

## “Provincializing English,” Globalizing Indian English Drama<sup>1</sup>

Nandi Bhatia

The University of Western Ontario

In the Editor’s Column of *PMLA* (2014), Simon Gikandi emphasizes the need to provincialize English and recognize its plurality because even though it may operate as a “secondary” language in many of the ex-colonies, its “secondariness” does not deprive it of “its power and standing” (12). It is, as Gikandi points out, a language that “causes most anxiety” (7) as evident in the ongoing debates about the status of the English language and literature in India. Meenakshi Mukherjee’s essay, “The Anxiety of Indianness” (2000), is a case in point. This builds on earlier work in which Mukherjee called Indian fiction in English “twice-born,” a phrase that refers to the influence of English and of the writer’s cultural and linguistic heritage that shows its traces on his/her writing (Mukherjee 1971). Mukherjee goes on to locate the “anxiety of Indianness” for those writing in English (and often living in the diaspora), in the pressures of a readership that comprises middle-class elites in India and the western publics, along with expectations from publishers who envisage the Indian writer as a native informant (2000). This is also a topic that creative writers have brought attention to, inadvertently or consciously.

Yet despite the emergence of an identifiable archive of Indian English literature, an archive that represents its diverse registers, debates about English as a hegemonic language, or as what Bernard Cohn calls the “language of command” (16), have far from settled. They appear routinely, as demonstrated in Aatish Taseer’s recent *New York Times* article (March 19, 2015), which suggests that English, “which re-enacts the colonial relationship, placing certain Indians in a position the British once occupied [,] ... has created a linguistic line as unbreachable as the color line once was in the United States.” Or they appear in the realm of politics, as evident in Gautam Adhikari’s editorial from *The Times of India* entitled, “Macaulay’s Children and the Rest” (2013). This editorial, which questions what English means for “all political players who profoundly display an almost Macaulay-like disdain towards Indians who use English as the main language of communication” (14), reminds us of the relevance of the debates on English in the domain of contemporary politics in India. It suggests that the legacy of Macaulay, who argued for the superiority of the English language by suggesting that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia,” resonates strongly in the social, political and cultural life of the nation.<sup>2</sup> English is powerful because it is the language in which the

Constitution of India was originally written; it is powerful because knowledge of English and the anglicization that comes with it connote class power; and it remains powerful because knowledge of English continues to facilitate entry into higher paying jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, the English spoken across India, with varying levels of fluency, deflates its authority, as captured in Hindi poet and satirist Ashok Chakradhar's fictionalized phone call between an uncle and his nephew in Bihar, who tells him how "Hinglish" has permeated Bihar in phrases such as "beti music mein interstiya gayi hai" (daughter has developed an interest in music 68).<sup>4</sup> It is provincialized when its vocabulary enters the lexicon of Hindi as well as when it is spoken through a translation from Hindi, consciously in the case of writers like Rushdie, who mixes Hindi-Urdu words and phrases and songs from Hindi cinema in his novels. Rushdie also shows how Indian English mimics Hindi patterns of speech, such as when the doubling of words, common in colloquial Hindi, enters the English language through Padma in *Midnight's Children* (1981), who, in seeking Saleem's attention, asks him: "what is so precious . . . to need all this writing-shiting" (24)? Following Rushdie, the plurality of English is demonstrated in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) whose "half-baked" protagonist, Balram Halwai, writes his letters in a combination of today's SMS-inspired phrases with traces of Bihari Hindi and other Indianisms—all of which capture the changes brought to English by technology and the differentiated levels of the English language taught in the government school that Balram attended as a child until the time he was removed by his family to work in a tea shop. Balram's language, throughout the narrative, speaks of the ways in which English has been provincialized, to use Gikandi's term, in India. And yet the fact that he is able to communicate with the Prime Minister of China in English, the epistolary form that gives the novel its narrative shape, is reflective of the mediated power that the English language enjoys—and the world of linguistic flexibility and translation that post-colonial subjects live in—confirming Brett de Barry's claim that it is "multilingualism, or living in translation, that is the norm for many populations, rather than monolingualism" (46).

