

Voicing the Invisible: Representation of the Third Gender and Homosexual Identity in Mahesh Dattani's Plays

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Indian English drama whose plays challenge social prejudices and bring marginalised communities to the forefront of public discourse. This paper analyses *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* through the lens of queer theory, particularly drawing upon Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Dattani portrays the struggles, discrimination, and emotional trauma experienced by transgender and homosexual individuals in a society governed by heteronormative values. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the tragic story of Kamala and Anarkali exposes the violence and injustice faced by the transgender community, while *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* depicts the psychological conflicts and social pressures experienced by homosexual individuals who are compelled to conceal their identities. Through these plays, Dattani transforms theatre into a powerful medium of social intervention and advocacy. Through his plays, Dattani gives voice to those who remain invisible within mainstream narratives, and contributes to the discourse on gender diversity and social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, queer theory, transgender identity, homosexuality, Indian drama, gender performativity, marginalisation, LGBTQ+ representation

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian English drama witnessed a significant transformation in the late twentieth century with the emergence of playwrights who began addressing social issues that had long remained neglected within mainstream literary discourse. Among these dramatists, Mahesh Dattani occupies a unique position for his willingness to engage with controversial themes such as gender discrimination, sexuality, domestic violence, and marginalisation. His plays challenge traditional social norms and encourage audiences to confront realities that are often ignored. Through his plays, Dattani questions the rigid structures of Indian society and explores the struggles of those who are denied recognition and acceptance because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

The social position of transgender and homosexual individuals in India has historically been characterised by exclusion and discrimination. Although the transgender community has existed within Indian society for centuries, its members have frequently been denied social acceptance, educational opportunities, and legal recognition. Similarly, homosexual identities have long been stigmatised due to cultural and religious conservatism. Dattani's plays serve the role of creating spaces where peripheral voices can be heard. He presents a realistic portrayal of individuals whose experiences are often erased from public discourse.

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by queer theory, particularly the work of Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not a fixed biological reality but a performative construct shaped by social and cultural practices. Her theory challenges binary understandings of gender and provides a useful framework for examining identities that exist outside conventional categories. Michel Foucault's discussions of power and sexuality are also relevant, as they demonstrate how social institutions regulate and control expressions of sexual identity. These theoretical perspectives enable a deeper understanding of the oppression experienced by the characters in Dattani's plays.

Several scholars have explored Dattani's contribution to Indian drama. Amar Nath Prasad observes that Dattani's plays combine social commitment with artistic innovation, allowing him to address sensitive issues while maintaining dramatic effectiveness. Tanu Pant argues that Dattani's significance lies in his ability to represent borderline voices and challenge social hypocrisy. Studies on *Seven Steps Around the Fire* have highlighted its portrayal of transgender exclusion, particularly the violence and injustice faced by the hijra community. Critics have noted how the play exposes institutional discrimination through the complicity of political and legal authorities. Similarly, scholarly discussions of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* have focused on its representation of homosexuality in Indian theatre. The play is often regarded as one of the first Indian English dramas to openly address same-sex relationships and the psychological consequences of social stigma.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Dattani's works, much of the existing research tends to examine transgender and homosexual representation separately. Comparatively fewer studies analyse *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* together as complementary explorations of queer identity and marginalisation. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining how both plays expose different forms of oppression while simultaneously advocating acceptance and equality. Through a comparative analysis, the paper demonstrates how Dattani employs theatre as a platform for social criticism and transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive research methodology based on textual analysis. The primary texts selected for examination are Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. These plays have been chosen because they explicitly address issues related to transgender and homosexual identities and provide significant insight into the experiences of ostracised communities in contemporary Indian society. The paper also discusses how Dattani represents these identities and how his dramatic techniques contribute to broader discussions concerning gender, sexuality, and social justice.

The analysis is primarily informed by queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Butler's theory provides an effective framework for understanding the instability of gender categories and the ways in which social norms regulate identity formation. The study also incorporates insights from Michel Foucault's discussions of power, sexuality, and social control. These theoretical perspectives facilitate an examination of how institutions, cultural expectations, and dominant ideologies contribute to the marginalisation of transgender and homosexual individuals.

A close reading of the selected plays was conducted to identify recurring themes, character relationships, dramatic conflicts, and symbolic elements associated with gender identity and sexual orientation. Particular attention was given to representations of exclusion, violence, invisibility, resistance, and acceptance. The study also examines dialogues, stage directions, and narrative structures to understand how Dattani constructs alternative spaces for marginalised voices within the dramatic framework.

Secondary sources, including books, journal articles, critical essays, and scholarly studies on Mahesh Dattani and queer theory, were consulted to support the analysis. The methodology remains interpretive rather than quantitative, focusing on thematic understanding rather than statistical measurement. Through comparative textual analysis, the study aims to demonstrate the significance of Dattani's plays in challenging heteronormative assumptions and promoting greater awareness of gender diversity within Indian society.

DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that both *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* function as critiques of social structures that marginalise individuals based on gender identity and sexual orientation. Although the plays focus on different communities, they share a common concern with the invisibility, exclusion, and suffering experienced by those who exist outside socially sanctioned norms.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani exposes the harsh realities faced by the transgender community. The murder of Kamala serves as a symbol of the violence inflicted upon individuals who challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality. Her relationship with Subbu Sharma threatens established social hierarchies,

leading to her tragic death. The investigation undertaken by Uma reveals a network of corruption and silence that protects powerful individuals while denying justice to marginalised victims. Through the characters of Kamala, Anarkali, and Champa, Dattani demonstrates how transgender individuals are systematically deprived of dignity, security, and equal treatment. The placement of Anarkali in a male prison further highlights institutional discrimination and the vulnerability of transgender persons within legal structures.

