



"Queering the Stages: Unraveling the Representation of LGBT Identities in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani"

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper, titled "Queering the Stages: Unraveling the Representation of LGBT Identities in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani," aims to critically analyze the portrayal of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) identities in the theatrical works of Mahesh Dattani, a renowned Indian playwright. The study delves into the intersection of gender, sexuality, and social constructs as reflected in Dattani's plays, exploring how he challenges traditional norms and provides a platform for marginalized voices. Through a comprehensive examination of select plays, including "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" and "Dance Like a Man," this paper examines Dattani's depiction of diverse LGBT characters and their struggles within a predominantly heteronormative society. The research investigates the ways in which Dattani explores themes of self-acceptance, societal pressures, discrimination, and the search for identity within the LGBT community. Drawing upon queer theory and performance studies, this research paper employs a qualitative analysis of Dattani's plays, highlighting instances of subversion, resistance, and empowerment within the LGBT narratives. It explores how Dattani's characters negotiate their sexual and gender identities, while simultaneously navigating complex familial, societal, and cultural dynamics. Furthermore, this study analyzes the impact of Dattani's plays in fostering awareness, empathy, and social change surrounding LGBT issues within the Indian context. It investigates the reception of these plays by audiences and the broader implications for the representation of LGBT identities in Indian theater. The findings of this research contribute to the existing body of knowledge on LGBT representation in literature and theater, specifically within the context of Indian dramatic works. By unraveling the complexities of LGBT identities as depicted in Dattani's plays, this study aims to promote a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender and sexuality in the realm of Indian performing arts.

Key Words: homophobic, marginalized, turmoil, predicament, empathy, sensibility.

PAPER:

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of LGBT representation in various forms of media, including literature and theatre. The representation of diverse sexual and gender identities not only reflects the lived experiences of individuals within these communities but also contributes to social progress, inclusivity, and acceptance.

Mahesh Dattani, a prominent Indian playwright, has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary Indian theater. Known for his thought-provoking and socially relevant works, Dattani has tackled a wide range of themes, including those related to identity, societal norms, and interpersonal relationships. Importantly, Dattani's plays have also explored the experiences of LGBT individuals, shedding light on their struggles, triumphs, and complexities.

The significance of examining LGBT representation in the plays of Mahesh Dattani lies in the exploration of marginalized voices within the Indian context. India, like many other societies, has a complex relationship with homosexuality and non-normative gender identities. Traditional social and cultural norms often perpetuate discrimination and stigmatization against LGBT individuals, leading to a lack of representation and recognition.

By analyzing Dattani's plays, we can gain insights into the ways in which he challenges these norms, disrupts stereotypes, and humanizes LGBT characters. Dattani's works provide a platform for narratives that are often silenced or ignored, allowing audiences to engage with the experiences of individuals who navigate the complexities of their sexual and gender identities within a predominantly heteronormative society.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the playwrights who exemplify this tendency of exploring frankly the hitherto tabooed issues. It appears that he is drawn to probe deep into the life and experiences of queers in Indian society, revealing their desires and fears, tensions and conflicts, struggles and tribulations from inside out. His plays depict the plight of the gay people living in a homophobic environment which forces them to live a spurious life and conceal their sexuality for fear of hostile reactions and consequences. He provides insight into a rule-based society where people have been brought up with the feeling that homosexuality is wrong, thereby causing in the transgender strong feelings of shame and self-loathing leading to low self-esteem. Furthermore, his plays show that suppressing one's sexuality involves denial of an important part of one's identity and that it can have serious impact on one's life and relationships. Dattani's plays aim at

tearing the veneer of such filthy realities and expose the gruesome truth which lies concealed in a hypocritical Indian society. Sangeeta Das remarks: "...Mahesh Dattani makes himself conspicuous by picking up such sensational issues of the society which we know and read now and then but refuse to acknowledge their existence amidst us."¹ His plays become the outcry of the queers, sexual minorities such as gays and hijras, the marginalized members of society, the excluded and subalterns, who in their futile efforts to be connected with society are reduced to pathetic creatures with their guilt-ridden, tortured psyche and opposing socio-ethical background.

In "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai," Mahesh Dattani presents LGBT representation through the exploration of a gay character and his experiences within the context of Indian society. The play delves into the challenges faced by individuals who identify as gay in a society where homosexuality is often stigmatized and marginalized.

The play can be studied and examined in the light of these lines while focusing mainly on the theme of relationship among queers. In this play, we meet a group of gays belonging to the urban society who assemble in the flat of Kamlesh, a fashion designer, who throws a party to them to announce the engagement of his dear sister, Kiran. They freely discuss the problems here and while they talk, their pains, turmoil and travails are unfolded. The atmosphere inside the flat and outside is muggy and full of suffocation. The noise outside, the music and the din indicate lack of peace symbolic of their inner turmoil. The gays are forced to meet in darkness of a closed area. They are unable to cope with their situation in open society where they are a butt of laughter and ridicule.

