



Generalising and Negotiating Queer Talk: The Selected Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is an Indian playwright and the most outstanding practitioner of art performing. He is the author who has successfully launched the Indian theatre. In this paper various issues like homosexuality, gender discrimination and commensalism will be of the main focus. There will be an attempt to understand the Indian gay and lesbian problem and how homosexuals have been marginalized in the society.

Key Words: - Queer Theory, Gay/Lesbian, Homosexual, Marginalization, Discrimination, Sensibilities.

Introduction

Queer theory is the academic discourse that has largely replaced what used to be called gay/lesbian studies. The term was coined by Teresa De Lauretis for working conference on theorizing gay and lesbian sexualities that has held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in February 1990. Queer theory is largely based on the works of Michel Foucault, the French Philosopher. Besides Foucault, the works of Derrida, Lacan and Freud have contributed as important theoretical references. In the beginning of nineteenth century, sexuality gradually assumed a new status as an object of scientific and popular knowledge. The last two hundred years or so have seen what the critic and historian Michel Foucault once described as a 'discursive explosion' (Foucault 1998:38) around the question of sex, by which he did not simply mean that it came to be talked about more widely or more often, easing the grip of repressive conventions of taboos. Heavily influenced by the works of Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies.

Close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Sexuality is much more than a facet of human nature, the platform of leisure become a principle of explanation, whose effects can be discerned, in different ways, in virtually any stage and predicament of human life, shaping our capacity to act and setting the limits to what we can think and do (Clover & Kaplan 2007:12). Thus, the growing willingness to put sex into question, even to search for the truth about sexual behavior, gradually opened up new ways in which the entire field of sexual possibilities and sexual identities could be imagined, permanently transforming people's most intimate sense of their sexual selves.

Whereas gay/lesbian studies focused its enquiries into natural and unnatural behavior with respect to homosexual behavior, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories. Through the context of heterosexuality being the origin and foundation of society's heteronormative stability, the concept of queerness focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Queerness has been associated most prominently with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytical framework also includes such topics as cross dressing, intersex bodies and identities, gender ambiguity and gender confirmation surgery. Queer theory holds that individual sexuality is a fluid, fragmented, and dynamic collectively of possible sexualities and it may vary at different point during one's life.

Queer theory also examines the discourse of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place the "queer" into the historical context deconstructing contemporary arguments both for and against the latest terminology. This study attempted at studying concerns of sexual instincts with special emphasis on questioning homosexuality and giving gay/lesbians their identity in the works of Mahesh Dattani.

About the author

Mahesh Dattani is an Indian director, actor, playwright and writer. He is the first play wright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award. His plays have been directed by eminent directors like Arvind Gaur, Alyque Padamsee and Lillete Dubey. His acclaimed

works include *Final Solutions.*, *Dance Like a Man.*, *Bravely Fought the Queen.*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai.*, *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September*, *The Big Fat Cat*(2012).

Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore to Gujarati parents. He went to Baldwin Boys High School and then went on to join St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. Dattani is a graduate in history, Economics and Political Science. He completed his post-graduate in Marketing and Advertising Management because he wanted to become a copywriter. He worked with Bangalore Little Theatre, where his first role was in Utpal Dutt's *Surya Shikhar*.

After reading Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Early in his life, he became interested in writing.

He was also influenced by Gujarati playwright Madhu Rye's *kumarni Agashi* and developed an interest in play writing.

He began his career as a copywriter in an advertising firm. In 1986, he wrote his first full length play, *Where There's a Will* and since 1995, he has been working as a full-time theatre professional. He has also worked with his father in the family business.

Dattani is also a film director. His debut film *Mango Souffle*, adapted from one of his plays. He also wrote and directed a movie *Morning Raaga*.

Dance Like a Man has won the award for Best Picture in English awarded by National Panorama in 1998.

He mainly deals with the topics which are rarely being discussed in the society. His works become sometimes arguable and debatable. Dattani enhances the methods for making a genuine world in front of an audience with a total depiction of the texture of Indian culture which deliberately and unwittingly separated based on sexual orientation. The best part of Dattani's play is that they speak to the contemporary society, for the most part of urban culture. Here Dattani can be compared with Shaw who likewise spoke to his general public in his plays. Dattani gives a stage to various issues, with a goal that the individual know about the way they are a reality and not simply the dream of a writer. He handles each issue from sex to sexuality.

