

Fluid Identities: Queer Performativities in Dance Like a Man and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai

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Abstract

Queer study is an interdisciplinary field of study. As an integral part of Gender Studies, it deals with some key concepts like heteronormativity, performativity, fluidity of identity and subversion. We have a glimpse of this analytical perspective in the works of renowned authors like Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Oscar Wilde and James Baldwin and so on. Through my paper I intend to show some prevailing complicated aspects of our society which are considered as social taboos. To analyse my strand on these specific issues, I have included in my study two specific works: Dance Like a Man and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai. When we are talking about the Modern theatre, we have to discuss Mahesh Dattani who needs no introduction. The modern society in Mahesh Dattani's plays is the setting. He has researched themes related to social exclusion, gender inequality, fundamentalism, and the psychological effects of the terrible HIV/AIDS epidemic. He is bold and unafraid to convey novel issues such as men and women's representation of their sex preferences, which was taboo in Indian society until recently. Readers feel empathetic and sympathetic towards him for his accurate depiction of human nature. Dance Like a Man brings us to a specific world where the protagonist Jairaj is a victim of the gender binary of patriarchal society. In On a Muggy Night in Mumbai we see the plight of Kamlesh and Prakash to accept each other as life partners. In this paper, through textual analysis I will examine how Dattani's plays depict queer people and argue that gender roles are socially rather than physiologically determined. Dance Like a Man and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, two of Dattani's plays, have been chosen for this purpose.

Key words: Gender binary, Performativity, Queer, Social Taboos,

Introduction:

The academic arm of the homosexual rights movement gave rise to queer theory, which was originally known as gay and lesbian studies. Studying sexuality as a central topic in literature and culture was a byproduct of a broad sociological study (Nayar255). The new perspectives on gendered and sexual identities that post-structuralist and queer theorists have generated to indicate diverse forms of identity. According to Judith Butler gender is not identical. It cannot be perceived through the male and female identities but rather through performativity. Similar to Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman," Butler emphasizes that gender is not an intrinsic reality but a role enacted within a cultural framework. In contrast to Beauvoir,

who emphasized the social construction of womanhood, Butler explores the concept of gender as a performance a sequence of behaviors that do not align with a fixed identity but instead fabricate the semblance of one. Nagel argues that these performances are influenced by societal expectations and cultural standards, rather than biology. These theorists contend that conventional conceptualizations entail the imposition of heterosexuality on gender in the form of a "heterosexual matrix," as defined by Butler and Ingraham. The universe is defined as a heterosexual person's symbolic order through verbal and nonverbal communication, according to Ingraham "heterosexuality" is not normal. It is imaginary. The author contends that although sexuality inherently fluctuates throughout an individual's life, society regulates this variability by establishing rigid identification categories (such as heterosexual, bisexual, gay) and belief systems that render sexuality seemingly constant and immutable. These categories are not impartial; rather, they are situated within a hierarchical value system that bestows legitimacy and social position contingent upon adherence to heteronormative standards. This arrangement institutionalizes heterosexuality as the standard, while bisexuality is diminished in value and homosexuality is the most ostracized (Ingraham 2). Butler's heterosexual matrix is the dominant paradigm that produces an epistemic framework for understanding gender intelligibility. We live in a society where heterosexuality is accepted as the norm and deviant behaviour is frowned upon. "Homosexuality" is considered as sin and has no place in society, and those who practice it are not accepted in this so-called civilized society. According to Rich, writing about authenticity is a crucial way for marginalized writers to confront and undermine the prevailing narratives that underpin their oppression. Here, authenticity refers to a person's sense of self and capacity to translate that into artistic endeavours. As Rich demonstrates, the lack of writing and self-representation by those who identify with historically marginalized groups makes this particularly important. Rich's focus on building community through solidarity, despite her direct and intentional writing for women and lesbian women throughout this period of her career, offers a priceless window into the workings of oppressive systems and the ways in which poetry may subvert them. Rich's writing during this timeframe demonstrates how reading and writing literary works can serve as a means of intellectual liberation. It's a process that gives people the ability to define their identities according to their own terms and starts the process of shedding the assumptions that surround them (Hoden, n. d.). There are around four million people residing in India who belong to the category of gay or lesbian community. They are treated as outcasts of the society. They are banished from their families and eventually from society at large, so they are unable to come out in public. Many gay people have "double lives," that is, they maintain homosexual relationships while pretending to be married. Due to society's prohibition of abnormal behaviour, they are compelled to do so. We observe many people practicing homosexuality voluntarily; some do it in public and some do so in private; it is a fact of our society even if there are laws against it and society's unfavourable attitudes endure (Handbag) Mahesh Dattni who is not only a writer, director and playwright but also a social activist who consistently emphasizes the potential for attitudes to change and pushes for a loosening of social norms, values, and taboos. He is renowned for raising concerns that the general public finds pressing. During those periods, the majority of theatrical performances featured musically

