

**GIVING VOICE TO THE UNHEARD : A STUDY ON
TRANSGENDERS AND HOMOSEXUALS WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI**

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Submitted to

**UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION
BAHADUR SHAH ZAFAR MARG
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Introduction

Social exclusion is a worldwide phenomenon and in a multilingual and multicultural country like India, it is undeniably the foremost problem that threatens the very fabric of the society. Though the Indian society argues to be open-minded and receptive regarding notions relating to sex and gender, it still views gender and sexual identity as linked with procreation and therefore propagates heterosexuality as pious and the only possible mode of accepting man-woman relationship. All other sexuality is declared as unnatural, perverting and even criminal. As a result, they reject the existence of homosexuals and hijras, and such differently born individuals are treated as lusty, sinners, evil, and therefore unsocial entities. And so any homosexual/ eunuch who dare to break free of the social structures that control him/her is cruelly rejected and even eliminated from the society.

Though homosexuality was considered as another type of sexual practice, it was not sanctioned and accepted. In spite of a vast homosexual Indian population (coming to more than 2.5 million males), it is still a taboo in large parts of India. In addition to India, there are many cultures including the European and African, in which same-sex lovers and neuter gendered people are treated as misfits and blots in the society. The society views them with fear and subjects them to all kinds of injustices such as verbal harassment, physical violence, racial-ethnic discrimination, dismissal from jobs, eviction from housing and denial of services even from people in authority including police officers and medical professionals. As a result, several sporadic efforts and campaigns were held for their legal recognition. Such a demand for freedom and equality of gays and lesbians in India was first put forth in an organized manner by the end of 1991, and since 1994 *the Naz Foundation* (India), a New Delhi based NGO, is at the forefront of the campaign to decriminalize

homosexuality. And likewise, homosexuals and transgenders are seen as coming out of their secluded lives and fighting for a recognized position in the society. They have their own associations and are no longer uneducated, and hence are striving hard to be part of society, and enjoy the fundamental rights as that of the so-called 'normal people' of the mainstream world.

Objectives

This project studies Queer theory to comprehend the experiences and existences of transgenders and queer people as expressed and addressed through theatre. This study focused on the select plays of Mahesh Dattani, the first Indian English playwright who dared to voice the so-called "abnormal" people of the Indian society.

Findings of the Project

Queer studies is an innovative and interdisciplinary area which is concerned with the issues relating to the LGBT – lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and intersex people, their lives and culture. It includes studying the varied forms of representations of individuals who have 'abnormal' sexual inclinations and diverse gender identities in art, literature and social relations.

Gender/sexuality is a human social system of differentiating sex roles, behaviours, characteristics, appearances and identities. Every individual has an internal sense of their gender/sexuality and this sense is called 'gender/sexual identity'. For most people their gender identity is congruent with their assigned sex, but there are many people who experience their gender identity as discordant with their natal sex; they experience a mismatch of the physical body and their internal

bodily experiences. And this often has a negative impact on his/her daily functioning and well-being in the society.

In India, hijra is an institutionised third gender. The term 'Transgender' is used to describe individuals whose gender identity is in some way different from or transgresses the social norms of their assigned birth sex. To put it in simple words, they are neither men nor female but comprise physical features of both men and women. They're intersexed, impotent men who sometimes undergo emasculation. Such transgendered communities have existed in most parts of the world where they live with their own local identities, customs and rituals. To become a hijra or to obtain a hijra identity, one must "come out" and join a hijra community which comprises of a *guru*, *chelas* (disciples) and a *nani* (grandmother). Each hijra community contains seven houses with a *nayak* (leader) for each house and if a hijra is dissatisfied with his house, he can change the house and *guru* and become the *chela* of another *guru*. And based on hierarchy, *chelas* become the *guru*.

Though the Indian Government in 1994 decided to legally acknowledge the identity of hijras as a part of the Indian society by introducing a third category E (for Eunuch) in addition to the Male/Female option in the Indian passport, hijras even today endure harsh rejections and violence, especially in the hands of policemen and *goondas*. The heterosexual Indian society tends to erase and omit the existence of hijras in India as they do the homosexuals. They regard these individuals as neither male nor female because neither do they have the sexual urge of men nor can they reproduce children like women. As a result, hijra are often seen as getting involved in sex activities because for them, it was the only way to earn money for their livelihood. The true hypocrisy of the Indians, especially those in northern parts, is revealed in the way in which they welcome these eunuchs at the time of marriage and childbirth, for

these people are believed to be “endowed with the power to confer fertility on newlyweds and newborn children” (*Collected Plays*, 26) though they themselves are viewed as infertile and unfit for marriage, conception or family.

As an emerging and compelling dramatist, Dattani’s main concern of Dattani was human beings and how the human spirit triumphs over societal oppressions. He endeavoured to use the theatre as a platform to depict lived traumatic human experiences which, no matter how sordid, unpleasant or hard to accept, is real and human. With this in mind, he went to the extremity of unveiling the virgin landscapes inhabited by homosexuals and eunuchs. Though he is not the first to touch such tabooed subjects, his treatment of it is entirely shocking and irritating. For Dattani, a homosexual is as natural as ‘being left handed in a predominantly right handed world’. But the world, for which a man-man and woman-woman relation is illegal, unholy and hence unacceptable, treats them very badly. For Dattani, these marginalised people were not a small group of Indians and so as a writer, he decided to voice their unheard and ignored cries of anguish, dilemma and suffering. His ensuing struggle is, therefore, for visibility, voice and social space of gays, lesbians and hijras, so that they no longer get frozen into stereotypes.