When approached from the perspective of non-English-speaking vernacular localities, then, it is fair to assume that English is simultaneously both provincial and powerful. Caught in a political quagmire because of a variety of factors at play—political and social—that make English simultaneously hegemonic, embraced, and rejected, its status is rife with contradictions. Many of these contradictions arise because of English's relationship to the vernacular languages, in particular Hindi, which itself has a "troubled" (Rai 5) history, a history complicated by the presence of English.<sup>5</sup> Such contradictions have been analyzed through the Indian novel in English, making it the privileged genre for analysis within Postcolonial Studies as a field of inquiry. However, what does this mean for Indian English drama, a genre that remains largely excluded from critical debates about the place of English in Indian Literature? The exclusion of this drama rests on the perception that English is unsuitable for the dramatic

representation of local and regional issues, a perception that has produced yet another contradiction. This contradiction is marked by the marginalization of drama in English within India while emphasizing the diversity of what gets defined as “Indian Literature.”<sup>6</sup> As Aparna Dharwadker points out, “plays written originally in English ... remain on the periphery of contemporary theatre and are rarely translated into the indigenous languages of the subcontinent” (82). Yet even more notable is the fact that it is the English language that facilitates this drama’s international mobility and presence, as in the case of Mahesh Dattani’s plays, which have enjoyed critical acclaim abroad because they were written in English. This paper examines this contradiction by referencing Dattani’s play *Seven Steps around the Fire*, the first full-length play about *hijras*. Recognized under the category of “third gender” through a Supreme Court of India ruling in 2014, *hijras*, variously described as “eunuchs, intersex or transgender,” continue to face acute levels of violence, exclusion, social prejudice, and harassment from the police, the medical profession, and prospective employers, which often results in the relegation of their existence and their livelihoods to the social margins (Khaleeli).

*Seven Steps* was initially commissioned by the BBC as a radio play in 1999. The first staged performance took place at the Museum Theatre, Chennai (by the MTC production and The Madras Players) on August 6, 1999, followed by a performance at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi. Its Canadian premiere took place in Mississauga, Ontario, in September 2013, where it was presented by Sawitri Theatre Group at Meadowvale Theatre. My attempt is to understand how and if the play can facilitate a global dialogue about socially marginalized groups such as the *hijra*, as opposed to its performance in India where the English language limits the play to a middle-class English-speaking audience. What transnational linkages does English provide across global/multicultural audiences? And how is “locational specificity” maintained in spaces through a language that some critics deem as an imperial imposition?

## Indian Drama in English

In order to understand the importance of Indian English drama and, specifically, of Dattani’s contributions, a brief summation of its history is useful. Scholars identify the first play written by an Indian in English as Krishna Mohan Banerjee’s *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831). Other plays written in English in the pre-independence period include those by Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote in English and Bengali, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, A.S.P. Ayyar, P.A. Krishnaswamy, T.P. Kailasam and Bharati Sarabhai. The post-independence phase saw plays by Nissim Ezekiel, Geive Patel, Girish Karnad and Pratap Sharma. The announcement of the Sultan Padamsee Award for Indian plays in English by Theatre Group Bombay in 1968, an award won by

Gurcharan Das for his play *Larins Sahib* produced in 1969 and by Cyrus Mistry for *Doongaji House* in 1978, brought wider attention to Indian English drama.<sup>7</sup> Since then, playwrights including Dina Mehta, Cyrus Mistry, Asif Currimbhoy, and Manjula Padmanabhan, among others, have continued to write plays in English, while many others are available in English translation. The themes of the plays include social issues, historical moments, women's liberation, and mythology, among others.<sup>8</sup> It was, however, Dattani's plays that put Indian English drama on the international literary map in post-independence India, even as the subject matter deals with marginal figures and issues of social justice through an English that he suggests is an Indian language. Dattani's emphasis comes in response to the obstacles and a kind of censure that English drama has faced. Within India, he has to wrestle with the question of his plays being accepted as "Indian." According to Ramaswamy, Dattani was questioned at a seminar in Mysore in 1994 about why he does not write in his "own language," to which he replied, "I do," only to be berated by the questioner as follows: "You write about things that are not Indian. Do you know what is happening out there on the streets?" (35). Dattani, says Ramaswamy, "had read out extracts from his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (2000), and the speaker was objecting to the depiction of homosexuality in the play, a phenomenon that he perceived as 'not Indian'" (35). In so doing, the speaker was inadvertently reinforcing the nationalist position that equates "homosexuality with sexual perversity" (Gupta 4815) or as belonging within the realm of a modernity (read westernization) that is often attributed to the English-speaking elite. Recent debates on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, and the criminalization of homosexuality in India, along with critical work on queering India, has brought urgent attention to the issue.<sup>9</sup> Dattani, as a matter of fact, writes in English not because English literary education, as Gauri Vishwanathan points out, was constructed as a "cultural ideal" (2) but because this is the language he is most comfortable with. However, the questioner seems to have equated both English and "homosexuality" as western, thereby overlooking the complexity of the language question as well as a human rights issue within India.

