

## **Silenced Voices: Exploring the Intersection of Gender and Sexuality in Mahesh Dattani's Selected Works**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper conducts a comparative analysis of Mahesh Dattani's plays, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* that delves into the complexities of repressed identities, gender representation and sexuality. From a social analytic perspective, this study examines how Dattani's works encounter traditional societal norms that reflect a broader tension between conservatism and individual self-expression. This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationships between identity, culture and performance in contemporary Indian theater.

**Keywords:** Self-Expression, Repression Identities, Gender Inequality and Societal Expectations

Literature is a collection of human experiences and social realities through a powerful form of expressed emotions. It helps the writers to evaluate the world around them, pointing out both the beauty and the problems of society. In the domain of literary landscape, drama holds an exceptional place because it brings stories to life on stage, engaging audiences to see, feel and connect with live emotional portrayals of the characters.

As a part of Indian English literature, Drama has forged a unique literary identity. Indian English drama, in particular, usually copes with the country's complex social, cultural, and political realities. Playwrights like Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani have used theater to portray the struggles & challenges faced by individuals in Indian society.

Mahesh Dattani, one of the greatest dramatic giants in Indian English Literature, also a courageous and innovative writer. His plays revolve around the theme of gender politics, family politics, sexual identity, homosexuality, LGBTQ+ rights and communal violence. He talks about the marginalized groups of Indian society. He is a serious critic of the society and often questions the dominant gender of the conservative society. This research paper is a comparative analysis that portrays the systematic sexism and LGBTQ+ identities in Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. This paper highlights the complexities of human experience and analyzes the tension between tradition and self-expression of Indian society.

In Indian English Literature, Mahesh Dattani is a renowned dramatist, whose works are path-breaking in the landscape of gender stereotypes and sexuality in the current Indian community. Two of his significant dramatic works, *Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998)*, brought to our attention about the restrictions placed on individuals by societal norms regarding gender stereotypes and sexual identities. The Play *Bravely Fought the Queen* projects issues about violence against women, homosexuality and

politics of capitalism, while *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* spotlights the hindrances encountered by the LGBTQ+ community, particularly gay men and lesbianism in a conservative social environment. This study compares these two plays, analyzing how Dattani portrays the repression of gender and sexual identities, the contradiction between personal desires and societal expectations, and the consequences of this repression.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* is a play about the Trivedi family's women characters and their encounter with different types of violence in every transition of their life. Alka, Dolly and Baa, the three female characters, symbolizes the oppression women face in a male-chauvinistic society. They got stuck in unhappy marriages and controlled by the social norms that instruct how they should behave and live. The patriarchal norms in their family has made a huge impact on their emotional and psychological health. Dattani examines how the Trivedi family silences women and controls their choices. Dolly is dominated by her husband Jiten, despite the emotional abuse she suffers. Alka's life, similarly, is forced into a marriage with Nitin and his distance and lack of interest made her seek refuge in liquor to numb her feelings. Both women are trapped in forced marriage and suffocating home lives, constrained in every possible way by their husbands and mother-in-law.

Jiten, the elder one in Trivedi's family treated his wife Dolly as a slave, even though they have been married for fifteen years, he regularly ill-treats his wife and she remained as a pawn in his hand. Dolly's mother-in-law, Baa provoked Jiten about her conduct, she was being attacked heavily when she was pregnant. This attack will affect the pre-born child and Dolly gave birth to a eight month old, premature spastic child, Daksha. Listening to thumris in Naina Devi voice is the only activity that Dolly regularly does to forget her sorrow and empty life. In the play even Alka states that "yes. That's too. Whereas poor Dolly is too... straight. She is neither interested in the so-and-sos of this world, nor unfortunately, in the bottle." (BFQ 38) Only thumri song helps her in passing her emptied life.

On the other hand, Alka is an energetic young adult woman affected by a familiar frustration. In her childhood days, she was tortured by her brother Praful who threatened her because she's talking to a neighbor boy. "Praful saw. He didn't say a word to me. He just dragged me into the kitchen. He lit the stove and pushed my face in front of it! I thought he was going to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Just... Praful said, 'Don't you ever look at any man. Ever'." (BFQ 35) Due to Nitin's gay love with Praful, Nitin distanced himself & lacked interest in Alka. Thus, Alka starts living a loveless marriage and tries to drown her sorrow in alcohol.