accompanied depictions of everyday events. For his superb execution in *Final Solutions* and other plays, Dattani bagged the esteemed Sahitya Academy Award. He demonstrates that love and humanity drive out the ominous shadows of discrimination, and that man's own consciousness has the key to the solution. In *Dance Like a Man* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* he shows males' desire to achieve an esteemed position of a renowned dancer but unfortunately clogged up by patriarchal domination and homosexuality is prevalent in India, as are the pressures and restrictions that gay people must endure in order to maintain their way of life. They welcome hypocrisy as an escape from such societal constraints.

Mahesh Dattani, an Indian dramatist, is the author of the critically praised play "Dance Like a Man." The drama addresses difficult issues of love, passion, sacrifice, and the conflict between tradition and individual goals. It is set in modern-day India. "Dance Like a Man" explores the complex relationships of a family and the significant impact that societal standards have on individual lives through its sad narrative and endearing characters. The characters in "Dance Like a Man" shows different issues related to gender and sensitivity. The conflict between tradition and modernity is embodied by the family patriarch, Jairaj. He is a living example of the pressures placed on society by society to uphold classical dance JAIRAJ (drinks). "The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic?"

VISWAS. "But you fought back. That's good. You did what you wanted to do. You were steadfast.

JAIRAJ (sarcastically). Brave.

VISWAS. Yes, and brave too.

JAIRAJ. Words! Brave words That's all" (Dattani 27).

VISWAS. "What happened?

JAIRAJ. What happened? Nothing. (Laughs.) That was the trouble.

Nothing happened. (Laughs again.) Didn't you hear my wife? Nothing is what we are! After forty years, she tells me she doesn't think of me as a man. Just a spineless boy. And you know what I. And you know what I think? I think she is right!" (Dattani 28). Jairaj contemplates the professional standards dictated by patriarchal society, which are based on gender rather than humanity. As a mediator between the generations, Jairaj's wife Ratna finds herself caught between her husband's loyalty and the younger generation's Lata, who struggles with the demands of conformity and his love of dancing, embodies the conflict between tradition and personal freedom. The play addresses important issues including gender roles, identity, and the pursuit of happiness through the dialogue and interactions between the characters. It questions conventional ideas of success and happiness, inspiring viewers to consider the costs people bear to pursue their goals and the negative effects of social expectations on their ability to live happy, fulfilling the goals of life.

The ideas of *On a Muggy Night* ought to influence and be influenced by society as a whole. The drama addresses openly gay themes of love, collaboration, trust, and betrayal, and it is not just the first of its kind in Indian theatre. The play explores how societal norms shape behavior patterns and how simple it is for people to conform to social expectations. Of the characters, Sharad and Deepali are gay in distinct ways and are at ease with their sexuality. Deepali is more subdued, maybe steadier, while Sharad is ostentatious and showy. Prakash and Kamlesh are the most blatant victims of the stereotype. They don't have the ability to reveal their so-called stained relationship in front of this conventional society. The TV star Bunny is a more conventional gay man from India; he is happily married but has openly denied his sexual orientation. In contrast, Ranjit has chosen an easier route by relocating to Europe, where he is free to "be himself." To consider these characters to be in any manner stereotyped would be banal. They are a diverse group of people with a breadth of experience that goes beyond customary estimations. They are brought together in a way that exposes the tensions,