With a literary output of sixteen plays including stage, radio and screen plays on existing yet tabooed, “invisible” issues of Indian society, Dattani explores the lives of homosexuals who usually ended up creating a new but ‘fake’ identity to incorporate into what is called family and society. His stage plays such as *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy_Night in Mumbai* and in his radio play, *Do the Needful* delve on the theme of homosexuality. In another play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani handles the theme of third gender by presenting before his audience an

entire hijra community which contains people who are equally capable of love and commitment, like the heterosexuals.

The issue regarding the marginalization of homosexuals and transgenders had become a 'visibly' real issue in India in the year 2009 when the Delhi High Court struck down the 1860 Indian Penal Code, Section 377 verdict which criminalized homosexual intercourse as being "against the order of nature". The 2009 Delhi High Court decision *Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi*, found Section 377 as directly violating the fundamental rights provided by the Indian Constitution. As a result, countries like Africa and Australia conferred legality of fundamental rights to homosexuals and transgenders. However, even after the 2009 verdict of the High Court, there are societies, say in India, China and other countries, where same-sex lovers and third gendered people are labelled as "abnormal" people in the society, simply because they do not go along the line of conventional sexual/gender concepts. So many social and human rights activists have been working to promote an increased acceptance of homosexuality, and as a result by the end of the twentieth century, homosexual people have become a fully-fledged community with places for social and sexual contacts, gay churches, gay clinics, gay schools, gay recreational centres, gay residential complexes, gay traders, etc.

With highly unconventional approaches, Dattani is perhaps the first playwright to write a full-length play on hijras or homosexuals in which he presents them on centre stage as living human beings – as people with individuality who crave for respect and space in society. Simultaneously through his plays, Dattani makes a mockery of the gender oriented social system and the homophobic attitudes of the mainstream which makes the transgenders feel ashamed of being born as a transgender. And it is this sense of shame which actually helps the mainstream to

control and silence them and push them further into the unseen peripheries of society where they exist as entities being torn between social taboos and personal desires. From these unseen and unheard realms, they have been silently screaming throughout their lives at their helplessness of being trapped in bodies that are alien to their gender. And it is this silent screams that Dattani voices in his theatre.

Dattani believed in the transforming power of the theatre. For him, “If a play can transform even one life, it has done more than what is expected of it.” So by regarding his educated upper middle class audience as a starting point of his intended social change, he produced open-ended and daring explorations of the reality of these subjugated homosexuals and hijras of his Indian society on the stage. And as planned, when the characters’ masks fell, their emotions unravelled and their lives disintegrated, his audience experienced a classic catharsis of terror and pity. The intension of Dattani was simply this : if the educated public couldn’t initiate such a necessary and inevitable social change, how was it possible for the poor and uneducated lot who are deeply engrossed in age-old beliefs and superstitions, and spend half of their lifetime finding ways of survival.

By traversing deeply through the psyches of Dattani’s gay and third gender characters, I have recognised the fact that the existence of these LGBTs, especially in various parts of India where the patriarchal social system still exists, is really harrowing. While some dare to come-out of their shells and cry out to the world that he/she is a gay/lesbian and then move ahead in life either in his/her hometown or wherever they feel welcomed and free, a large number of gays are still physically and emotionally held up. And this is either because they do not want to face the havoc of announcing to the world that they are gays or because they do not want to put their families to shame. They fear that coming out will destroy not only their live but also

that of their family and hence they opt out the safer way out which is to remain silent and hide their reality. They pretend to be 'straight', gets married and involved in heterosexual relations and thereby try to lead their lives on. But some of them manage to find secret homosexual partners to fulfill their inborn cravings, as depicted by Dattani in his plays.

Based on the opinion polls conducted in a few colleges in Thiruvananthapuram, I have realized that the misconception regarding same-sex relations and a eunuch's sexual identity is high. And to say, this is mainly due to ignorance regarding the same. Though enriched and updated in their variant disciplines of study and current affairs, a large of the student community still believe that gays, lesbians and eunuchs are really "abnormal" people and misfits of the Indian society. Nevertheless when awareness programmes and interactive sessions with a transgender were conducted in these colleges, a good percentage of their misconceptions were nullified. I was able to convey to the students the reasons of birth of such so-called "abnormal" individuals.

An LGBT is born purely because of biological reasons. The gender of a new born child depends on the increase or decrease of chromosomes. If a child is born with a XY chromosome type, then it is a male; if it is born with a XX type, then it is a female. And unfortunately, if a child is born with an additional X or Y chromosome, then it is labelled as a "neuter" gendered baby – he or she is a transgender. So in a way the birth of any person with a third gender identity is merely because of the sheer negligence of doctors who could have detected the 'abnormal chromosome' from the human cells of the to-be born baby and could have taken steps to avoid the birth of such so-called "unsocial" beings or it is simply because of the will of God.

There also prevails a false belief that it is homosexuals who spread sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS whereas modern science has proved that such diseases are transmitted through unsafe heterosexual intercourses. For people, same sex relations are never aimed towards offspring production and hence it is sheer lust, anti-religious and bourgeoisie culture, and hence it is their moral and social responsibility to reject, suppress and even eliminate these 'anti-social' entities. But my study is based on the fact that when God himself accepts this binary fusion of heterosexuals and homosexuals as part of his created world, then why shouldn't people. And this acceptance of gays and hijras as part of the Indian society can be attained by conducting frequent awareness programmes and also by introducing a study of their lives in their concerned course of study.

To conclude, theatre is not a secluded art; it is a meaningful medium through which one can talk about social scenario and scene. Employing the theatre as an instrument for social change, Dattani focused on human psyche and emotional cataclysm existing in the mind of his marginalised characters and demanded justice to them through his plays, and it is believed that he did succeed in making his drama alive, popular and powerful.