Such censure has also been enabled, in part, by the National School of Drama. In the post-independence period, which saw an expansion in drama (especially with the setting up of the National School of Drama in 1959 under the auspices of the Sangeet Natak Akademi) and witnessed an increased emphasis on the "folk" in an attempt to counter European dominance, Indian drama found little place for English. The issues that were thrown up in the post-independence decades by theatre practitioners, critics, and audiences as well as playwrights, in what Dalmia calls "those heady decades of self-discovery and national self-projection" (1), continue into the present. The promoters of these issues yearned for a theatre whose language of production would primarily be Hindi, imagined in those decades as the "national language" (1). In a 1997 interview with Erin Mee, Dattani insightfully nails the problem of the English language and its post-colonial hangover, which he suggests, results in a tacit form of

censorship of plays that are written and performed in English and are, therefore, seen as “Un-Indian.”<sup>10</sup> The situation, in Dattani’s own words, has not changed much:

About the attitude to Indian-English, I am afraid it still prevails. Although the language is widely used with an increasing body of work in literature, despite the Sahitya Akademi award that does consider works in English, most government funding operations do ignore it entirely when it comes to theatre. The National School of Drama or the Sangeet Natak Akademi have not extended a single invitation to me for any of their programs. (email exchange with Dattani, 1 Aug. 2012, quoted with permission)

What, then, constitutes “Indian” drama? At the outset it may be useful to define it, as have theatre scholars in recent years. Vasudha Dalmia suggests that Western theatre practitioners limit Indian drama to what they regard as “classical theatre,” or “traditional” or the “folk” (17).

Traditional sources have ... inevitably been seen as repositories of ancient wisdom. Whereas taking resort to these sources in itself seems a legitimate enough undertaking, it has seldom been accompanied by any serious attempt to understand the historical, social, aesthetic, and most of all, religious context of the performance tradition thus abstracted. Once extracted from the respective setting, however, it has been easy enough to see any given aspect of the performing arts as exemplifying and representing the essence of Indian culture. Yet, for all its essentialism, the engagement with traditional Indian theatre has inevitably been partial, eclectic, restricted often to a preoccupation with technique, with little sense of history, of differences within the traditions thus set up as single and linear. This has been a practice that the Indian culture industry has equally colluded in and indulged. (17)

As Rakesh Solomon succinctly sums it up, in spite of the “plural, democratic and comprehensive construction of Indian theatre” (28-29), a construction that embraces several theatre genres, English drama faces occlusion because of theatre historians’ participation in “a broader nationalist process of self-definition” that focuses on reevaluating the nation’s “artistic achievements” (29).

Dattani’s plays do not fit criteria that evaluate post-colonial drama on the basis of local aesthetics or languages, especially in a context where English continues to be seen as a language of the elite, an imperial imposition, and a medium that does not connect with the people. In fact, his focus on realist dramas, which are presented in everyday conversations about urban milieus and middle-class family settings, eschews the return to the “folk” or “classical” aesthetics that characterized the work of some theatre practitioners in earlier decades. Yet, as Dalmia rightly asks, “if theatre is to remain an open forum for the enactment and querying of cultural difference, of issues of community and belonging which so plague the subcontinent, can it afford to relapse into complacency?” (18). This question is especially relevant for Dattani’s plays. Not subscribing to a narrowly conceived idea of a return to the “theatre of roots,” which emphasizes the rejection of western influences in terms of aesthetics and languages in favour of traditional forms,<sup>11</sup> his dramas, instead, partake in a process of performance that analyzes myths rooted in traditional notions, in order to address the failures and contradictions of the nation, especially

on the part of those who command power—social and linguistic. In contravention to the charge of elitism that is often levelled against him because of his use of English, he continues to take on the challenge of dealing with marginalities and confronting stereotypes about those who operate on the social margins: devadasis, transgendered people, and *hijras*, as in *Seven Steps*. By focusing on the intertwined stories of characters from three gender groups through a plot that combines family drama, gender relations, and a murder mystery, *Seven Steps* throws up several issues that are germane to any context and society: the politics of journalism, social work, police brutality, and gender power-relations. But in *Seven Steps* these issues become critical to forcing open a dialogue in the context of the Indian social ethos, since the play foregrounds the *hijra* community.

