



DOMESTIC REALISM AND DRAMATIC MODERNITY: MAHESH DATTANI IN DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PLAYWRIGHTS

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Abstract

This study examines the dramaturgy of Mahesh Dattani in relation to contemporary British playwrights, arguing that his work redefines modern Indian drama through its engagement with marginalisation, identity, and everyday power structures. While British dramatists such as Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill, Tom Stoppard, and Sarah Kane explore themes of existential uncertainty, political critique, and postmodern fragmentation, Dattani relocates similar concerns within the domestic and socio-cultural framework of postcolonial India. Through qualitative interpretative analysis and comparative methodology, the paper demonstrates that Dattani's theatre foregrounds internalised oppression rather than external spectacle. His plays challenge dominant narratives by presenting marginalised identities as central rather than peripheral. The study concludes that Dattani's dramaturgy bridges global modernist tendencies with indigenous realities, thereby expanding the critical and aesthetic possibilities of contemporary drama..

Keywords

Mahesh Dattani, Comparative Drama, British Theatre, Identity Politics, Internalised Oppression, Dramaturgy, Postcolonial Modernity, Gender and Sexuality, Theatre and Society, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Modern drama, across both Indian and British traditions, has undergone a profound transformation over the last century, marked by a gradual departure from classical unity and mythic representation toward fragmentation, realism, and psychological depth. This shift is not merely aesthetic but deeply connected to broader socio-historical changes, including industrialisation, urbanisation, and the reconfiguration of individual identity within modern societies. In India, particularly after independence, drama began to reflect the tensions of a society negotiating between tradition and modernity. In Britain, similar anxieties found expression in the works of playwrights who challenged established theatrical conventions and explored the instability of language, identity, and power.

Within this evolving landscape, Mahesh Dattani emerges as a significant figure whose work redefines the contours of Indian English drama. Unlike earlier dramatists who relied heavily on mythological or historical narratives, Dattani situates his plays within contemporary urban and semi-urban settings. His focus is not on grand narratives but on the everyday experiences of individuals navigating complex social structures. This shift from the monumental to the intimate marks a decisive moment in the development of Indian theatre. Dattani's dramaturgy is particularly notable for its engagement with marginalised identities. His plays address issues such as gender discrimination, sexual identity, and communal tension, not as isolated problems but as interconnected aspects of social life. In *Tara*, for instance, the discrimination against the female child is embedded within familial decision-making processes, revealing the subtle ways in which



patriarchy operates. Similarly, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* foregrounds queer identity within a society that often renders it invisible.

When placed alongside contemporary British dramatists, Dattani's work reveals both affinities and divergences. Harold Pinter's theatre, with its emphasis on silence and ambiguity, explores the dynamics of power embedded in language. Caryl Churchill's plays interrogate gender and capitalism through experimental forms, while Tom Stoppard engages with philosophical questions of identity and reality through intellectual wit. Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, associated with the "in-yer-face" theatre movement, confront audiences with the brutality of contemporary existence.

Despite these differences, a common concern unites these dramatists: the exploration of identity within systems of power. However, Dattani's approach remains distinct in its grounding in everyday life. While British dramatists often employ abstraction or extreme theatricality, Dattani locates conflict within domestic spaces, thereby making it immediately recognisable and relatable.

This paper argues that Dattani's dramaturgy represents a unique synthesis of global theatrical trends and local realities. By placing his work in dialogue with contemporary British drama, the study seeks to illuminate the ways in which Indian theatre engages with and transforms international influences. Ultimately, it demonstrates that Dattani's contribution lies in his ability to reveal the structural and internalised nature of marginalisation, thereby redefining the function of modern drama.

Literature Review:

Critical discourse on Mahesh Dattani has consistently foregrounded his engagement with marginalised identities and socially sensitive themes. Scholars have observed that his plays bring into focus issues that were previously marginal within Indian theatrical discourse. Angelie Multani notes that Dattani's work "renders visible those experiences that mainstream narratives tend to suppress" (Multani, 34), thereby positioning him as a dramatist deeply invested in the politics of representation. Feminist readings of Dattani's plays, particularly *Tara*, have emphasised the systemic nature of gender inequality. Simone de Beauvoir's well-known assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 16) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how gender identity is constructed within patriarchal systems. In *Tara*, the privileging of the male child reflects cultural norms that assign greater value to male agency, revealing how discrimination is embedded within familial structures.

