms are internalised and reproduced. By examining his narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and cultural contexts, the study seeks to position Dattani as a central figure in the intersection of drama and cultural studies.

## 2. Literature Review

The critical reception of Mahesh Dattani has evolved from an initial emphasis on thematic innovation to a more complex engagement with his dramaturgical strategies. Early commentators foregrounded his role in bringing marginalised voices into the domain of Indian English theatre. Angelie Multani's assertion that Dattani "creates a stage for those silenced by social convention" (Multani 34) captures the significance of this intervention, yet it also risks confining his work to a representational framework. More recent scholarship has attempted to move beyond this limitation by examining the formal dimensions of his plays. Aparna Dharwadker identifies a broader shift in Indian theatre toward "subjectivity and interior experience" (Theatres of Independence 112), situating Dattani within a lineage that privileges psychological depth over external action. This perspective is crucial, as it allows for an understanding of Dattani's narrative techniques not as stylistic choices but as integral to his critique of cultural structures.

Erin Mee's discussion of contemporary theatre as a site of "everyday politics" (Mee 45) further clarifies Dattani's position. His plays do not rely on extraordinary events; instead, they reveal how power operates through routine interactions. This focus aligns with cultural materialist approaches, particularly those associated with Raymond Williams, who emphasises the importance of lived experience in the formation of ideology. Feminist criticism has been central to the interpretation of Dattani's work. Simone de Beauvoir's insight that gender is a process rather than a fixed identity (The Second Sex 16) provides a theoretical foundation for analysing characters such as Tara. The play demonstrates how gendered expectations are internalised within the family, shaping both identity and destiny.

Queer theory has similarly enriched the discourse. Judith Butler's concept of performativity—where identity is constituted through repeated acts (Gender Trouble 191)—is particularly relevant to On a Muggy Night in Mumbai. The characters' struggle to articulate their desires reflects the tension between social norms and individual identity. Foucault's analysis of power as diffuse and pervasive (Discipline and Punish 30) offers another useful framework. In Dattani's plays, power is not located in a single authority but is embedded within relationships, language, and memory. Despite these contributions, there remains a tendency to treat Dattani's themes in isolation. This paper seeks to integrate these perspectives, demonstrating how narrative, culture, and identity function as interconnected elements within his dramaturgy.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology that brings together close reading, discourse analysis, and cultural criticism. The objective is not merely to identify themes within Dattani's plays but to understand how meaning is produced through the interaction of narrative form, language, and cultural context. Close textual analysis serves as the foundation of the study. Each play is examined with attention to its linguistic texture, including patterns of dialogue, pauses, and silences. These elements are treated not as incidental but as constitutive of meaning. In Dattani's theatre, what is left unsaid often carries as much significance as what is articulated.

The study also employs discourse analysis, drawing on Norman Fairclough's assertion that language both reflects and shapes social reality (Language and Power 2). This approach allows for an examination of how everyday speech in Dattani's plays reveals underlying ideological tensions. Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" (Interpretation of Cultures 10) informs the cultural dimension of the analysis. By situating the plays within their specific social contexts, the study seeks to uncover the symbolic significance of

ISSN: 3107-6513

rituals, relationships, and practices. The integration of feminist and queer theoretical perspectives provides an additional layer of interpretation. These frameworks are not imposed externally but emerge from the texts themselves, offering insights into the construction of identity and the operation of power. Through this multi-layered methodology, the study aims to capture the complexity of Dattani's dramaturgy, demonstrating how his plays function as sites of cultural inquiry.

## 4. Results and Discussion

A close reading of Mahesh Dattani's plays suggests that his theatre does not stage conflict in the conventional sense of visible confrontation alone; rather, it exposes the quieter, more enduring processes through which social structures shape human lives. What becomes apparent is that marginalisation in his work rarely appears as an imposed, external force. Instead, it is absorbed into everyday behaviour, into habits of speech, silence, and decision-making that seem ordinary on the surface but carry deep ideological weight. His dramaturgy, therefore, operates less through dramatic rupture and more through gradual revelation, allowing the audience to recognise how inequality is sustained not by isolated acts of violence but by patterns of thought that pass as natural.