oppressions, and historical secrets that specifically affect Ed/Prakash and Kamlesh. The current "romance" between Ed and Kamlesh sister Kiran and the previous one between Kamlesh and Prakash are masterfully counterposed until it is revealed, to audiences' constant amazement, at the first act's climax, that Ed and Prakash are the same person. Mahesh Dattani looks closely at the rigid gender and sexuality roles that still exist in Indian society in his great works like *Dance Like a Man* and *On a Muggy Night* in Mumbai. Scholars have looked at these plays from a number of different critical angles. Bite looks at how Dattani shows "gender performativity". within the confines of limited cultural frameworks ("Gender Performativity"). Chaudhari and Jagtap similarly emphasize the plays' foundation in "social realism" and their depiction of individual conflicts within conventional expectations ("Social Realism in Select Plays"). Queer theory offers additional understanding: Esbensen delineates the theoretical underpinnings of queer studies, whereas Hoden, building on Adrienne Rich, attacks "compulsory heterosexuality," a concept seen in the silences and compromises of Dattani's gay characters (Esbensen; Hoden). Chrys Ingraham's broader critiques of heterosexual hegemony in "Thinking Straight" and the cultural theory frameworks articulated by Pramod K. Nayar in "Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory" elucidate the socio-cultural facets of Dattani's oeuvre. Additionally, some prominent papers which have already been mentioned in the reference section explore the alternative forms of sexuality in Indian English drama ("Alternative Sexuality"). Although this scholarship emphasizes performativity, realism, and queer frameworks, little emphasis has been directed toward Dattani's utilization of these narratives to dismantle the binary by revealing the decaying structure of established societal practices.

Current study aims to examine how Mahesh Dattani construct and deconstruct gender norms through queer narratives? In what ways do societal forces and family dynamics serve to reinforce gender conformity in both plays.

Objectives:

The study adheres to the subsequent objectives:

1. To analyse how Mahesh Dattani's plays contest conventional gender binaries and heteronormative frameworks.
2. To examine the depiction of queer identities and non-conforming gender roles in *Dance Like a Man* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.
3. To investigate the application of theatrical methods and narrative strategies in articulating queer topics.
4. To examine the influence of societal, familial, and cultural expectations on the expression or repression of LGBT identity in Indian society, as depicted in these plays.

Methodology:

This study aims to decipher queerness persistent in our society through Dattani's masterpieces like *Dance Like a Man* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Qualitative textual analysis has been adopted for the representation of queer identities. Through the prism of gender and queer theory, both texts are examined, with a focus on how they challenge conventional gender and sexuality binary classifications. The study entails closely examining the plays with an emphasis on the following areas: stage directions and performative metaphors; character development; dialogic interactions; and thematic themes pertaining to gender performance and queer desire. Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity and Adreanna Rich's argumentative views on the imposition of heterosexuality by sociocultural system serve as the theoretical foundation for this text based qualitative study.

Presentation of queerness through characterization:

According to Collins dictionary “**Queer** means relating to people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual or whose gender identity is not traditionally male or female”. Since 1990, it has been utilized across various transdisciplinary domains. It has been characterized as a paradigm for comprehending gender and sexual activities beyond heterosexuality. It questions the prevailing notion that heterosexual attraction is normative among individuals. The narrative posits that sexuality and gender identity are socially constructed and warrant periodic re-examination (Esbensen). Mahesh Dattani is both a playwright and a social reformer, whose primary objective in composing plays is to address and mend deteriorated societal norms by highlighting critical themes such as gender, varied sexual identities, and child abuse. Dattani's plays contain a large cast of individuals that go through similar struggles before coming to a consensus, living in harmony, and being replicated in society; instead, they spend the rest of their lives hiding behind masks. Although we live in a modern world and are often distracted by everything that is going on around us, Dattani was able to identify personalities from our own society who we were unaware even existed because of his queer observation (Chaudhari, Jagtap). Jairaj and Ratna in "*Dance Like a Man*" view dancing as their spirit rather than just a pastime. Amritlal, Jairaj's father, is reluctant

to embrace his son's career as a dancer since it was believed that dancing is a vocation reserved for women in our society. Jairaj is a man who does not care for traditionalism. Though structurally he is a man but inwardly he has motherlike emotion and softness on the other side we have a different picture of Ratna who is rather influenced by the toxic femininity which always tries to subjugate male ego.

