

Realism and Reform: A Study of Social Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

Rajiv Gandhi. G¹

Department of English, Research Scholar (Part-time), Vels Institute of Science,
Technology, and Advanced Studies, Chennai

Dr. N. Prathiba Lakshmi²

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology,
and Advanced Studies, Chennai

Paper Received on 19-10-2025, Accepted on 23-11-2025
Published on 25-11-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.4.350

Abstract:

This paper presents a critical analysis of Mahesh Dattani's plays — *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* — through the lens of social realism. These plays explore themes such as gender discrimination, identity, socio-economic inequality, and family dynamics, offering a profound commentary on the complexities of Indian society. The study also examines the social issues embedded within so-called "civilized" Indian life. Through a close analysis of narrative structure, characterization, and symbolism, this paper highlights how Dattani realistically and unromantically portrays everyday life and social concerns. These works powerfully depict the social stigmas rooted in Indian traditions, revealing the mistreatment of women, persistent gender inequality, and the restrictive influence of patriarchal and orthodox beliefs.

Keywords: Social Realism, Gender Inequality, Identity and Representation, Patriarchy in Indian Society

Mahesh Dattani's Dramatic realism is a literary movement that seeks to depict everyday life and social issues in a realistic and unromanticized manner. In the context of Indian literature, social realism has served as a powerful medium for writers and playwrights to explore the complexities of Indian society and the struggles faced by individuals within it. Mahesh Dattani's plays *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Thirty Days in September* are significant examples

of social realism, offering poignant commentaries on themes such as gender discrimination, identity, and family dynamics.

Tara particularly embodies the principles of social realism, portraying everyday life and social issues with striking authenticity. The play's narrative revolves around twin siblings, Chandan and Tara, who are conjoined at birth and later surgically separated. This event sets off a chain of consequences that deeply affect the lives of the characters, especially Tara.

The play explores several themes that are characteristic of social realism, most notably **gender discrimination**. It starkly exposes the preference for male children over female ones, reflecting the deep-rooted gender bias in Indian society. The decision to surgically separate the twins is driven by the desire to save the male child, Chandan, underscoring the societal pressure to prioritize male interests over female lives.

Tara's struggle to assert her identity and autonomy in a society that imposes rigid expectations on women serves as a powerful commentary on the limitations placed upon women. The play emphasizes how societal norms can restrict individual freedom, particularly for women.

Additionally, *Tara* delves into the complexities of family relationships, especially the mother-daughter dynamic. The character of Bharati represents the societal pressure to conform to traditional expectations, even at the cost of personal and emotional well-being.

The characters in the play are complex and multi-dimensional, reflecting the nuances of human relationships and the pervasive influence of social expectations. Tara emerges as a strong and determined figure, symbolizing the struggle for self-discovery and autonomy. Chandan, on the other hand, is portrayed as a conflicted character burdened by guilt and responsibility for his sister's fate. His inner turmoil illustrates how societal expectations can shape and distort individual behaviour.

The play *Tara* employs rich symbolism to convey its central themes, particularly through the motifs of Tara's garden and the locked doors and windows. Tara's garden represents a space of potential growth, freedom, and personal

identity—symbolizing her yearning for autonomy and self-discovery. In contrast, the locked doors and windows signify the social and familial constraints that restrict her freedom, reflecting the broader limitations imposed on women by patriarchal structures and societal expectations.

The themes explored in *Tara* resonate strongly in *Dance Like a Man*, another thought-provoking play by Mahesh Dattani that exemplifies social realism. This play confronts sensitive issues such as gender bias, patriarchal authority, and artistic freedom within Indian society. The narrative centres on Jairaj and Ratna, a married couple united by their shared passion for Bharatanatyam, and their ongoing struggle against rigid societal expectations that define gender roles and artistic pursuits.

Through a realistic portrayal of human relationships and social pressures, *Dance Like a Man* highlights the complexities of gender dynamics and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Dattani critiques conservative social values, exposing the emotional toll they take on individuals who dare to challenge them. The play delves deeply into the emotional landscape of its characters, revealing the tensions between ambition, love, and societal conformity.

Jairaj's sacrifices for Ratna's career and the resulting strain on their marriage underscore the intricate interplay of gender expectations and personal aspirations. The character of Amritlal, Jairaj's father, embodies the patriarchal mindset that dictates acceptable behaviour for both men and women, reinforcing the power hierarchies prevalent in Indian families.

Ultimately, *Dance Like a Man* explores the tension between tradition and change, portraying how the Ratnam family grapples with gender roles, career choices, and generational expectations amid shifting cultural values. The play raises awareness of deep-rooted gender biases and patriarchal norms, urging audiences to question and reflect upon them. By portraying the complexity of human relationships and individual struggles, Dattani challenges societal conventions and advocates empathy, artistic freedom, and the right to self-expression without social constraints.

In the context of Indian society, social realism in *Dance Like a Man* serves as a powerful tool for critiquing societal norms and expectations. The play exposes deep-rooted social issues such as gender bias, patriarchal authority, and the

limitations imposed on artistic expression. By portraying the personal struggles of its characters, Dattani encourages audiences to empathize with their experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of the human condition. The narrative centers on Jairaj and Ratna, a couple united by their passion for Bharatanatyam, who must navigate the rigid expectations of a conservative society that dictates gender roles and artistic pursuits. Through this realistic portrayal of human relationships and societal pressures, Dattani highlights the complex interplay between tradition, individuality, and modernity.