Dattani denounces the untrustworthiness and craftiness in relationship. He does not scrutinize homosexuality as sexuality in distinguished as one method for understanding one's sexual wants and type of its acknowledgment, oneself endures and influences the general public.

While composing his plays he investigates both the manly and the female self inside him. The main concern in the works of Dattani remains associated with the social issues. The norm which has been set in society, about which one doesn't even to talk, has been highlighted in the various plays of Dattani.

Aims and Objectives

The main objective of this study is to highlight the issues related to homosexuality which has is a most unwanted project in the society. By keeping in view the themes of Mahesh Dattani plays being related to gay/lesbian, one can easily understand the position and what views one kept in their mind towards this homosexual class. If I talk about this homosexuality in India and other countries, there will be a great difference between the thinking of people residing here and out of our country. Though various orders have been passed which talk about legalisation of homosexual behaviour in the society so that it could become a norm of the society, but still there remain issues in the mind of normal people about this class.

The Politics of Heteronormative Gendering: *Tara*

Androgyny as the ultimate and archetypal creative force is testified in mythology. It is the undiscovered and ignored consciousness lurking deep with human psyche; a collective sense of oneness of masculine and the feminine leading to the creation itself. Way apart from hermaphroditism and bisexuality, androgyny is dealt with in this chapter as a spiritual state, which resides in a unification of the masculine and feminine aspect in the self. It is also different from the condition of the effect male, with whom androgyny is often confused. Androgynous men never tend to be extremely virile, and androgynous women never tend to be extremely dependent. Traditionally polarisation of male and female arose out of a social necessity, encouraging the development of so-called masculine and feminine characteristics in male and female respectively. An androgynous mind transcends these polarities by virtue of its being an all-pervasive comprehensive force, an inner potency, a liberal consciousness of belonging to the vast cosmic order. Taoism says:

He who knows the male, yet cleaves to what is female

Becomes like a ravine, receiving all things under heaven... (Walter 178)

In the fact of unification of the masculine and feminine in the psyche at the expense of gender stereotypes has often been seen a conducive to the development of creative mind. What Coleridge hailed as the androgynous "great mind" (587) or what Woolf hailed as the "naturally creative, and undivided "mind (114) is nothing but the characteristics of the self which has harboured both the masculine and the feminine selves into the boundary. The androgynous mind is thus queer, as it challenges gendering of the self and assignment of performances exclusive to gender.

The reading of *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* on the basis of the heterosexual gendering of the androgynous soul can be made, taking idea from Dattani's own interpretation of *Tara*. The play is about how the patriarchal society sustains its domination through sexual politics, how the male is programmed to deny his androgynous status, how female creativity is suppressed and how, in spite of all these, Tara tries to "twinkle". The story itself, the dialogues and other theatrical elements bring to the force these "invisible issues" (19). Though the emphasis on Tara, the play can also be seen from Chandan's point of view. It is less about Tara than Chandan or the struggle of male and female selves to seek a union within one self. Chandan and Tara are conjoined twins. They need to be separated for survival.

Dattani sees *Tara* as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the female side of oneself during a world that favours always what's male. The standard being effeminate may be the reason for shame in India.

Embracing Homonormativity: On a *Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Lisa Duggan propounds her theory of homonormativity according to which gay men resort "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency, and a gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption"(SO). A homonormative gay sacrifices his gay identity to consume all markers of capitalist happiness (the same capitalism which produced the identity called the homosexual.

R. Raj Rao and Divya jyoti Sharma, two Indian Queer writers, also opine the same. In the introduction to their anthology, *whistling in the Dark: Twenty-One Queer Interviews*, Rai says:

Heterosexism is the fallacious belief that the prerequisite for sexual attraction is that the partners invariably be of opposite sexes, that is, male and female. However, heterosexism serve the interests of homoerotically inclined men in most Eastern cultures, including India, by allowing them to establish an albeit guarantees that a homosexual liaison arouses no suspicion in the minds of one's immediate kith and kin, and indeed, society at large, by making the association seem like friendship, or to use a more resonant word, *yaari*.

For gay men heterosexuality becomes a strategic tool in hiding their sexual orientation. Since they start to lead a double life which is full of distress to them. They try to hide their own identity about which Dattani tries to talk without any hesitation.

