

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

Susan Lobo

Associate Professor

The researcher's reading on contemporary theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality enabled a more sensitive awareness about how these issues have been defined and delineated by modern scholars, both Indian as well as western, and helped achieve greater clarity about these issues from local and global perspectives. It was found that gender and sexuality have been long debated by scholars from the discipline of literature as much as from the fields of medicine and psychology, and that our perspectives on gender and sexuality have consequently changed over time such that today, not least in the field of literary theory, there is a general consensus that they are cultural constructs which are fluid in nature, not fixed, stable entities that can be perceived in the same way by people all over the world for all time.

Readings related to Indian drama revealed that India has had a rich tradition of theatre of many different kinds. Dramatic forms such as classical dance dramas (like kathakali), folk performances (like chhau), enactments of the ramlila, and street theatre are often viewed outside the restrictive boundaries of the stage, in a variety of spaces from private ones like drawing rooms and government offices to public spheres such as temples and marketplaces. Hence, we cannot really speak of something called a 'national drama' or 'Indian theatre' since the sheer diversity of dramatic traditions in the various languages and geographical regions of this country defies that attempt. While contemporary Indian playwrights have been influenced by western theatre, they have also deviated from classical and European models to give us theatre that is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. Modern Indian drama has succeeded in laying the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of world drama by reinvestigating history, legend myth, religion and folk-lore, and we owe the evolution of a rich theatrical tradition to playwrights like Mohan Rakesh,, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad (Agrawal 10). Local traditions have been kept alive by our playwrights, who have often adapted ancient forms to suit more contemporary themes in order to make theatre more meaningful to modern audiences.

However, when it comes to Indian drama in English, Mahesh Dattani is one of the lone playwrights to have written original plays in the English language. He has written over fourteen plays (a number of which he has himself directed), about nine screenplays (including such reputed ones like *Ek Alag Mausam* and *Morning Raga*), and has conducted a number of theatre workshops. He enjoys the distinction of being the first playwright writing in English to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award (for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays*). He has also received the Sahitya Kala Parishad award for best production for *Dance Like a Man* in 1997 and for *Tara* in 2000. In addition, he has acted in a number of plays. It would not be presumptuous to give him credit for ensuring that we can still speak of something called Indian Drama in English. Amongst those that have influenced his work, Dattani cites Mahesh Elkunchwar, whom he considers the father of modern Indian theatre. Like Elkunchwar, Dattani too explores the complexities of human relationships, with a particular emphasis on the dark side of the human psyche. While the emotional texture in Dattani's plays may not be as violent as in Elkunchwar's work, Dattani does display Elkunchwar's propensity for stripping his characters bare, unmasking them, and exposing them for the hypocrites they are. Both playwrights offer no hope at the end, leaving unsettled viewers with questions they are expected to resolve by themselves instead of with simplistic, easy resolutions.

For the purpose of this research project, four plays were selected: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Do the Needful* and *Final Solutions*. It was found that Dattani's treatment of issues related to gender and sexuality in these plays have been in sync with contemporary insights on these issues. Although concerns with gender and sexuality predominate in his work, Dattani claims that he is not overtly conscious about the gender of his characters, except when they themselves become conscious about it. (Subramanyam 130) He characteristically situates and explores these issues within an urban, middle-class milieu, in the very narrow confines of the space we call home. The family, as a core institution that affects its members in fundamental, intimate ways takes centre-stage, and is exposed for the manner in which it both creates and aggravates gender-based conflicts for those trapped within it. In Dattani's plays, the family becomes a jungle of sorts, with members often ganging up on each other, preying on each other's weaknesses in a dramatic re-enactment of the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest. Hence, most of Dattani's plays are dark and disturbing in nature, engaging as they are as performances. Dattani's focus on homosexuality in plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen* seeks to break taboos that surround the subject in Indian society, a homophobic society that would have preferred to let it remain hidden or 'invisible', best brushed under the carpet of the Indian home. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* highlights how the heterosexual world cannot see beyond the sexual preference of homosexuals such that their entire being gets reduced to their sexual identity alone. Ed, a homosexual in denial, may be the villain of the piece, and the playwright may not forgive his deceitfulness and cowardice, but Dattani gives us to understand that Ed's behaviour is largely the result of social pressures from a homophobic society that victimises him for his sexual preference. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a strong critique of heterosexuality, sending the clear message that homosexuals must not be tempted by its obvious 'advantages' like social acceptance and respectability, that being true to one's sexual identity is a must since in the final reckoning it is better to be an honest and happy homosexual rather than a deceitful and miserable heterosexual. Through its criticism of people like Ed and Bunny, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* functions as an explicit critique of a society that forces them to choose between homosexuality and heterosexuality, of a society that foregrounds and reduces an individual's identity to one's sexual identity alone only when it comes to homosexuals so that once identified as such all other aspects of one's personality get effectively erased. Dattani also counters the stereotypical perception that homosexual relationships are all about casual sex and lust rather than love and companionship.

