

Construction of 'Homo' Space in Dattani's Select Plays

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Courtesy: [www.facebook.com/Mahesh](https://www.facebook.com/MaheshDattani) Dattani

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a renowned contemporary Indian playwright, director and actor. He writes plays and directs a few them. He has received numerous awards including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi in 1998 for his collection of plays entitled *Final Solution and Other Plays*. He is often considered to be a controversial playwright. He illuminates the dark aspects of society and turns them into a debatable issue in the Indian literary arena. This paper entitled "Construction of 'Homo' space in Dattani's plays" is an attempt to critically evaluate the pathetic picture of homosexuals in the heteronormative society as portrayed by Dattani. The ambivalent state of the homosexuals mind is the central theme of this paper. Homosexuals are having an internal conflict with themselves and with the heteronormative society. This paper attempts to provide new insights into the incongruity between homosexuality and the heteronormative values of the society. The plays that are selected study are *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Do the Needful* (1997) and *Night Queen* (1999).

Key words: Indian Drama, Mahesh Dattani, Gay, Heteronormative behaviour, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Do the Needful*, *Night Queen*.

Indian academicians have not given LGBT studies the reception that they gave to other emerging disciplines. It is obvious that till date LGBT related studies are not encouraged in Indian literary and academic arena. Indians still hesitates to introduce sex studies in schools and colleges. In contrast to that, Dattani, as a dramatist introduces issues related to sex, sexuality and sexual abuse in his plays. He presents the marginalisation of LGBTs in the society. People discriminate them by branding that they bring the negative impact to the society. The claim of heterosexuals is that homosexual relationship with others is against nature and social order.

Dattani on the other hand, he is the only dramatist who first shed light on these dark faces of the society. His plays provide a jumping board for intellectual debates. In an interview with Erin. B. Mee, Dattani points out that Indians are embarrassed to talk about homosexuality to their spouses or to their children. Dattani has uncovered the invisible issues of the society. He says:

I would say the only time a homosexual character has been treated with sympathy. There have been caricatures. If we look at the statistics of a gay population in any given society, even if you look at it as a conservative five per cent (people put it at ten, but even if you take five per cent), with a population of 850 million we're talking about almost 50 million people, and I think it's a real invisible issue. Almost all gay people are married in the conventional sense, so I think there are invisible issues which need to be brought out and addressed. In this case, it wasn't such a conscious attempt to say "look, here is an invisible issue, let's talk about it," I think it's there, and since it is very much a part of our society, very much a part of my society, it happens to be there. (Mee, 20)

On A Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998) is the first Indian English play that deals homosexual issues in India. The stage play was performed in Tata theatre in 1998 and the screenplay was released in 2002. Homosexuals in India are forced to hide their sexual orientation and co-exist with the society as normal or straight men. They have separate space or club to exhibit their sexual preferences. Dattani in his plays tries to contrast the private space of homos with the heteronormative space (society).

Some of his gay characters want to exist in both spheres. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Bunny and Ed/Prakash want to exist in both spheres. Ashwin in *Night Queen*, (1999) Nitin in *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) and Alpesh in *Do the Needful* (1997) share the same fate. They fear to lose their heterosexual identity. They want to get the privilege of heterosexual lifestyle at the same time practising their gay identity in private. Dattani presents different types of homosexuals in his plays. Some of them feel being a homo is ugly and sinful. Ed/Prakash in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and Aswin in *Night Queen* are having the guilt of being gay and want to lead a normal heterosexual lifestyle. While Kamlesh begs for love to Ed, Ed replies by tearing the private photography of them and says "Filth! Rubbish!" (I 93) and further, he insists "I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest." (I 92)

Ed believes that gays have no future as they have to live their entire life in angst and disguise. The pathetic condition of homosexuals gives him a horrified nightmare, so he wants to bust the bubble and step out of the shell. Ed says, "Let's not get too emotional. Think of yourself. There is no real future". (I 92) He takes psychiatry medication to get rid of his present self and he believes his love for Kamlesh is the work of the devil. Whereas Benny smoothly sails between these two spaces. He is a famous TV actor and has a wife and children. He argues with his gay friends that there is nothing wrong in camouflaging a homosexual relationship. He enjoys private parties with gay friends on one side and adheres to heteronormative behaviour on the other side. He is comfortable within the closest.

Ashwin in *Night Queen* hesitates to accept that he is gay though he accepts to have a one-night stand with Raghu whom he had previously met in a park. Ashwin is the victim of incest and was abused by his own brother. The same brother took him to a park and shows the pathetic conditions of gays and in his brother's point of view gays are ugly and worse than lepers. Ashwin does not want to present himself as like the ugliest leper to his brother. Ashwin confesses,

... he took me out. To the park. He showed me those guys, looking around. Waiting for a sexual partner. A stranger. He told me how unhappy and miserable they were. They look unhappy and miserable to me. And ugly. (*Night Queen* 73)

While he fails to control his emotions with Raghu, he blames God for not helping him to save from the ditch. Nitin hides his homosexual relationship with his wife's brother Praful from the entire family in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Even his brother and partner in business Jetin do not know about his gay life. Nitin hides not to enjoy the social privileges, but he is in a locked-in homosexual relationship with Praful. Praful is the master manipulator and abuser in the play. He does not hesitate to use physical violence against his sisters to make them toe his line. He convinces Nitin to marry Alka to continue their homosexual relationship. Nitin nervously confesses the real nature of Praful to the drunken Alka that, "He is... was attractive. And he responded. Oh! But how ashamed he made me feel after! He made me cry each time! That was a game he played. And I-I was caught in it ..." (I 314) Praful once waits for Nitin in the outhouse of Nitin. It is said:

I mustn't keep him waiting... (He moves towards the kitchen.) the office is not a good idea.... Too many people passing by.... but here—the outhouse. Perfect. Yes. Don't wake up. Stay drunk. You mustn't watch ... those powerful arms.... (Exits to the Kitchen.) (I 315)

Alpesh in *Do the Needful* is the only gay that Dattani treats him with sympathy. His social status forces him to hide his sexual orientation. Alpesh's parents compel him to lead a heteronormative life. So he agrees to visit Lata's house. Both of them are true to each other and they come to know about each other's flaws. They agree to marry and lead a life of their own. That marriage brings happiness to both parents and the newly wedded couple.

Dattani in these plays presenting the reality of homosexual life in India. Gays in these plays try hard to resist homosexual orientation. The more they resist the deep they delve into it. They cannot resist themselves from their innate nature. Even God, psychiatry, medicine and sense of ugliness cannot prevent them from being a gay. Dattani supports this as a normal and natural phenomenon and thinks that, this should be understood by the gays and the society. Dattani counters the heteronormative society by asking:

But you never ask him to change. Why didn't you beat him when you saw him masturbating? Why didn't you beat him up when you saw him with his girlfriend? Why didn't you tell him that unless he slept with a man, he is ugly as a leper? Why didn't he go down on his knees and plead with you to help him? (*Night Queen* 75)

Characters like Kamlesh and Sharad are bold enough to proclaim their orientation. In fact, they help the dual roles to find the right orientation. Dattani stands for the rights of homosexuals. He encourages the homosexuals to come out of their den to reveal their sexual orientation to the society. At the same time, by staging these taboo themes to the public, he expects a positive response and proper understanding of the homosexuals by the audience.

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