### “May You Have a Hundred Sons”

In *Seven Steps*, the story of the *hijra* is woven with that of a murder investigation by Uma Rao, a PhD student and social worker, who, while conducting research on *hijras*, becomes embroiled in playing detective and unraveling the mystery of who killed a *hijra* named Kamla. As the action unfolds, it becomes clear that Kamla’s murder was orchestrated by a politician named Mr. Sharma because of his son Subbu’s love affair and secret marriage with Kamla. As a cover-up for the murder, Anarkali, who calls Kamla her sister, is arrested and is subjected to torture and sexual violence by the police and by prison inmates. Not quite incidentally, Uma is also the daughter-in-law of a university Vice-Chancellor, daughter of the Deputy Commissioner, and wife of the police superintendent who is responsible for arresting Anarkali for the murder of Kamla. Sympathetic to Anarkali after she meets her at the police station, Uma takes advantage of her socially privileged position and arranges for the bail money for Anarkali’s release. The mystery of who murdered Kamla unfolds at Subbu’s wedding ceremony, which has been arranged against Subbu’s wishes by his politician father. In a fit of rage at his father and the social entrapment that kept him away from Kamla, Subbu exposes the crime as soon as the wedding ceremony is over, and shoots himself in order to be reunited with Kamla.

Aided by commentaries on the *hijras* within the play, stage directions that provide details about the *hijras*’ daily activities, and the spotlighting of places where they live in order to show the multidimensional aspects of their daily lives and lived experience (because mostly people see them begging on the streets, or at weddings and ceremonial occasions, without knowing anything about their private lives), the play accords them a multilayered complexity that is ignored in stereotypical representations in popular culture, film, and everyday conversations.

Dattani’s play is marked by an interesting juxtaposition: Subbu’s Hindu wedding, sanctified through Sanskrit shlokas, is juxtaposed with blessings by Champa, a *hijra*, who, along with other *hijras*, arrives at

precisely the moment of the completion of the vows. When Champa is threatened by the groom's father, Mr. Sharma, Uma immediately interjects: "No, it is bad luck to turn away a *hijra* on a wedding or a birth" (277). While Uma's insistence saves Champa from the humiliation of being publicly castigated, embedded in her statement is another tale about the deep-rooted social mythologies around *hijras*. In such mythologies, *hijras* are seen as "auspicious," an idea that "still occupies a commanding presence in the Indian imaginary" (Lal 13). As Vinay Lal points out, "At what are traditionally held to be the two most auspicious moments in an adult person's life, namely, marriage and the birth of a male child, *hijras* come into their own as persons possessed of the power of conferring blessings and, complementarily, inflicting curses. It is said that a bride's face must not be open to the gaze of the *hijras*, since the curse of infertility (the stigma of which in India carries its own inestimable force) might fall on her" (123). The contradiction, however, is that the "presence of the *hijras* is auspicious, and yet terrifying" (123). Therefore, calling attention to such stereotypes is important for identifying how such evocations prevent *hijras* from being seen in all their complexity.

Indeed, *Seven Steps* evokes several such mythologies through key moments. One of these moments is when Uma, after bearing witness to Anarkali's tortured body in the prison cell and having promised to help her out, reflects on the disjuncture created by this vision and her theoretical research and asks herself if *hijras* kidnap children. This self-confrontation of the popular myths that she has absorbed carefully implants questions for the audience in an attempt to provoke a rethinking of such issues. After using moments such as these to undermine stereotypes about *hijras*, Dattani foregrounds a debate about the role and place of *hijras* in Indian society, a place marked by a paradox whereby *hijras* are simultaneously embraced and marginalized. "May you have a hundred sons" is a blessing the *hijras* shower upon the young couple Subbu and his wife, when they arrive to sing at the wedding. However, while it throws light upon the *hijras*' style of interaction, the repetitious use of this phrase in the play points towards the history of gender preference and heterosexual marriage, and the *hijras*' social exclusion from such social practices since they neither can marry nor have biological children. Embedded in this phrase is also the social position of women, in this case Uma, who, despite enjoying a privileged life by virtue of her education and the class position of her father, husband, and father-in-law, is simultaneously trapped into playing the roles of wife and mother. Suresh, her husband, cannot see that she does not want to have a child and he treats her research as peripheral to her identity as his wife. As Uma helps Anarkali escape the false accusation of the murder charge, for which the latter was imprisoned, and begins to nurture a relationship with the *hijra* community as a result of her research, she not only starts to overcome her hackneyed perceptions about *hijras* but also becomes self-conscious about her multilayered identity. Even as the murder plot unfolds, Uma uncovers more than the mystery of who killed Kamla. Through her close encounters with Anarkali and her