Seven Steps Around the Fire, a radio play first broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January 1999, draws attention to the status of hijras as a marginalised group that is welcomed or pushed to the sidelines according to the whims of mainstream society, shunned at all times except when needed to sing, dance and clap on auspicious occasions like weddings and christening ceremonies. Anarkali, a castrated male, occupies a gendered space that is neither here nor there. Her unstable gendered position enables her to reach out to the protagonist, Uma, as a 'sister', though she herself mocks the notion of sisterhood initially because of the class divide that separates them. The play offers a sharp critique of patriarchy by highlighting Uma's powerlessness despite her education and social status, not so very different in the end from Anarkali, the hijra in the play.

Do the Needful, is a radio play that was first broadcast on 14 August 1997 by BBC radio 4, is primarily a satire on arranged marriages in India, a romantic comedy turned on its head to look at homosexuality in a lighter vein. The Patels' and Gowdas' schemes are subverted by their children's refusal to put up pretences to gain approval in the marriage market. Almesh admits that he obviously cannot fulfil Lata's sexual needs because he is gay, and Lata reveals

that she's in love with someone else. In planning to carry on their respective affairs after a marriage their parents have 'arranged' for them, Alpesh and Lata also assert their right to decide and practise their sexual choices on their terms: Alpesh with his gay lover and Lata with her Muslim lover. The middle-class Indian mindset that refuses to consider, let alone talk about, sexual needs and desires as an important component of marriage is sharply critiqued in this play. *Do the Needful* draws attention to a generation that has a different temperament and mindset, a generation that knows what it wants, and which if thwarted by conservative and superficial elders, will go ahead and fulfil their emotional and sexual desires on their own terms, society and tradition be damned.

Dattani's award-winning play *Final Solutions* is set in post-independence India is based on the communal riots that swept the nation during the partition as well as those that took place in independent India, highlighting the tragedy of 'free' India through events that shift through time – from 31 March 1948 to forty years later. The events that unfold are seen through the perspective of the female protagonist who is at times Daksha, the child-bride of fifteen, and at times Hardika, an older woman of 55. Daksha's subjugation within the confines of her marital home is ironically contrasted with the nation gaining independence from foreign rule: the curfew outside is underscored by the consciousness of the woman who is in curfew within. The view we get across time and age reinforces the idea that for the women of this nation not much has changed: they must 'sacrifice' themselves at the altar of domesticity, ensure that they remain within the boundaries of 'decency', and never forget that they are wives, mothers, daughters or daughters-in-laws before they are individuals in their own right, if at all.

As a matter of fact, the institution of marriage comes in for bitter critique in most of Dattani's plays, signifying an oppressive mechanism that endorses the repression of men and women by perpetuating the institution of patriarchy. Those who rebel are punished for life with barbs and recriminations, and the threat of, or actual violence, is used as a deterrent. There is no escape, especially for the women, who never consider breaking their marriages or walking out on their families to escape emotional and/or sexual abuse. Dattani presents men and women as equally capable of dominating and being dominated; in fact, Dattani's characters are often both victimiser and victim at the same time. Also, the past is never the past, and Dattani's characters remain stuck in a time-warp of their own making, punishing themselves by continually reliving their traumas, and seeking comfort in trying to hurt others as they were hurt. Parents are usually portrayed as indifferent to their children's needs, more interested in maintaining appearances.

In the final analysis, Dattani's plays do not offer easy remedies to the conflicts represented on stage, but they do offer a modicum of hope through the unstated message that honesty and love, not manipulation and deception, can bring comfort in human relationships. Dattani's plays expect the audience to introspect about how we are complicit in the trauma his characters suffer. His achievement as a playwright is effectively summed up in the words of Professor John McRae, who (in his introductory note on *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*) applauds him for using theatre to unmask not only his fictional characters but also his audiences, compelling us to confront the demons within, and accept that we are complicit in the trauma his characters endure: "For the fault is not just the characters' – it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity" (Dattani 46).