

MYTH, SYMBOL, AND SOCIAL REALITY: A LITERARY REAPPRAISAL OF MAHESH DATTANI'S DRAMATURGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comprehensive literary reappraisal of Mahesh Dattani's plays, examining them through the lens of symbolism and Indian myth. It argues that beneath his realist surface, Dattani's dramaturgy is deeply embedded in symbolic structures and mythic resonances that reinterpret traditional Indian narratives within contemporary contexts. Employing a qualitative interpretative methodology and close textual analysis of plays such as Tara, Final Solutions, Dance Like a Man, Bravely Fought the Queen, and Seven Steps Around the Fire, the study demonstrates that Dattani's use of myth is subtle, internalised, and recontextualised within modern socio-cultural frameworks. His symbols—rituals, bodily metaphors, spatial arrangements, and narrative patterns—function as critical tools that expose gender inequality, communal tensions, and identity conflicts. The study concludes that Dattani's dramaturgy represents a unique synthesis of realism and symbolic depth, redefining Indian English theatre as a site of cultural reinterpretation and ideological critique.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani; Indian Myth; Symbolism; Dramaturgy; Ritual; Cultural Semiotics; Modern Indian Drama; Identity and Myth.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of modern Indian drama reflects a gradual yet decisive departure from the overtly mythological frameworks of classical Sanskrit theatre towards forms that engage directly with contemporary social realities. While early dramatists frequently relied on epic narratives drawn from texts such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, modern playwrights began to reinterpret these traditions in ways that resonate with present-day concerns. Within this trajectory, Mahesh Dattani occupies a distinctive position. His plays are often read as examples of social realism; however, a closer examination reveals that these are deeply structured by symbolic and mythic undercurrents.

Dattani's dramaturgy does not replicate myth in its traditional narrative form. Instead, it reconfigures myth as a symbolic framework that operates beneath the surface of everyday life.

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His plays are set in recognisable domestic and urban environments, yet they are permeated by patterns, motifs, and structures that echo classical Indian myths. This subtle integration of myth distinguishes his work from that of dramatists such as Girish Karnad, who explicitly employ mythological narratives. In Dattani, myth is neither decorative nor nostalgic; it functions as a critical lens through which contemporary social realities are examined. One of the defining features of Dattani's theatre is its engagement with marginalised identities. His plays foreground issues such as gender discrimination, sexual identity, and communal conflict, presenting them not as isolated problems but as systemic conditions embedded within social structures. As critics observe, Dattani's theatre "questions middle-class morality and exposes its contradictions". This critique is often articulated through symbolic devices that reveal the underlying tensions within seemingly ordinary situations.

Symbolism in Dattani's plays operates at multiple levels. Objects, spaces, and rituals acquire meanings that extend beyond their immediate context, functioning as metaphors for broader social and psychological processes. For instance, in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the ritual of marriage becomes a symbol of exclusion and identity conflict, reflecting the struggles of marginalised communities. Similarly, in *Tara*, the physical body itself becomes a site of symbolic significance, representing the fragmentation of identity under patriarchal pressures. The use of Indian myth in Dattani's work is closely linked to his exploration of identity. Myth, in this context, is not a fixed narrative but a dynamic structure that can be reinterpreted to reflect contemporary realities. By invoking mythic patterns within modern settings, Dattani creates a dialogue between tradition and modernity, highlighting both continuity and transformation. This paper argues that Dattani's dramaturgy represents a unique synthesis of realism and symbolism, where myth is internalised rather than explicitly narrated. Through this approach, he redefines the function of Indian drama, transforming it into a space where cultural traditions are critically examined and reimaged. The study seeks to explore how symbolism and myth operate across his plays, revealing their significance in shaping both narrative and thematic structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical scholarship on Mahesh Dattani has predominantly focused on his representation of marginalised identities and his contribution to contemporary Indian theatre. However, there is a growing recognition of the symbolic and mythic dimensions of his work, which warrant closer examination. Early studies emphasised Dattani's role as a social realist. Scholars noted that his plays address pressing issues such as gender inequality, communal tension, and sexual identity, thereby reflecting the complexities of modern Indian society. As one study observes, his work deals with "burning social issues of contemporary Indian society". While this perspective highlights the thematic relevance of his plays, it often overlooks the symbolic structures that underpin them.