Any sexual desire outside of the heteronormative framework is invalidated by Indian patriarchal society, and it is prohibited to represent such a desire. Dattani asserts that it is erroneous to rigidly categorize same-sex desire into distinct, frequently exclusive identity classifications such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, eunuch and so on. If any indication of sexual desire must be promptly categorized or defined, then our understanding of sexuality remains inadequate. It is the codification or description that takes precedence in the process. The character Bunny Singh in the current play "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" suggests in his statement that these folks need to have an accepting mindset in order to survive. BUNNY. "All I am saying is that we would all forget about categorizing people as gay or straight or bi or whatever, and let them do what they want to do" (Paul 65). The statement is a criticism of the widespread inclination to foster division among individuals based on sexuality, as if other variables such as race, religion, and ethnicity are insufficient. Main purpose of the play, to some extent, revealed to a reader from the following conversation:

DEEPALI. "If you were a woman, we would be in love" (Paul 65)

KAMLESH. "If you were a man, we would be in love" (Paul 65)

From the conversation of the characters, we come to know about their desires and at the same time a detailed picture of Indian society where only heterosexual marriage is acceptable and that they are both looking for partners who are prepared to return the Favor. Dattani's message is that same-sex relationships are real and should be accepted as such since they are just as natural as heterosexual relationships between two consenting individuals. The other characters in the play include Kiran, who is Kamlesh's divorced sister; Ed/Prakash, who is a closet homosexual; Sharad, who is also gay; and Kamlesh's current partner, Ranjit, who is gay and lives in England. Although there are many different types of people who are inclined towards the same sex and each one must conceal the truth of their sexual preference out of fear of social rejection, according to Bunny Singh, a well-known TV actor and gay family man, and The Guard, Kamlesh's sexual partner. There is still a subtle hierarchy among the gay characters in this play. Kamlesh, for example, can use his guard to sate his sexual needs and turn to Sharad when Prakash refuses to reciprocate. Bunny Singh can demonstrate how his widespread popularity gives him special treatment, and Ranjit can demonstrate how much more oppressive conditions are for gay people in India than their Conclusiland (Paul 66).

Socio psychological analysis of Dance like a man and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai: Mahesh Dattani is a prolific writer who always tries to unveil the reality through his writings. His plays are

not merely the scripted write ups but rather a poignant picture of such a society where the plights of the oppressed and marginalized are well depicted in the form of psychological abuse. The plays by Mahesh Dattani investigate the socio psychological effects of social conventions on people's lives in great detail. While *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* explores the complexity of sexuality and social stigma, fear of isolation and urge for social acceptance. Kamallesh, Ed, Ranjit, Sharad, Bunny, Deepali, and Kiran are among the characters whose stories are in the play. All the characters are gay except for Kiran, who is straight, and Deepali, who is lesbian. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* reveals the existence of homosexuality in India as well as the restrictions and pressures that individuals who identify as homosexual must endure in order to live in India. As an escape from such societal constraints, people turn to hypocrisy. Two distinct worlds are presented to the reader in the play: the inner, secret world of homosexuals and the outside, heterosexual order-dominated world, along with the conflict between these two worlds. *Dance Like a Man* concentrates on the interplay of gender, ambition, and identity. It also shows psychological scars on self-inflicted by contemporary patriarchal society. The main protagonist of the play Jairaj experiences societal prejudice that deems the classical dancing form unworthy of being a "masculine" profession. Both expose the human spirit's tenacity while criticizing the systems that uphold misery and isolation.

Findings and Discussion:

Dattani critiques the cultural standards related to gender and society within the framework of the Indian societal milieu. Both plays illustrate divergent perspectives on gender roles as dictated by societal norms. In the play *Dance Like a Man*, Jairaj is a professional dancer, a vocation traditionally associated with women. Men are prohibited from participating in this form of art. Dattani use both literal and symbolic performances to reveal the limitations imposed by gender boundaries established by patriarchal society. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* prominently showcases queer narratives and explores the intricate experiences of gay men and a lesbian character as they traverse love, self-acceptance, and societal stigma, adeptly illustrating the emotional landscape and existential dilemmas stemming from heteronormative pressures. These plays collectively examine the "naturalness" of heteronormative frameworks, underscore the internal and external challenges faced by queer individuals, and ultimately offer affirming narratives that advocate for compassion, inclusion, and the deconstruction of binary identity constructs within Indian society.

The overall analysis reveals that, rather than focussing on the queerness of the characters who are entangled by societal standards that accept heterosexuality and toxic masculinity as normal but view homosexuality as obscene, both plays address distinct concerns relating to the queerness of our society. Now is the ideal moment to modify this idea. We accepted the idea of sexuality as a biological fact and never asked why all bodies had to fit into the categories of male or female before Dattani dramatized the lives of gay and lesbian people. Dattani has demonstrated to us that there is no direct correlation between a given sex and a certain gender, that some people do not

identify with gender norms, and that a wide range of realities and people call for a humane environment, space, and rights.

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