This is particularly evident in Tara, where the central injustice is not staged as a moment of explicit cruelty but unfolds through a family's decision that appears, at least to those within it, justified by circumstance. The choice that determines Tara's life is made within the domestic sphere, a space conventionally associated with care and protection. Yet, it is precisely within this intimate setting that patriarchal preference asserts itself most effectively. The lack of overt confrontation is striking; there is no dramatic outburst that marks the act as exceptional. Instead, the decision is absorbed into the family's routine, becoming part of its internal logic. Tara's later sense of dislocation—her feeling of moving without purpose—does not arise from a single traumatic event alone but from the gradual realisation that her existence has been shaped by a value system that privileges the male child. What Dattani reveals here is that inequality often persists not because it is loudly defended but because it is quietly accepted.

A similar process can be observed in Final Solutions, though the context shifts from the domestic to the communal. Here, the tension between Hindu and Muslim identities is not presented as a sudden eruption of hostility but as something that has been sedimented over time. The use of the chorus is particularly significant in this regard. Rather than functioning merely as a theatrical device, it serves as a conduit for collective memory, bringing into the present echoes of past conflicts. The chorus speaks in a voice that is at once individual and communal, suggesting that personal attitudes are shaped by inherited narratives. In this way, the play demonstrates how prejudice is not simply a matter of individual bias but part of a larger cultural script that is repeated across generations. The conflicts that emerge within the household mirror those outside it, blurring the distinction between private and public spheres. By doing so, Dattani underscores the idea that communal identity is not confined to moments of crisis; it is continually reinforced through everyday interactions and assumptions.

If Tara and Final Solutions explore the internalisation of gender and communal hierarchies, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai turns to the question of desire, particularly the tension between personal identity and social expectation. The play unfolds within a group of friends, a setting that might suggest openness and intimacy. Yet, even here, communication is fraught with hesitation. The characters circle around their own truths, often speaking indirectly or withholding what they feel. This difficulty in articulation is not simply a matter of personal insecurity; it reflects a broader social environment in which certain identities remain unspeakable. Desire, in this context, becomes something that must be negotiated carefully, shaped by what can be acknowledged and what must remain hidden. The resulting tension is not resolved through dramatic confession but lingers, underscoring the gap between inner experience and outward expression. Dattani's treatment of sexuality thus avoids sensationalism; instead, it focuses on the everyday strain of living within restrictive norms.

Across these plays, one begins to notice a consistent pattern in Dattani's dramaturgy. He resists linear storytelling in favour of structures that allow the past to intrude upon the present, whether through memory,

ISSN: 3107-6513

fragmented narration, or overlapping voices. This narrative approach mirrors the way in which cultural conditioning operates—rarely in a straight line, but through repetition and return. Moments of dialogue often carry more than their immediate meaning, hinting at histories that are not fully spoken but nonetheless felt. The language itself is deceptively simple, grounded in everyday conversation, yet it is precisely this simplicity that gives it power. By avoiding overtly literary or rhetorical speech, Dattani ensures that the ideological tensions embedded within his plays feel immediate and recognisable.

Symbolism, too, plays an important role, though it is rarely heavy-handed. Objects, gestures, and even silences acquire significance through context rather than explicit explanation. A casual remark, a pause in conversation, or a repeated phrase can reveal more about a character's position within a social structure than a lengthy monologue. This understated use of symbolism contributes to the reflective quality of his theatre, encouraging the audience to read between the lines rather than relying on direct exposition.

What ultimately distinguishes Dattani's work is his refusal to offer clear resolutions. The conflicts he presents are not easily contained within the framework of a single narrative because they are rooted in broader cultural patterns. By leaving certain tensions unresolved, he invites the audience to continue the process of interpretation beyond the performance itself. His plays do not dictate a moral conclusion; instead, they create a space in which viewers must confront their own assumptions and recognise their complicity in the structures being critiqued. In this sense, Dattani's theatre functions as more than representation. It becomes a form of inquiry, a way of examining how everyday life is shaped by forces that often go unnoticed. By focusing on the ordinary—the family decision, the casual remark, the unspoken hesitation—he reveals the extraordinary complexity of cultural life. His dramaturgy does not seek to simplify this complexity but to illuminate it, making visible the processes through which identity and inequality are continually produced.