More recent scholarship has begun to explore the role of symbolism in Dattani's dramaturgy. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, for example, the use of ritual is interpreted as a metaphor for the constraints imposed by tradition. The seven steps of the Hindu marriage ceremony are not merely a cultural practice but a symbolic representation of the characters' emotional and psychological journeys. This interpretation underscores the significance of ritual as a narrative

device that conveys deeper meanings.

The intersection of myth and modernity is another area of critical interest. Scholars have argued that Dattani's plays reflect a tension between traditional values and contemporary aspirations. This tension is often articulated through symbolic representations of dharma and desire, as seen in studies that examine the concept of psychological androgyny in his work. These analyses suggest that Dattani's characters embody a complex interplay between cultural expectations and individual agency. Postcolonial perspectives further enrich the understanding of Dattani's use of myth. His plays are situated within a cultural context shaped by colonial and postcolonial influences, where traditional narratives are continuously reinterpreted. By incorporating mythic elements into contemporary settings, Dattani challenges the notion of a fixed cultural identity, instead presenting it as fluid and dynamic. Comparative studies have also highlighted the differences between Dattani and other Indian dramatists. While playwrights like Karnad employ myth as a central narrative framework, Dattani integrates it more subtly, using symbolic motifs rather than explicit storytelling. This approach aligns his work with modernist and postmodernist theatrical traditions, where meaning is often conveyed through indirect and fragmented forms. Despite these developments, there remains a gap in comprehensive studies that examine symbolism and myth across Dattani's entire body of work. This paper seeks to address this gap by providing a systematic analysis of these elements, demonstrating their centrality to his dramaturgy.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, comparative reading, and thematic synthesis. The choice of this methodological framework is informed by the nature of the research problem, which seeks to explore symbolic and mythic structures within dramatic texts. Such an inquiry requires an approach that is sensitive to nuance, ambiguity, and contextual meaning, rather than one that relies on quantification or empirical generalisation. The primary corpus includes major plays by Mahesh Dattani, including *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. These texts are selected on the basis of their thematic diversity and their relevance to the study's focus on symbolism and myth. Each play is analysed in detail, with attention to both textual and performative elements.

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is employed as a guiding method for identifying recurring patterns and motifs. This approach allows for the systematic examination of themes such as ritual, identity, and cultural symbolism, while preserving the complexity of literary meaning. Rather than imposing predefined categories, the analysis allows themes to emerge organically from the texts.

Close reading serves as the primary analytical tool. Particular attention is paid to language, imagery, and dramatic structure, as well as to the use of stage directions and visual elements. Symbols are identified not only in explicit references but also in recurring patterns and associations. For instance, the use of space in Dattani's plays—such as the division between public and private areas—often carries symbolic significance, reflecting broader social hierarchies.

The study also incorporates an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing on semiotics, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies. Semiotics provides a framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through signs and symbols, while postcolonial theory situates these symbols within a broader cultural context. Cultural studies, in turn, emphasizes the relationship between text and society, highlighting the ways in which literature both reflects and shapes social realities. A comparative dimension is introduced through the analysis of mythic structures. Rather than treating myth as a fixed narrative, the study examines how mythic patterns are reinterpreted within modern contexts. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how Dattani's work engages with traditional cultural forms while simultaneously challenging them.

The methodology also emphasizes reflexivity, recognizing that interpretation is shaped by the researcher's own perspective. By maintaining a critical awareness of this process, the study seeks to produce a nuanced and balanced analysis that does not reduce the complexity of the texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that symbolism and myth are central to Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy, functioning as key mechanisms through which social realities are interpreted and critiqued. Across his plays, symbols operate at multiple levels, creating a layered structure of meaning that extends beyond the surface narrative. One of the most significant findings is the role of ritual as a symbolic device. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the marriage ritual becomes a metaphor for both inclusion and exclusion. While it represents union and continuity within traditional society, it also highlights the marginalisation of those who do not conform to normative identities. The ritual thus serves as a site of tension, where cultural values are both affirmed and questioned.

