

# INTRODUCTION

“My life is big. I am BIG and GENEROUS! Only the theatre deserves me”

*(Where Did I Leave My Purdah? 59)*

Theatre has always been a glorious star in the multi-dimensional and richly adorned cultural galaxy of India. But Indian English theatre has had a rather low key representation in this vibrant cultural arena. During the sixties and seventies European influence, especially of Pirandello, Brecht, Chekhov and others, gained prominence and helped Indian theatre express the fractured reality of the time. But the indigenous Indian theatre moved past regional boundaries to become really a polyglot phenomenon from the sixties onward, and use of English helped it cross the border of language, too. Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar were the chief architects of this aesthetic/cultural development. But except for a few plays written in English between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and for the translations in English of the works of the above playwrights, the picture of Indian drama in English, however, appeared rather uninspiring. It was not until the eighties that English drama stepped out of the coterie of elitists and reached a wider audience. The efforts of playwrights like Nissim Ezekiel, Asif Currimbhoy, Shib K Kumar and others achieved occasional success, but failed to connect the audience with theatre's full potential. With a younger group of

playwrights a more lasting change was visible, and the plays by Dina Mehta, Poli Sengupta, Manjula Padmanavan, and Tripurari Sharma found increasingly appreciative audience. It was with the appearance of Mahesh Dattani in the 1980s that Indian English drama gained a distinct identity. India's first English-language playwright to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998, Dattani says, "...this has been really the kind of endorsement that Indian English Theatre in the country has been looking for because up till now it seems as if it belonged to a fringe section of a society ..."

("Conversation with Mahesh Dattani", 26).

In such an exceptionally multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country as India, theatre developed as a heterogeneous and polyglot event, never reducing itself into what Ashis Sengupta terms as a "dominant, homogenizing construct of indigenous culture and heritage" (Sengupta, 5). Consequently, theatre acted as an inclusive genre encouraging a cross-pollination of and encompassing within itself the variety of performance ranging from temple dance to martial art, from classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam (with emphasis on "abhinaya" (enactment or acting) and Kathakali, ritual performances like Raas, Ramleela and Theyyam, folk performances like Chhau and Therukuttu, puppetry and folk lores, miming, orally delivered dramatized stories to neatly structured indigenous and Europeanized and experimental plays.

In fact, India has evolved as, to borrow words from Sengupta again, "a potpourri of cultural heritages, religions, and languages -- all of which bear on the amazing variety of its theatre and performance" (Sengupta, 8). Modern Indian theatre took its root primarily in urban settlements like Calcutta (now Kolkata), Madras (Chennai) and

Bombay (Mumbai), by mid-nineteenth century with the rise of an educated, refined and cultivated intelligentsia -- initiated by and exposed to western literature and taste. Various theatre groups, talented writers and directors worked together with rich theatre patrons to cater to the taste of a sustained audience in Calcutta, Madras, Thiruvananthapuram, Bombay and Asam. The crestfallen theatre movement during the political turmoil of the last decades of British rule was revitalized by the rise of amateur theatre groups just before and after independence -- foundation of Indian National Theatre in 1944 and later National School of Drama in 1960s arranging sponsorship and funding from central and state government for multi lingual theatres. In Kolkata alone hundreds of theatre companies got registered with leading groups like Bahurupiee, Little Theatre, Nandikar, IPTC etc; in Mumbai the Kapoor family, Narang couple, Ebrahim Alkazi, Satyadev Dubey, Sultan Padamsee and Alyque Padamsee made significant contribution. Experimental theatre made considerable advancement in the hands of Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi. While Delhi-based Mohan Rakesh's plays broke new ground in Hindi theatre by introducing non-realistic dramaturgy and making the body part of meaning, playwrights like Girish Karnad in Bangalore and Kavalam Narayana Pannikar in Thiruvananthapuram made extensive use of the ancient ritual forms and folk performances as a part of the process of "de-colonizing" (Mee, referred to in Chaudhuri, 8) -- a political act of expressing indigenous aesthetics and dramaturgy. Their endeavour gave birth to what is termed the Theatre of Roots movement. Women's theatre, though not feminist in the given Western sense, also emerged as a powerful medium to protest against the sociocultural regime which subjugates women through dowry death, killing of

female foetus and a hundred similar ways, and tried to retell and reinterpret the archetypical narratives with Usha Ganguli and Mahasweta Devi.

Sengupta rightly observes, “The journey of modern and contemporary Indian theatre has been multifaceted – from an ‘encounter with the tradition’ through a recuperation of the realist mode to the present impressive range of practices from different regions/communities and also from abroad” (Sengupta, 18). Just after independence theatre has been instrumented to make “a single, enduring ‘India’ by homogenizing India’s robust cultural diversity” (Sengupta, 18). With extensive industrialization and urbanization during the sixties, however, playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchawa and others made their presence felt to the urban audience; the failings of the economic programmes in decreasing the difference between economic classes and widespread corruption and the consequent militant social turmoils prepared the ground for dramatists like Mahasweta Devi, Sircar, Hashmi, Gurcharan Das; while Sanjoy Ganguly’s Forum theatre attempted a constructive equation of “acting and activism” (Sengupta, 21), women playwrights struggled to assert female agency and women’s empowerment, and dalit theatre movement (M. B. Chitnis, Datta Bhagat and others) sought to provide an alternate narrative. Thus Indian (theatre has come a long way from the search for an “imagined or recoverable ‘glorious tradition’” to include “a sum total of its regional multiplicity” (*Theatre India* (special Issue) “How ‘National’ is our National Theatre?,” quoted in Sengupta, 20). In fact, to follow Aparna Dharwadkar, “In post-independence India, the quest is not so much for a ‘national theatre’ as for a significant theatre *in* and *of* the nation” (quoted in Sengupta, 18).