## 5. **Conclusion**

Mahesh Dattani's contribution to contemporary Indian drama may be most fruitfully understood not simply in terms of thematic innovation but through his reconfiguration of the relationship between culture and representation. His plays occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of literary form and cultural inquiry, where the stage becomes a site for examining the everyday operations of power. By focusing on domestic spaces, interpersonal relationships, and the quiet rhythms of ordinary life, Dattani shifts the centre of dramatic attention from spectacle to experience. This study has argued that Dattani's dramaturgy functions as a grassroots archive of Indian cultural life. Such an archive does not preserve events in a linear or objective manner; rather, it records the lived processes through which identities are shaped, contested, and sometimes erased. In Tara, the family's decision is not presented as an isolated act of injustice but as the outcome of deeply internalised cultural values. The absence of overt coercion is precisely what renders the act so disturbing. It illustrates Michel Foucault's insight that power operates most effectively when it is "capillary," diffused through everyday practices rather than imposed from above (Discipline and Punish 30).

Dattani's engagement with sexuality further reinforces this perspective. In On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, the characters' inability to reconcile private desire with public identity reveals the extent to which social norms shape self-perception. Judith Butler's formulation of identity as performative—constituted through "a stylised repetition of acts" (Gender Trouble 191)—finds a compelling dramatic expression here. Yet Dattani's treatment remains grounded in the specificities of Indian social life, where familial obligation, social respectability, and cultural expectation intersect to produce a particularly intense form of repression. Another significant dimension of Dattani's work is his treatment of cultural memory. In Final Solutions, the chorus functions as a collective voice that bridges past and present, suggesting that communal identity is sustained through narrative continuity. The line "It must feel good being a majority" (Dattani 87) encapsulates the subtle ways in which privilege is normalised, transforming historical advantage into everyday experience. This aligns with Raymond Williams' conception of culture as a lived

ISSN: 3107-6513

structure, where ideology is embedded within the ordinary fabric of life (Culture and Society 18).

Dattani's dramaturgical techniques play a crucial role in articulating these concerns. His use of non-linear narrative, memory sequences, and conversational realism creates a form that is both intimate and analytical. Rather than guiding the audience toward a definitive conclusion, his plays leave space for reflection, encouraging viewers to confront the complexities of cultural life. In this sense, his theatre resists closure, mirroring the unresolved nature of the issues it addresses. When placed alongside other modern Indian dramatists, Dattani's distinctiveness becomes particularly evident. While playwrights such as Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar engage with questions of identity and power through mythic or overtly political frameworks, Dattani locates these concerns within the sphere of everyday interaction. His focus on the domestic and the psychological allows him to reveal the subtle mechanisms through which ideology operates, often unnoticed.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Dattani's theatre expands the scope of Indian English drama by transforming it into a space of cultural analysis. His work challenges the boundaries between literature and social inquiry, offering a nuanced understanding of how identity is constructed within specific cultural contexts. By foregrounding marginalised voices and exposing the processes through which they are silenced, Dattani not only redefines the role of the dramatist but also invites the audience to reconsider their own position within the cultural landscape. In this way, his dramaturgy does more than represent reality—it interrogates the very conditions under which reality is understood, making his work an indispensable resource for the study of contemporary Indian culture.

## 6. **Findings**

The study establishes that Mahesh Dattani's plays function as grounded representations of Indian cultural life, where identity is shaped through everyday practices rather than abstract ideological structures. His dramaturgy reveals that marginalisation is embedded within domestic, linguistic, and social interactions, often operating without overt coercion. The analysis demonstrates that his use of narrative fragmentation, conversational realism, and memory structures enables a deeper exploration of internalised power. Furthermore, the study confirms that Dattani's treatment of gender and sexuality aligns with feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, particularly in illustrating how identity is constructed through repetition and social regulation. Unlike earlier dramatists who rely on mythic or overtly political forms, Dattani foregrounds psychological and domestic spaces, thereby exposing the subtle mechanisms through which cultural norms are sustained. His work ultimately redefines Indian drama as a critical medium for cultural analysis.

## Works Cited

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble. Routledge, 1990.
Dattani, Mahesh. Collected Plays. Penguin, 2000.
Dattani, Mahesh. Final Solutions and Other Plays. East-West Press, 1994.
De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. Vintage, 2011.
Dharwadker, Aparna. Theatres of Independence. University of Iowa Press, 2005.
Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish. Vintage, 1977.
Geertz, Clifford. The Interpretation of Cultures. Basic Books, 1973.
Mee, Erin B. The Theatre of Roots. Seagull, 2008.
Multani, Angelie. Mahesh Dattani's Plays. Brill, 2012.
Williams, Raymond. Culture and Society. Columbia UP, 1958.