The body emerges as another important symbol in Dattani's plays. In *Tara*, the conjoined twins represent the fragmentation of identity under patriarchal conditions. The physical division of the body mirrors the psychological and social divisions imposed by gender norms. This symbolic use of the body underscores the extent to which identity is shaped by external forces. Mythic structures are often embedded within the narrative framework of Dattani's plays. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the title itself evokes historical and mythic associations, suggesting a parallel between contemporary struggles and traditional narratives of heroism. However, these associations are subverted, revealing the limitations of such narratives in addressing modern realities.

The analysis also highlights the interplay between tradition and modernity. Dattani's use of myth does not simply reinforce traditional values; rather, it exposes their contradictions and limitations. By placing mythic elements within contemporary settings, he creates a dialogue between past and present, encouraging audiences to reconsider their assumptions. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that symbolism in Dattani's plays is closely linked to issues of marginalisation. Objects, spaces, and rituals often function as markers of inclusion or exclusion, reflecting broader social hierarchies. This symbolic framework allows for a nuanced exploration of power, revealing how it operates at both visible and invisible levels.

CONCLUSION

The present study has sought to re-evaluate Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy by foregrounding the role of symbolism and Indian myth in shaping his dramatic vision. While Dattani has frequently been discussed within the framework of social realism, this analysis demonstrates that such a classification, though not inaccurate, remains incomplete. His plays are not confined to the surface representation of contemporary life; rather, they are structured through a dense network of symbols and mythic resonances that deepen their interpretative possibilities. It is through this layered construction that Dattani achieves a distinctive dramatic voice, one that negotiates between realism and cultural memory. A key conclusion that emerges from the study is that Dattani does not employ myth in a conventional or overt manner. Unlike classical Sanskrit dramatists or even modern playwrights such as Girish Karnad, who draw directly upon mythological narratives, Dattani internalises myth within the everyday. Myth in his plays does not appear as a story retold but as a pattern reconfigured. It is present in the symbolic structure of relationships, in the ritualistic repetition of social practices, and in the psychological conflicts experienced by his characters. This subtle integration allows myth to function not as an authoritative framework but as a critical tool that exposes the contradictions of contemporary society.

Another significant insight concerns the function of symbolism in Dattani's work. The analysis has shown that symbols in his plays are not merely decorative elements; they are central to the construction of meaning. Rituals, bodily images, spatial arrangements, and even silences operate as symbolic forms that reveal underlying tensions within the social order. For instance, the use of marriage rituals in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* or the symbolic fragmentation of the body in *Tara* demonstrates how everyday practices can be imbued with deeper ideological significance. These symbols enable Dattani to articulate complex social issues without resorting to overt didacticism.

The relationship between myth and marginalisation is also crucial to understanding Dattani's dramaturgy. By reworking mythic patterns within contemporary contexts, he highlights the ways in which traditional structures continue to shape modern identities. At the same time, his plays challenge these structures, exposing their limitations and suggesting the possibility of transformation. This dual movement—of continuity and critique—gives his work its distinctive tension and vitality.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of viewing Dattani's theatre as a site of cultural negotiation. His plays engage with a wide range of social issues, including gender inequality, sexual identity, and communal conflict, but they do so through a framework that is deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions. By integrating myth and symbolism into his dramaturgy, Dattani creates a dialogue between past and present, tradition and modernity, thereby expanding the scope of Indian English drama. In conclusion, Mahesh Dattani's contribution to contemporary theatre lies in his ability to combine realism with symbolic depth, creating a form of drama that is both socially engaged and aesthetically complex. His use of myth and symbolism not only enriches the narrative structure of his plays but also provides a powerful means of critiquing the cultural and ideological systems that shape modern Indian society. As such, his work represents a significant development in the evolution of Indian drama, offering new possibilities for the exploration of identity, power, and cultural memory.

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