Dattani points out how the so-called conservative society silences women's needs and desires, employing the powerful metaphor of 'Caged Women' to illustrate the social issues of how women are conditioned to suppress their identities and adjust themselves with the social norms.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is a play about the challenges and struggles of a community of homosexuals and the constraints with their sexual identity in a conservative society. The play revolves around Kamlesh, a gay man, and his close group of friends, who struggle with their sexual identities in a society that refuses to accept them. This play delves into repression of sexual identity, illustrating how socio-cultural norms force individuals to conceal their true selves. For example, Kamlesh has internalized society's skeptical perspective towards homosexuality, forcing him to hide his true self. His lover Ed (Prakash), too, is unable to admit his sexual identity and marries Kamlesh's sister Kiran, hoping to escape the stigma associated with being gay. Dattani portrayed the real and deep love of homosexuals through the relationship of Kamlesh and Prakash. Kamlesh is very honest with his gay relationship but Prakash somehow gets offended because of his perverse relationship with a guy due to some strange thought. Prakash blamed himself for doing sinful acts against the religious customs. But secretly he wants the love of Kamlesh, in the meantime he wants to marry

Kamlesh's sister Kiran, to earn social validation and acceptable identity in the hetero-normative society. Ed says "Nobody would know. Nobody would care... I will take care of Kiran. You will take care of Me" (OMNM 68)

Dattani portrays nearly most of the different homo-sexual identities and the problems they faced in and out of the society. John MacRae commented about the introduction of this play "Of the characters, Sharad and Deepali are comfortable with their sexuality, and have different ways of being gay. Sharad is camp, flaunting; Deepali more restrained, perhaps more stable. Kamlesh is anguished, and Ed the most obvious victim of his own insecurities. Bunny, the T.V. actor, is a rather more traditional Indian gay man - married (he would say happily) while publicly denying his own nature, and Ranjit has taken an easy way out by moving to Europe where he can 'be himself' more openly". (McRae 46) The play focuses upon the emotional pain and conflicts faced by those who struggle to accept their own desires because of the social norms and cultural pressures. This play also criticizes society for not accepting homosexuality and forcing people to pretend to be someone they're not. This leads to a life of lies, betrayal and heartbreak.

Both plays deal with the repression of identity from different perspectives. While *Bravely Fought the Queen* examines how traditional hierarchies like marriage and family constraints women's self-expression, the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, delves into the suppression of sexual identity in a heterosexual dominant society. In these two plays, protagonists hiding their true self causes them great emotional pain and destroys their lives. Alka and Dolly from *Bravely Fought the Queen* are shown to be psychologically broken, stuck in loveless marriages that crushes their spirits. Kamlesh and Ed from *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* experience a similar internal conflict as they try to suppress their true sexual identities. Both sets of characters are victims of societal expectations that force them to live double lives and pretend to be someone else to fit into the society. It exposes the suffocating grip of societal

norms on personal freedom. Both plays commonly demonstrate the destructive impact of social structures - patriarchal and heteronormative - forcing individuals into a prescribed role, suppressing their true selves. The consequences of repression in both plays are severe. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Alka and Dolly's suppressed desires and emotional pains gradually consume them, fueling bitterness and emotional withdrawal. Their relationships within the family begin to weaken when they try to manage their struggles and it leads to a severe breakdown in communication. Alka turns to alcohol as an escape from her oppressive reality. While Dolly, due to her husband's infidelity and denial from him, becomes emotionally detached. Similarly, in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, repression causes emotional disorder in Kamlesh and Ed. Kamlesh faces heartbreak, while Ed struggles with self-acceptance. Ed's marriage to Kiran is a double betrayal - of Kamlesh and his own identity. His denial and internal conflict lead to suffering for both him and Kiran, who is unaware of her husband's true feelings. The characters' inability to openly express their sexuality causes emotional damage to themselves as those who are around them as well. Through these two plays, Dattani criticizes the socio-cultural norms that enforce regulations, based on gender and sexuality that have severe consequences for repressing one's identity. This repression sparks emotional and psychological disorder. Thus this play exposes the harmful effects of the conservative / heteronormative society that prioritize traditionalism over individual happiness and fulfillment.

Mahesh Dattani's works are like a mirror of India's social landscape. Each one of his repressed characters' struggles both physically and mentally. One can notice the severe consequences of repression and the transformative power of self-acceptance through his plays. Most of Dattani's plays encourage India's younger generation to build a community where every individual can live as themselves, without any fear of judgment or rejection.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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