On the other hand, *Thirty Days in September* is a powerful example of social realism that addresses one of the most sensitive and often silenced issues in Indian society—child sexual abuse and its psychological aftermath. The play follows Mala, a victim of incestuous abuse, as she confronts her trauma and embarks on a journey toward healing and self-acceptance. Dattani offers a realistic depiction of the trauma endured by victims, revealing the long-term emotional and psychological consequences of abuse. By doing so, he critiques the societal tendency to silence or ignore victims, exposing the collective failure of society to offer protection and support.

The play also delves into themes of betrayal, silence, and recovery, illustrating how familial complicity can deepen a victim's suffering. Dattani emphasizes the importance of therapy, open dialogue, and compassion in the healing process. Through its social commentary and emotional depth, *Thirty Days in September* raises awareness about the need for empathy and social reform. As a work of social realism, it not only portrays the harsh realities of abuse but also challenges the myths, traditions, and moral hypocrisy that perpetuate such violence, urging society toward greater sensitivity and change.

Similarly, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* extends Dattani's exploration of social realism by examining the complexities of identity, sexuality, and human relationships in an urban Indian context. The play offers a candid portrayal of the struggles faced by individuals from the LGBTQ+ community as they negotiate between personal truth and societal conformity. Through realistic dialogue and intimate settings, Dattani captures the emotional turbulence of those who are marginalized for defying social norms.

The characters in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* embody the tension between desire, identity, and societal expectation. The play's urban setting becomes a microcosm of modern Indian society—progressive on the surface yet deeply constrained by traditional moral hierarchies. Dattani's social realism here lies in his unflinching portrayal of human vulnerability and his critique of social hypocrisy. By foregrounding the emotional and psychological dimensions of marginalized individuals, the play raises awareness, challenges conventional morality, and advocates for individuality and acceptance.

Ultimately, through *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Mahesh Dattani uses social realism to illuminate the hidden fractures within Indian society. His plays question patriarchal authority, expose silenced traumas, and foreground marginalized voices. Collectively, they contribute to a broader literary movement aimed at exposing social injustices and inspiring empathy, understanding, and social transformation.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani emerges as a significant figure in contemporary Indian theatre, renowned for his thought-provoking plays that explore complex social issues and the intricacies of human relationships. His innovative dramatic techniques, nuanced characterization, and psychological depth have established him as a pioneering voice in modern Indian drama. Dattani's works reflect the contradictions and complexities of urban Indian society, redefining Indian English theatre through their bold engagement with taboo subjects and experimentation with dramatic form and structure. The plays chosen for this study—*Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*—are particularly apt for examining these social and psychological complexities within the framework of social realism.

This paper highlights how Dattani's plays employ social realism to portray everyday life and pressing social issues in a realistic and unromanticised manner. Through the exploration of themes such as gender discrimination, patriarchal domination, identity crises, and societal hypocrisy, Dattani provides a poignant commentary on the need for social awareness and change. His use of symbolism, emotional depth, and realistic dialogue enhances the audience's understanding of the individual's struggle within constraining social systems.

Each of the plays—*Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*—demonstrates how social realism functions not merely as a narrative style but as a critical lens through which societal issues are examined. They confront gender inequality, patriarchal control, artistic suppression, trauma, and identity conflicts, thereby urging empathy, reflection, and transformation. Collectively, these works contribute to the broader movement of social realism in Indian English theatre, aiming to expose hidden injustices and promote social reform.

Dattani's innovative staging and spatial dynamics further enrich his critique of Indian society. By using both physical and psychological spaces to mirror his characters' inner conflicts and societal pressures, he transforms the stage into a site of confrontation and revelation. His dramaturgy compels audiences to question cultural hierarchies and personal prejudices, positioning theatre as a powerful medium for social introspection and change.

In essence, Mahesh Dattani's dramas have redefined the contours of Indian theatre. His ability to blend social critique with artistic innovation makes his works enduringly relevant in both academic and creative spheres. For scholars and researchers, examining the interplay of staging, space, and social realism in Dattani's plays offers a fertile ground for literary analysis and cultural critique, firmly situating his oeuvre at the forefront of contemporary Indian theatre studies.

Works Cited

- Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance Like a Man*. Penguin Books India, 2006.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Penguin Books India, 2000.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Tara*. Ravi Dayal Publishers / Rupa & Co., 1990.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Thirty Days in September*. Surjeet Publishers, 2013.
- "A Critical Study in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*." *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 2023.
- "A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology (IJARSCT)*, 2024.
- "Critical Analysis of Mahesh Dattani's Selected Dramas." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, 2023.
- "Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: A Critical Study." *The Creative*

Launcher, Apr. 2022.

George, Miruna. *A Critical Reading of Mahesh Dattani's Plays*. Emerald Publishers, n.d.

Hossain, Anowar, and Wasim Qadir. "Gender Identity and Gender Discrimination in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2024.

Mahesh Dattani: His Stagecraft in Indian Theatre. Vishwanath Bite Publication, June 2025.

Pant, Tanu, and Rajendra Kumar Dhawan. *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*. Prestige Books, 2005.

Revisiting Mahesh Dattani. Nash Foundations, Oct. 2024.

Sathyaraj, M., and Kathiresan. "Critical Perspectives on Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *Academic Journals Referencing Indian English Drama*, 2015.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays: Volume II*. Penguin Publishers, 2005.