The play opens with a scene showing Kamlesh having sex with the middle-aged guard whom he pays for it. This behaviour may shock the traditional sensibility but in the modern context, the situation of Kamlesh needs to be explored more liberally and sympathetically. Dattani, in this play, has tried to force the audience to give their thinking a new approach.

The central character, Kamlesh, struggles with his sexual orientation and the conflicts it creates within his personal life. He grapples with the fear of societal judgment and the pressure to conform to societal expectations of heterosexuality. Dattani portrays Kamlesh's journey towards self-acceptance and the pursuit of personal happiness, emphasizing the importance of embracing one's true identity despite social obstacles.

Through Kamlesh's character, Dattani highlights the complexities of navigating relationships and intimacy as a gay individual in a society that often imposes heteronormative

norms. The play also addresses the themes of secrecy, denial, and the toll they take on an individual's mental and emotional well-being.

Moreover, "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" challenges stereotypes surrounding homosexuality and presents a nuanced portrayal of a gay character who defies simplistic categorizations. Dattani humanizes Kamlesh, allowing the audience to empathize with his struggles, hopes, and desires.

The play emerges as an outcry of these people who are suffering for something which is innate to their nature and therefore to resist or change their sexual orientation is not in their control. It underlines the necessity of trying to understand sympathetically the predicament of the class of the queers. In the play, there is "...a passionately spun but essentially sane and rational argument that no human being should suffer from inhuman social attitudes, just because the nature of his sexuality is different from that of the majority of mankind."²

The play encourages dialogue and reflection on societal attitudes towards homosexuality, urging audiences to question preconceived notions and prejudices. Dattani's portrayal of LGBT representation in "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding LGBT rights, acceptance, and the need for a more inclusive society.

By giving voice to the experiences of LGBT individuals, Dattani's play sheds light on the importance of embracing diversity, understanding different sexual orientations, and fostering empathy towards marginalized communities. "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" serves as a significant contribution to the representation of LGBT identities in Indian theater, challenging social norms and promoting dialogue on issues of sexuality and self-acceptance.

Another play by Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, also depicts the plight and woes of a homosexual, Nitin Trivedi. But unlike the bunch of gays in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, who live a closeted life, he has been placed in a joint family. Dattani has dealt with this theme of homosexuality in this play throwing a searching light on the socio-psychological causes which contribute to one's sexual preferences. Nitin's sexuality can be studied against the background of his past. He is a victim of abusive childhood, son of a violent father and a possessive mother. In this play also, we find that though Nitin maintains homosexual relations with Praful but remains bereft of any happiness. He is rather abused badly by his homosexual partner, Praful, who is his wife's brother. Asha Kuthari Choudhary's remarks are also pertinent in this context. She observes,

“Interestingly gay literature seems to have been beleaguered by unhappy endings. Homosexuality invariably moves towards death, isolation or a sham heterosexual marriage.”³

While *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* are the plays highly serious in tone, *Do the Needful* is a comic play where gay relationship has been dealt with differently. Many issues related to the relevance, validity and sanctity of the institution of marriage have been raised in the modern context.

The denouement of the play is startling, giving certain messages about marriage and adjustments in marital life. The ingenuity of Lata and Alpesh is both amusing and astonishing to the reader. It shocks the traditional sensibility which holds marriages in great esteem. The play shows that after getting married, Alpesh goes to his gay partner, Trilok, and Lata, the wife, goes to her lover, Salim.

Thus, the study of relationships between/among the homosexuals reveals that they do not feel like liberated men and are forced to live a life of sham within the norms of heterosexual society. They feel, realize and express the desire to lead a normal life like others but are compelled to hide their reality and lead a secluded life in their claustrophobic spaces. They seem to be making an appeal to society to embrace the diversity of different sexualities in the changing scenario: “Humans originally put a taboo on homosexuality because they needed every bit of energy to produce and raise children – survival of the species was a priority. With over population and technological change, that taboo is absurd and continues only to exploit us and enslave us.”⁴

"Through these plays, Dattani portrays LGBT characters as multi-dimensional individuals, striving to find their place in a society that often marginalizes or overlooks their identities. His works challenge prevailing stereotypes and engage audiences in a deeper understanding of the complexities and humanity of LGBT individuals.

Dattani's exploration of LGBT representation in Indian theater contributes to the broader discourse on inclusivity and social change. By giving voice to these marginalized identities, he promotes empathy, awareness, and acceptance, paving the way for greater visibility and understanding of the LGBT community within Indian society.

Notes

¹Sangeeta Das, “The Sensational Issues in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani,” *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*, ed. R.K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant (New Delhi: Prestige Publications, 2005), p.11.

²Pranav Joshipura, *A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani’s Plays* (New Delhi: Sarup Books Pvt Ltd, 2009), p.23.

³Asha Kuthari Chaudhari, *Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Mahesh Dattani* (New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2005), p.50.

⁴Carl Wittman, “Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto,” *The Homosexual Dialectic*, ed. Joseph A. Mc Caffrey (New York: Prentice Hall, 1972), p.158.