family, Uma begins to gain greater consciousness of the social roles she is expected to play as the wife of a high-ranking police officer and the daughter-in-law of a highly-placed university official. But, as Miruna George rightly asserts, “her role as a wife has nothing to offer, except to be fit for motherhood... and an object of sexual pleasure” (147). Dattani sets up a contrast between the roles that Uma is expected to play within her own family on the one hand, and the kinship that exists amongst the family of *hijras* and the love between Subbu and Kamla on the other. This contrast is sharpened through the juxtaposition of Uma’s attempt to ward off her husband when she bites him as he kisses her (238), with Champa’s motherly love for Kamla, “her only daughter” (262), whom Champa pledges to defend until the end. The “emotive absence characterizing upper caste familial relations” in the play, sharply evoked through the lack of “intimacy between the bourgeois couple Suresh and Uma and the filial relation between the minister and his son Subbu” (Batra 106), exposes, as Kanika Batra suggests, the “fault-lines in husband and wife” (106) bonding and the limited social roles accorded to Uma from which she attempts to break out. Overall, as George asserts, “Dattani throws up questions like what is ‘normal’, ‘regular’, ‘stable’ and ‘fixed’ . . . [and in so doing] he suggests the possibilities for reworkings, reconstructions and resignifications starting from the basic unit of society, and identifying family as the basis of institutional power” (146). To this end, the play evokes the meaninglessness of rituals such as the seven steps around the fire that a couple takes at a Hindu wedding.

Salim’s brutal murder of Kamla also exposes the legal limits of a system to which those who live on the social margins have little to no access. As the plot unravels, it also begins to show the possibilities enabled by the forging of friendships across socially disparate groups such as that between the privileged Uma and the underprivileged Anarkali.

### Multiple Audiences and Differentiated Messages

Since the debates about English in relation to drama have inevitably drawn attention to the question of audience, it is useful to return to this issue and ask what the play’s production in English can accomplish. The presentation of the play in English for middle-class English-speaking spectators (at the India Habitat Center in Delhi, for example) is notable, especially because it uncovers for such spectators the workings of power and middle-class complicity in such power-relations and highlights a topic that often gets brushed under the carpet, especially for middle-class viewers. The play’s dialogue subtly weaves in a critique of commonplace perceptions about *hijras* through allusions to legends, ritualistic practices, and mythologies; comments on the role of journalism with its stereotypical coverage; points to the unlawful harassment of *hijras*; raises questions about the role and responsibilities of the academic who writes their stories; and questions

the position of the critic who must gain the *hijras*' trust while simultaneously acknowledging the risks that are not shared.

To this end, the research that Dattani conducted in order to write this play takes on significance. In a discussion in my graduate seminar in September 2013 during the time when his play was performed in Mississauga, Dattani disclosed that his characterization of the *hijras* came from personal conversations with them on which he based the fictional representation. This suggests that Dattani carefully embeds his own self-conscious pedagogy in the narrative. The voiceovers that narrate the story of the *hijra* perform a significant theatrical purpose as well, one that serves as an alternative source of information for Uma to counter her own stereotypes as well as those of the audience. According to Dattani, in one of the productions, Uma was shown sitting with a laptop while a voiceover gave information about *hijras*. The use of a laptop in the age of technology is also notable in that it references the means by which information on such a complex topic is often sought and the speed with which the information may be disseminated.

How was the theme conveyed in an international context? Ostensibly, for the BBC radio production, the detective genre and Uma's investigation of the murder became the primary means for raising awareness about *hijras*' social and cultural marginalization and emphasized the importance of listening, especially for the researcher. With the absence of visuals, theatricals, dress, or other accessories that characterize a radio play, it is the voice and dialogue that acquired a centrality in narrating the story of the *hijra*. Thus, in a context where the language was not a barrier but the cultural nuances were, the detective storyline acquired greater centrality (Dattani, graduate class, September 2013).