Queer theory has also played a significant role in interpreting Dattani's work. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is often cited as a pioneering text in Indian English drama for its portrayal of queer relationships. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity, critics argue that the play demonstrates how sexual identity is shaped through repeated social practices (Butler, 25). The characters' struggles highlight the tension between personal desire and societal expectations, underscoring the constructed nature of identity. Postcolonial perspectives further enrich the analysis of Dattani's dramaturgy. His use of English, often interwoven with Indian idioms and cultural references, reflects a hybrid linguistic strategy that challenges colonial hierarchies. This hybridity aligns with Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural negotiation, where identity is continuously redefined through interaction.

Comparative studies have frequently placed Dattani alongside Indian dramatists such as Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar. Karnad's use of myth and folklore contrasts with Dattani's realism, while Tendulkar's focus on overt social conflict differs from Dattani's emphasis on psychological processes. However, these comparisons often remain confined to the Indian context. When extended to British drama, new dimensions emerge. Harold Pinter's exploration of power



through language resonates with Dattani's focus on conversational realism. Caryl Churchill's feminist theatre parallels Dattani's engagement with gender, while Tom Stoppard's intellectual dramaturgy offers a different approach to questions of identity. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* introduces the "angry young man" as a figure of social discontent, a theme that finds echoes in Dattani's portrayal of frustrated middle-class characters. Despite these intersections, existing scholarship rarely undertakes a sustained comparative analysis between Dattani and contemporary British dramatists. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how different theatrical traditions engage with similar themes while employing distinct dramaturgical strategies.

Methodology:

This study is grounded in a qualitative interpretative framework that prioritises close textual engagement and comparative analysis. Given that the subject of inquiry involves the representation of marginalisation, identity formation, and ideological structures within dramatic texts, a qualitative approach is particularly suited to capturing nuance, ambiguity, and contextual meaning. The research does not seek to quantify patterns but to interpret how meaning is generated through language, performance cues, and narrative construction. The primary corpus includes selected plays by Mahesh Dattani—*Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. These are read alongside representative works by contemporary British playwrights such as Harold Pinter (*The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*), Caryl Churchill (*Top Girls*, *Cloud Nine*), Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*), Edward Bond (*Saved*), Sarah Kane (*Blasted*), and Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and F*ing*). The selection is designed to cover a range of dramaturgical modes, from realism and absurdism to postmodern and experimental theatre.

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is used as a guiding method to trace recurring thematic concerns across the texts. Rather than imposing fixed categories, QCA allows themes to emerge inductively from the material. Key motifs identified include marginalisation, identity fragmentation, power relations, gender performance, and the tension between public and private selves. These themes are then examined in relation to specific textual instances, ensuring that interpretation remains grounded in the plays themselves.

Close reading functions as the principal analytical technique. Particular attention is paid to dialogue, pauses, stage directions, and patterns of interaction. In Pinter's plays, for example, silence operates as a form of power, while in Dattani's work, conversational realism reveals underlying tensions. Similarly, Churchill's non-linear structures are analysed alongside Dattani's more linear narratives to highlight differences in dramaturgical strategy. To organise the analysis, the study operates across three interrelated levels. The micro level focuses on linguistic detail—word choice, metaphor, rhythm of speech, and symbolic motifs. The meso level examines narrative structure, character development, and spatial organisation within the plays. The macro level engages with broader ideological frameworks, considering how the texts reflect and critique social structures such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, and class hierarchy.