The character of Uma functions as an intermediary between mainstream society and the transgender community. Her determination to uncover the truth reflects Dattani's own commitment to giving voice to those who remain unheard. Nevertheless, the play ends without complete justice being achieved, emphasising the persistence of social inequalities. The inability to punish the true perpetrators illustrates the extent to which power and privilege determine the functioning of social institutions.

In contrast, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* focuses primarily on the psychological consequences of homosexual marginalisation. The characters are not subjected to overt physical violence; instead, they experience emotional suffering caused by social expectations and internalised fear. Kamlesh and Ed struggle with their identities in a society that refuses to acknowledge same-sex relationships. Their reluctance to reveal their sexuality demonstrates how social stigma compels individuals to conceal their true selves. Silence becomes a survival mechanism, yet it also produces feelings of isolation and alienation.

In the introduction to the play "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai," John McRae remarks:

And the themes of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deserve to touch the whole society and to be touched by it. It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle the gay theme of love, partnership, trust, and betrayal. It is the play about how society creates the patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations of society. (7)

The relationship between Kamlesh and Deepali illustrates the complexity of alternative sexual identities. Their conversation regarding love and marriage exposes the limitations imposed by heteronormative society. Although they share emotional intimacy, societal expectations prevent them from achieving conventional forms of fulfilment. Dattani uses such interactions to challenge normality assumptions and to question the social construction of acceptable relationships.

A comparative reading of the two plays reveals important similarities. Both transgender and homosexual characters are portrayed as individuals seeking recognition, acceptance, and dignity. Both communities' experience exclusion because they fail to conform to dominant social expectations. However, the forms of oppression differ. While *Seven Steps Around the Fire* highlights physical violence, institutional discrimination, and political oppression, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* emphasises emotional conflict, secrecy, and psychological suffering. Together, the plays present a comprehensive critique of heteronormative structures and demonstrate the urgent need for social transformation.

Dattani's contribution lies not merely in representing marginalised identities but in humanising them. His characters are depicted as complex individuals with desires, fears, and aspirations similar to those of any other human being. By encouraging audiences to empathise with these characters, Dattani contests prejudice and promotes a more inclusive understanding of society. The plays ultimately function as acts of resistance against systems of exclusion and as calls for greater social awareness and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that Mahesh Dattani's dramatic works occupy a significant place in contemporary Indian literature due to their engagement with issues of gender identity and sexual marginalisation. Through *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani foregrounds communities that have historically been silenced and excluded from mainstream social discourse. His plays reveal how discrimination operates through cultural norms, political institutions, and social expectations, creating conditions that deny transgender and homosexual individuals' equal recognition and dignity.

The analysis highlights the relevance of queer theoretical perspectives in understanding Dattani's representation of identity. The struggles of Kamala, Anarkali, Kamlesh, and Ed demonstrate that gender and sexuality are not merely personal matters but social realities shaped by power structures and cultural ideologies. Dattani challenges these structures by presenting marginalised individuals as fully human subjects deserving of respect and acceptance.

Furthermore, the plays illustrate the emotional and psychological consequences of exclusion. Whether through physical violence or social silence, marginalised individuals suffer because society refuses to accommodate identities that differ from established norms. Dattani's theatre therefore becomes an instrument of social critique, exposing injustice while simultaneously advocating empathy and reform.

Mahesh Dattani, in his plays, makes use of bold words, which are not used publicly in a traditional Indian society. One doesn't have to look for gay connotations between the lines. Dattani's characters speak openly regarding their sexual desires and experiences without any hesitation. There are quick exchanges between the characters, and sometimes long monologues are used wherever and whenever necessary. Dattani allows the characters to blend their Hindi words with English, which indeed makes their performance real and appealing.

Dattani has portrayed the psyche of the characters so that the audience can feel the turmoil that they are going through. In this play, Dattani examines the psychology of people who are homosexuals by nature but tend to turn themselves to heterosexuals under societal pressures. Dattani has recreated the characters in their own situations in the play "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai". Dattani hinted at the need for same-sex marriage in the Indian context.

Dattani's plays don't view the world through rose-tinted glasses. They seek to realize the fact that there are flaws and try to improve them. Mahesh Dattani shows how people are dominated based on sexuality. According to him, all are creations of God, so equal freedom must be given to every individual, no matter whether they are women, gay, transgender, downtrodden, etc., and what they need is recognition, acceptance, comfort, encouragement, and due respect and status from society. Those people who consider themselves to be superior to others try to dominate women, transgender people, and gay people through oppression. The third gender and homosexuals should be given humane treatment by providing them with justice and equality. They just want moral strength, spiritual solace, human understanding, and social status to get rid of the psychological pressures of injustice being done to them. Dattani's plays have indeed helped in the upliftment of the marginalized section of society, that is, homosexuals and transgender people.

The enduring relevance of these plays lies in their capacity to stimulate dialogue about equality, diversity, and human rights. As discussions concerning LGBTQ+ rights continue to evolve in India and across the world, Dattani's works remain valuable interventions that encourage audiences to reconsider assumptions about gender and sexuality. Ultimately, his plays advocate a vision of society grounded in acceptance, recognition, and shared humanity, thereby contributing significantly to the ongoing struggle for social justice and inclusivity.

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