At the Mississauga production in September 2013, the primarily South Asian audience seemed familiar with *hijras*; therefore, less explaining had to be done on stage. This production juxtaposed the difficulties of *hijras*, the everyday brutality they suffered at the hands of the police, and the sympathy they receive from a social worker and PhD scholar, with banal representations of *hijras* dancing to a Hindi film song. Derived from popular stereotyping, such representation evoked an uncomfortable laughter from the audience, exposing the ways in which the play unsettled viewers who may have been confronted with their own prejudices. As in the text, the staged play also provided a slice of the *hijras*' lives when they engaged in seemingly mundane conversations, combed each other's hair, argued, and showed affection for family members. Thus the production took the subject matter out of the realm of stereotypical representation and rendered visible a more complex picture of the difficulties and harassment to which *hijras* are subjected on a daily basis—as in the case of Anarkali who faces horrific sexual assault and brutality at the hands of constable Munswamy and her prison inmates, and social exclusion by doctors who refuse to examine Anarkali when she is unwell.

Such exposure of the lives of *hijras* worked against the nostalgic romanticization of India that diasporic communities, as Vijay Mishra has pointed out, often engage in. Instead, such a picture showed them an aspect of India that is difficult to get nostalgic about, riven as it is with oppression against those who transgress gender and class norms. The fact that the Mississauga production had the recurring image of *hijras* dancing to a Hindi film song may also be interpreted as an attempt to suggest that the diaspora gets much of its sense of Indian identity from Hindi films but that these films rarely, if ever, expose the social prejudice that marks the lives of *hijras*, choosing instead to reiterate the same old image of the *hijra* as a figure of fun. While there are no stage directions regarding the *hijras*' dancing to a Hindi film song in the written version of the play, the fluidity of the genre of performance, as opposed to the fixity of the written text (such as the novel) enables the deployment of this theatrical device.

Moreover, unlike the novel, the play when performed makes the sounds of Indian English available, so, in some ways, Dattani's plays being performed on Canadian stages normalizes Indian English in a place where this English is often viewed as "accented" and foreign. Such a representation is particularly useful if we are to agree with Gikandi that the

confusion—of the English text and Englishness—still drives most claims made for English as the global language. Indeed, the claims once made for English as a colonial language survive in ongoing debates about the global reach of the language. Under the guise of globalization, English comes to be represented to the world as a diffuse language, but one with a core that needs to be quarantined from the influence of others (11).

Performing local issues through the English language in Indian accents then serves as a reminder of the variety of Englishes that have been formed and flourish as a result of colonial history, and can no longer be "quarantined."

To this end, the charge of elitism associated with Indian English drama can no longer be valid. Such a charge also risks overlooking its innovative experimentations that can enable a questioning of social problems and bring issues of social justice to middle-class viewers, for whom such problems may go unnoticed. As John McRae, Italian director and Professor of literary studies at the University of Nottingham, observes, "Mahesh Dattani takes the family unit and the family setting . . . and then fragments them. As relationships fall apart, so, in a way, does the visual setting . . . [H]e experiments, with great technical daring, using split sets, 'hidden' rooms, interior and exterior: he stretches the space and fills it in every available direction, even out front, playing with the audience and its expectations" (55). The Mississauga production, for example (directed by Christina Collins), attended to the multiple and intersecting gender relations through a creative use of the stage that imposed partitions to highlight spaces of the bedroom, the police station, and the prison cell where Anarkali is confined, and also included the auditorium where actors dramatized interactions with the spectators, a technique which somewhat dissolved the fourth wall created by the proscenium stage.

Barring a few plays, such as Vancouver-based playwright Anosh Irani's *The Matka King*, Indian playwrights have stayed away from representing *hijras* on stage. A few representations can be found in Hindi cinema, where *hijras* are mostly subjected to disparagement or are dismissed as laughable characters. Dattani's attention to this subject, through a play devoted primarily to *hijras* and one that humanizes them, creates a space for what Gayatri Spivak calls the subaltern subject whose speech is facilitated through a plotline and theatrical elements that make a concerted effort for them to be heard. It is Uma's ability to listen that enables her to sympathize with Champa. When Champa tells Uma, "We cannot speak . . . when we want to speak nobody listens (259), Uma replies by saying: "I am listening" (259). Uma's role as a listener in the play is one through which is provided a critique of power-relations and systemic violence. It also serves as an important theatrical device for drawing in the spectators as additional listeners of this conversation. Going by what Dattani says, this technique seems to have worked towards enabling theatre as a space for allowing *hijras* to speak and for them to be heard: "no audience so far except for a few are willing to look at the play as belonging to Uma Rao. Unwittingly, I have become a champion for the cause of the *hijras*. That just shows how little space they occupy in our real world that their presence is felt so powerfully in the artistic arena" (e-mail exchange with Dattani 20.10.13; quoted with permission).