The theoretical framework is interdisciplinary, drawing on feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives. Feminist theory, particularly the work of Simone de Beauvoir, is used to examine gender construction and the operation of patriarchy. Queer theory, informed by Judith Butler, provides a lens for analysing sexual identity as performative. Postcolonial theory, especially the work of Homi Bhabha, informs the analysis of cultural hybridity and identity negotiation. Importantly, these theories are not applied rigidly but used as interpretative tools that remain responsive to the texts. The aim is to allow the plays to generate meaning through a dialogue with theory rather than forcing them into predetermined frameworks. The comparative dimension of the methodology is central to the study's objectives. By placing Dattani's work in



conversation with contemporary British drama, the analysis highlights both shared concerns and distinctive features. This approach not only situates Dattani within a global context but also underscores the specificity of his contribution to Indian theatre.

Results and Discussion:

The comparative analysis reveals that Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy offers a distinctive mode of engaging with marginalisation, one that differs significantly from the strategies employed by contemporary British playwrights while simultaneously sharing certain thematic concerns. Across his plays, marginalisation is not presented as an external imposition alone but as a condition that is internalised, reproduced, and normalised within everyday life. This emphasis on internalisation marks a crucial point of divergence from many British dramatists, whose works often foreground conflict through more visible or extreme theatrical means.

In *Tara*, gender discrimination is articulated through the intimate setting of the family. The decision to privilege the male child is not depicted as an isolated act of cruelty but as a consequence of deeply ingrained cultural values. Tara's reflection, "I move, just move, without meaning" (Dattani, 72), encapsulates the psychological fragmentation that results from such systemic inequality. The play demonstrates how marginalisation operates through ordinary decisions that appear rational within their cultural context, thereby revealing the subtle mechanisms of power.

Similarly, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* explores the construction of queer identity within a society governed by heteronormative expectations. The characters' experiences align with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, where identity is constituted through repeated social acts (Butler, 25). The play highlights the tension between self-expression and social conformity, illustrating how individuals navigate the constraints imposed by normative frameworks.

When compared with British dramatists, these concerns take on new dimensions. Harold Pinter's plays, for instance, explore power dynamics through language and silence. In *The Homecoming*, the negotiation of authority occurs through subtle shifts in dialogue, creating an atmosphere of tension and ambiguity. While Pinter's approach shares Dattani's interest in the unspoken, it often abstracts conflict from specific social contexts, focusing instead on existential uncertainty. Caryl Churchill's work, particularly *Top Girls*, offers a feminist critique of capitalist society through non-linear structure and historical juxtaposition. Churchill's experimental form contrasts with Dattani's more conventional narrative techniques, yet both dramatists engage with questions of gender and identity. However, where Churchill employs fragmentation to disrupt narrative coherence, Dattani relies on the familiarity of domestic settings to expose underlying tensions. Tom Stoppard introduces another dimension through his intellectual and philosophical engagement with identity. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, questions of existence and meaning are explored through absurdist dialogue and metatheatrical devices. Dattani, by contrast, grounds similar concerns in lived experience, making them more immediately accessible to the audience.

The works of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill represent a more confrontational mode of theatre, often described as "in-her-face." Their plays depict violence and alienation in stark terms, aiming to shock and provoke. Dattani's approach is markedly different; he avoids overt sensationalism, instead revealing how violence can be embedded within everyday interactions. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* introduces the figure of the disillusioned individual, whose frustration reflects broader social tensions. While Osborne's protagonist expresses anger openly, Dattani's characters often internalise their conflicts, leading to quieter but equally profound forms of suffering. Edward Bond's theatre, with its emphasis on social injustice, shares Dattani's



concern with structural inequality. However, Bond often employs extreme situations to highlight these issues, whereas Dattani focuses on ordinary circumstances.

The analysis thus demonstrates that while Dattani shares thematic concerns with contemporary British dramatists, his dramaturgy is distinguished by its emphasis on everyday life and internalised oppression. His plays do not rely on spectacle or abstraction; instead, they reveal how power operates through routine interactions and cultural norms. This shift from external conflict to psychological interiority represents a significant development in modern drama. Dattani's theatre does not seek to resolve conflicts but to expose their structural roots, encouraging audiences to engage critically with the issues presented.