While the politics of invisible visible is Dattani's forte, his stage play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* makes use of invisibility as a strategic tool on the part of the gay character in the play. While primarily this play visibilize and give some sort of voice and space to the silenced and closet gay, some of the gay characters, instead of coming out, make a hideout in the enemy den, i.e., heterosexuality. Thus the play does not only show the closet and silenced gay, they also make suggestion of a self-seining on the part of the gay characters.

Dattani in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* has very deftly put why gay men choose heteronormativity, touching on the areas of performativity.

Revolving around a host of gay men trapped in the anxiety of performance, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai(1998)* is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal, but also, as John McRae notes in ' *Note on the Play*', "a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to expectations society creates (CP 45). The play presents a set of gay man who are seen in different stages in the negotiation of their gay identity and the society assigned masculine performances. While Sharad is an out and out gay character comfortable with his gay identity, for Ranjit coming entails going out of the country as he finds India unsympathetic towards homosexuality; Kamlesh is an insecure gay man suffering the tortures not only of the heteronormative society but also of the break up with his gay partner Ed/Parkash who has recently decided to adopt heterosexual behaviour.

Hegemony of Marriage: Seven Steps Around the Fire

The very term "hijra" usually imply a castrated male, relegated the hijra community to a laughable as also an intimidating group of cross-dressed male gate-crashing and threatening the families in which male children have taken birth to extort money from wayfarers in public places, and if denied, exposing their distorted genitals to the shame everyone. "Hijra" is an umbrella term, a construction, a formula to include eunuchs or men who have emasculated themselves, men and women with genital malfunction hermaphrodites, persons with indeterminate sex organs, cross-dressed impotent men, gays and even effeminate men, who cannot be assimilated into the mainstream heteronormative masculinity. Hijras are omnipresent in the mythology and history of India. In fact, the hijras do also represent an institution, a community based on strict religious and societal practices.

In the heteronormatively programmed society, "he" and "she" are the only valid identities, with all other sexually deviant subjects relegated to an identity-less status. That is why the play introduces the "it- she" dialectic in the beginning to run throughout the play.

In the play, Lima acts as Dattani's spokesperson with her sympathetic and analytical approach towards the hijras. Her voice-over in the play takes note of how "Perceived as the lowest of low, the hijras yearn for family and love.

Dattani not only shows how society criminalizes the hijras but also presents their human and organised social structure based on simple interpersonal relations. He uses myths to denote how the hijras had the identity of devoted friends enjoying homosocial bonds with great heroes like Rama.

Seven Steps around the Fire thus endeavours to include the hijras into society, makes visible the politics of "othering" them.

Conclusion

Thus taking the crux from the remedial study of the plays of Dattani it is concluded that Queer theory not only talk about the "marriage" as desires event in the queers' lives to live of their own but also suggests their aspiration for equal rights with normative sexual identities. As I was reading in some newspaper that govt. Is also taking keen interest in the upcoming of this class by giving Noida Sector 50 Metro Station dedicated to transgender community. But to recognize their own identity they have to be self potential of the same. Every right has now been awarded to this class but that self imposition of identity has to be created by their own. A realist that Dattani is, his plays have been a grim evidence of the creation of discourse. Side by side it is also necessary to see what more developments have been taking place to the scenario involving the alternate sexualities not only in the urban India but also in India in general.

By taking such issues into the minds of audience, the societal psychological social taboo can be changed. That is what Dattani tries to inculcate through his plays.

The latest judgement of the Supreme Court on April, 2014, ensuring equal rights for Third Gender, is a step forward in the recognition which should be given to the people of alternate sexualities. The judgement rules that the state would ensure legal protection for the Third Gender,

would ensure their fundamental rights and that the Third Gender would enjoy reservation in education and jobs.

But still there are miles to go. The society should come forward to incorporate the so far marginalized people in building the national identity. To that end not only the marriage and family law should be re-examined and reformulated, the State should make it a policy to expose the country's queer past which has so far been presented with a heteronormative form.

Dattani's effort has been to bring back this lost glory of the country's queer population by pitting them against the present scenario and to sensitize his audience regarding their aspirations, struggles and negotiations. His efforts have been to bring margin to the centre, give back the dishonored dissident the honor due to them.

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