To conclude, one may reiterate that because it is limited to English-speaking audiences, Indian drama in English continues to be seen as a threat to regional language drama. Consequently, the lack of patronage it faces in relation to vernacular language drama complicates the hegemonic power attributed to English. Yet if the charge of elitism persists, because of the international and middle-class audiences that Dattani's plays attract, then such a charge is worthy of investigation. It exposes other kinds of tensions operative in the world of theatre in India. Such tensions relate to funding and costs of production as vernacular theatre faces dwindling audiences and playwrights and actors searching for more financially sustainable careers are increasingly attracted to writing scripts and acting in TV soaps and films.<sup>12</sup> Under these circumstances, one can understand, even if one does not agree, where the response of those who reject Indian drama in English is coming from. However, in so doing, have the critics of Indian English drama given too much power to the "Englishness" of the drama and glossed over, in the process, this drama's possibilities of dealing with socially significant topics? While the critical dismissal of Indian drama in English reveals ongoing tensions regarding the unresolved language debates in the post-independence period, the attention to social issues in Dattani's drama reinforces the crucial function that his drama continues to perform on local, national, and international stages.

## Notes

1. I thank Mahesh Dattani for discussing the play in my graduate class and for numerous other discussions; Teresa Hubel for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of the essay; Chandrima Chakraborty and the anonymous reviewers for careful critical feedback. A version of this essay was presented at the 2013 American Society of Theatre Research Conference's working group on "Performance In/From the Global South." I thank Jisha Menon, Catherine Cole and Megan Lewis for the opportunity to present my ideas.

2. Gauri Vishwanathan suggests that in India, for Anglicism to be successful in the late nineteenth century, it was dependent upon Orientalism. Anglicists used the cultural knowledge produced by Orientalist scholars to justify the implementation of an Anglicized education. It is no surprise that even as Macaulay acknowledged that he did not know Arabic or Sanskrit, he confidently challenged the support for Oriental learning. While Macaulay's legacy continues, the success of English in India has also been facilitated through what is perceived as the hegemony of Hindi with respect to other languages.

3. In "English or Hinglish," Zareer Masani suggests that the "linguistic schizophrenia [faced by the first-time English learner] presents a huge commercial opportunity for hundreds of new language centres offering English to young, white-collar workers, who pay as much as half of their monthly salary for evening classes." Masani also suggests that "[t]he most vocal demands for English teaching now come from India's most disadvantaged communities" and that "English is now, more than ever, an essential passport to white-collar jobs." <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20500312>

4. Also see the BBC report by Craig Jeffrey regarding the creative use of English in Hindi.

5. Commenting on the relationship of the Hindiwallahs with English, Alok Rai writes: "For all the recent flurry of brave noises in the media and elsewhere about English being an Indian language, really—*which it is*—there is no getting away from the fact that it is also the language of privilege. . . . The fact of this obscene and absurd privilege, happening as it is in a desperately poor country, gives Hindi—English's 'other'—an unearned and undeserved moral advantage. Hindi becomes, by default, the language of the disinherited masses. The English elite, hobbled by its entirely well-deserved bad conscience, is not really in a position to challenge or even to scrutinize this moral advantage. The social privilege enjoyed by this elite becomes, in turn, a serious liability for the secular and modern value package espoused by them" (7).

6. Aparna Dharwadker brings "the generally paradoxical position of English in relation to modern Indian cultural forms" to attention in

*Theatres of Independence* (82). Dharwadker asserts that “[a]s the original language of fiction and poetry, it has been increasingly dominant since the 1960s and now commands an international readership; as the language of performance, it remains subordinate to such regional languages as Marathi, Bengali, and Kannada. Within drama, English has so far proved to be more important as the lingua franca for the translation of Indian-language plays than as the language of original composition” (82). Giving examples of post-independence playwrights, she observes: “The pattern for the last three decades . . . has been that a major play in a language other than English soon acquires a national, and sometimes an international, audience through translation, especially into English” (82).

7. This information is available in Kaustava Chakraborty’s *Indian Drama in English*, 3.

8. For a detailed discussion and an exhaustive list of plays and playwrights, see Khatri’s introduction in *Indian Drama in English*.

9. See, for example, Ruth Vanita, *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*.

10. Another form of censorship was manifested in the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival’s banning of Dattani’s *Final Solutions*, a play that takes up the theme of communalism through the story of two Muslim boys who seek protection in a Hindu household as they are chased by a mob. According to Ramaswamy, “In the wake of the communal riots following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which had taken place earlier that year, *Deccan Herald* considered it risky to permit the staging of the play” (35-36).