Conclusion:

The comparative framework adopted in this study makes it possible to locate Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy within a broader transnational conversation about modern theatre, while also recognising the specific cultural and ideological contexts that shape his work. What emerges most clearly from the analysis is that Dattani's contribution lies not simply in his choice of themes, but in the manner in which he reconceptualises the very nature of marginalisation. Rather than presenting it as an external condition imposed by visible structures of authority, he reveals it as a process that becomes embedded within everyday life, internalised by individuals, and perpetuated through routine practices.

This redefinition has important implications for the understanding of contemporary drama. In many strands of British theatre, particularly in the works of playwrights such as Harold Pinter or Sarah Kane, power and violence are made visible through linguistic tension, dramatic confrontation, or theatrical extremity. These strategies, while effective in their own contexts, often operate at a level where conflict is clearly identifiable. Dattani, by contrast, shifts attention to the less visible dimensions of power. His plays demonstrate that oppression can function without overt coercion, sustained instead through cultural norms, familial expectations, and internalised beliefs. This subtlety does not diminish the force of his critique; rather, it intensifies it by implicating both characters and audiences in the structures being examined.

Another significant aspect of Dattani's work is his sustained engagement with domestic space as a site of ideological formation. While British dramatists such as John Osborne and Caryl Churchill also engage with the family, their treatments often foreground conflict in more explicit terms. Osborne's protagonists articulate their dissatisfaction openly, and Churchill's experimental structures disrupt conventional representations of domestic life. Dattani's approach is quieter but no less incisive. By focusing on ordinary interactions—conversations at the dinner table, decisions taken within the family, silences that conceal discomfort—he reveals how deeply social hierarchies entrenched are reproduced within intimate settings. The family, in his plays, is not merely a backdrop but a central mechanism through which power operates.

The emphasis on psychological interiority further distinguishes Dattani's dramaturgy. His characters are not simply defined by their social positions; they are shaped by their internal negotiations, doubts, and contradictions. This inward turn aligns his work with broader developments in modern drama, where the exploration of subjectivity has become increasingly central. However, Dattani's treatment of interiority remains grounded in social reality. The psychological conflicts experienced by his characters are inseparable from the cultural and ideological contexts in which they are situated. In this sense, his plays bridge the gap between the personal and the political, demonstrating that individual experience cannot be understood in isolation from broader social structures.

The comparative dimension of this study also highlights the ways in which Dattani adapts and transforms elements of global theatrical practice. While his work resonates with the linguistic



tension of Pinter, the feminist concerns of Churchill, and the existential questioning of Stoppard, it does not replicate these models. Instead, Dattani reworks them within the framework of Indian society, where issues of gender, sexuality, and community are inflected by specific historical and cultural conditions. This process of adaptation underscores the dynamic nature of modern drama, which evolves through dialogue between different traditions rather than through imitation.

At the same time, the study suggests that Dattani's dramaturgy expands the ethical scope of theatre. By bringing marginalised identities to the centre of his narratives, he challenges audiences to confront perspectives that are often excluded from mainstream discourse. His plays do not offer easy resolutions or moral certainties; instead, they create a space for reflection, where the complexity of social reality can be acknowledged. This open-endedness is a defining feature of his work, encouraging an ongoing engagement with the issues he raises. In conclusion, Mahesh Dattani's theatre represents a significant reorientation of modern Indian drama, one that aligns it with global developments while maintaining a strong connection to local realities. His emphasis on internalised marginalisation, domestic space, and psychological depth sets him apart from both his Indian and British contemporaries. By transforming theatre into a site of critical inquiry, he not only enriches the aesthetic possibilities of drama but also enhances its capacity to engage with pressing social concerns. As such, his work occupies an important place within contemporary literary studies, offering valuable insights into the relationship between identity, power, and representation in the modern world.

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Article Received:28/07/2026

Article Accepted:08/08/2026

Published Online:30/09/2026

To Cite the Article: *Goswami, Ramen. "Domestic Realism and Dramatic Modernity: Mahesh Dattani in Dialogue with Contemporary British Playwrights." Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 33-38. www.literarycognizance.com*

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