11. See Suresh Awasthi’s article, “In Defence of the ‘Theatre of Roots,’” for an early discussion of this concept.

12. See, for example, J.C. Mathur’s essay, “Encounter of the Performing Arts and Modern Mass Media” and Kirti Jain’s essay, “Drama on Television.”

#### Works Cited

- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger. A Novel*. New York: Free P, 2008. Print.
- Adhikari, Gautam. “Macaulay’s Children and the Rest.” *The Times of India*, 23 February 2013. 14. Print.
- Awasthi, Suresh. “In Defence of the ‘Theatre of Roots.’” *Modern Indian Theatre*. Ed. Nandi Bhatia. New Delhi: Oxford UP. 295-311. Print.
- Batra, Kanika. *Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama. Community, Kinship, and Citizenship*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

- de Barry, Brett. "Practicing and Theorizing Translation: Implications for the Humanities." *Profession 2010*. USA: Modern Languages Association of America. 44-49. Print.
- Chakraborty, Kaustav, ed. *Indian Drama in English*. Delhi: Asoke K. Ghosh, 2014. Print.
- Chakradhar, Ashok. "Hinglish ka Syapa" (Chaos of Hinglish). *Chakradhar Chaman Mein (Satire)*. Delhi: Rajpal and Sons, 2011. 67-69. Print.
- Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1996. Print.
- Dattani, Mahesh. "Seven Steps around the Fire." *Collected Plays: Volume Two*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. 227-282. Print.
- . "Dance Like a Man." *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. New Delhi: Manas, 1994. 103-194. Print.
- . Personal Conversations. September 2013.
- Dalmia, Vasudha. *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*. Iowa: U of Iowa P, 2005. Print.
- George, Miruna. "Constructing the Self and the Other: Seven Steps Around the Fire and Bravely Fought the Queen." *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Anjelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. 145-155. Print.
- Gikandi, Simon. "Provincializing English." *PMLA* 129.1 (2014): 7-17. Print.
- Gupta, Alok. "Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals." *Economic and Political Weekly*. November 18 (2006): 4815-4823. Print.
- Irani, Anosh. *The Bombay Plays: The Matka King and Bombay Black*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada P, 2007. Print.
- Jain, Kirti. "Drama on Television." *Modern Indian Theatre*. Ed. Nandi Bhatia. New Delhi: Oxford UP. 417-424. Print.
- Jeffrey, Craig. "English Explodes in India—and it's Not Just Hinglish." 30 June 2014. BBC Magazine. Web.
- Khaleeli, Homa. "Hijra: India's Third Gender Claims its Place in Law." *The Guardian*. 16 April 2014. Web. 27 October 2015.
- Khatrī, C.L., ed. *Indian Drama in English: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2007. Print.
- Lal, Vinay. "Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality." *Social Text* 61 (Winter 1999): 119-140. Web. 9 June 2015.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Minute on Education" (1935). Web. 9 June 2015.
- Mathur, J.C. "Encounter of the Performing Arts and Modern Mass Media." *Modern Indian Theatre*. Ed. Nandi Bhatia. New Delhi: Oxford UP. 406-416.
- Masani, Zareer. "English or Hinglish—Which Will India Choose?" Web. 29 October 2015.

- McRae, John. "We Live in the Flicker: Reflections in Time on the Plays of Mahesh Dattani." *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Anjelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. 53-66. Print.
- Mee, Erin B. "Mahesh Dattani: Invisible Issues." *Performing Arts Journal PAJ*. 55.19.1 (January 1997): 19-26.
- . *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2007. Print.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "The Anxiety of Englishness." *The Perishable Empire. Essays on Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000. 166-186. Print.
- . *The Twice Born Fiction: Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971. Print.
- Ramaswamy, Radha. "Towards a Multicultural Theatre: Mahesh Dattani and the Changing Audience for Contemporary Indian Drama in English." *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Anjelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. 35-52. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 271-313. Print.
- Solomon, Rakesh. "Towards a Genealogy of Indian Theatre Historiography." *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*. Ed. Nandi Bhatia. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009. 3-30. Print.
- Rai, Alok. *Hindi Nationalism*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. Toronto: Random House, 1997. Print.
- Vanita, Ruth. *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Vishwanathan, Gauri. "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India." *Oxford Literary Review*. 9.1-2 (1987): 2-26. Print.
- Taseer, Aatish. "How English Ruined Indian Literature." *The New York Times*, March 19, 2015. Web. 8 April 2015.