Thus when Indian regional-language theatre was undergoing a constant process of shifting direction and dimension to make it a platform for combining its commitment to its roots with its potential for global importance, Mahesh Dattani took up his journey in the rather untrodden area of Indian English drama to explore its immense potential in theme and structure, issues and performances. The most distinctive of all the factors which became his trade mark, is his deliberate choice of and conscious commitment to contemporaneity: “They [Nissim Ezekiel and Asif Currimbhoy] were writing for their times...and I am writing for my time...” (“Conversation with Mahesh Dattani”, 26). In a course of self-assessment Dattani again observes: “I see myself as a part of contemporary society and therefore I see myself as a contemporary theatre artist” (“Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance,” 1). An author’s self-evaluation is, not very frequently, quite a reliable critique of his own oeuvre. However, Dattani in this case proves rather to be a stranger to the rule. In the same essay he observes: “Theatre has always been a mirror for man. A reflection of his world, of the eternal conflicts that plague him, through which he has experienced the gamut of human emotions” (“Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance,” 1). Hence he holds up a mirror to his/our contemporary society, and we feel like watching a projection of not only what is in front of us but also what exists behind our back—“the invisible issues” which are strategically kept under the carpet to the convenience and comfort of the ambivalent mainstream culture (Mee, Note on “Tara”, 319).

Yet theatre is not an “imitation”, but a “representation”. It may foreground “new realities” by centering the pool of light on issues hitherto unexplored, or resituate and reinterpret existent “realities” by jolting the readers/audience out of their complacent sense of “normality”. Dattani’s is a conscious strategy to debunk the mechanism of invisibility which tends to make realities nonexistent. He deals with issues which have been made “invisible” not because they are negligibly rare, but because they are rather deliberately and strategically ignored, marginalized, made unimportant and kept outside the ambit of analysis. Erin Mee rightly remarks, “By pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre” (Mee, “Note on Tara”, 319). The desired effect is produced through creating “a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical” (“Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance,” 1).

A boy of nine, watching a stage performance for the first time in his life got spellbound at its tremendous impact and thought “I had to be a part of this magic!” (Dattani, “Me and My Plays”, 7) Mahesh Dattani is in command of the genre of English drama in contemporary India struggling for acknowledging its identity and immense potentiality. He of course had his travails (“I didn’t have an audience, because I didn’t have a language”, “Me and...,” 16) to reach out to his target audience: “I had found my validation amongst the ones who mattered -- voiceless people like myself” (“Me and...,” 32). His plays have been published, translated and staged in India and abroad including

England and North America. He is a playwright, director, actor, and dancer -- all rolled into one. His reputation rests mainly on the dozen plays he has written for the stage as well as for the BBC, though he has also been successful in his other roles, too. His experience as an all-round theater person has, in fact, made him a better playwright. Dattani has directed and starred in a number of well-known English and Hindi plays, including his own, and also written/co-written several Hindi and English screenplays. So far as his medium of expression is concerned, he defends his writing in English on the grounds that he writes for city people, and all theater in a multilingual/multicultural country is after all limited by language and region. Moreover, his characters are Indian and his English "educated Indian English" spoken in a unique manner. Prejudice, hypocrisy, guilt, and compromise form the thematic threads of his work. Dattani, in particular, is concerned with the minorities who are forced to live a double life so as to be part of the mainstream. Many of his plays, however, critique Indian middle-class morality and even defend society's outcasts and potential rebels. What is most striking about his plays is the way Dattani brings in the dynamics of choice the individual is faced with while breaking away from traditional roles and the range of emotions it generates. "Society has its concerns about civilization," he says in an interview, "and that's why ... rules are constructed". But at the same time, "the individual shouldn't be thwarted by these norms" (Dattani, "Of Marginalised Men," 3). His liberal concerns apart, Dattani writes plays for the sheer pleasure of expressing himself through this dynamic medium. His work takes on new forms as he continues to deal with serious but "invisible" issues of contemporary Indian society. Actively involved in continuous research, search for resources, and experiments with theme and technique, Dattani's plays have garnered fast-

increasing audience and have been securing more and more critical attention with the passing of time.

Critical approaches to Dattani exist chiefly in the form of book reviews. “Complex Seeing: A Glimpse of Modern Indian Drama” (1995) by Mario Relich gives just an overview of modern Indian drama in English, welcoming Dattani in the process as a dramatist of “world stature”. Sara Adhikari’s “Stage of Transition” (1995) provides an account of the ordeals Indian English playwrights usually face for choosing English as the medium of expression, and how Dattani meets the challenge most successfully. C. K. Meena, in her “Unmasking the Middle Class: The Drama of Mahesh Dattani” (a 1999 review), shows how Dattani theatrically exposes the hypocrisy of the Indian middle class. Alka Tyagi’s 2000 review of the *Collected Plays of Dattani* sums up the plays thematically. The book length study of Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Mahesh Dattani*, evaluates Dattani as a complete artist in his various roles and approaches both his plays and screenplays from various perspectives.

Vivek Benegal, in his “Psychological Playgrounds” (1994), a review of *Final Solutions and Other Plays*, explores how the plays of Dattani bring out the psychological conditions motivating the behaviour of his characters and thus unveil the different layers of their mental life. Kasturi Kanthan’s “The Strongest Fragrance” (a 1995 review of *Final Solutions and Other Plays*) analyzes how the family in Dattani’s plays becomes a site of contest for power and resistance. Kusum Haider, in “Essentially a Comic Muse” (a 1998 review of *Tara and Final Solutions*), looks into the form/structure of the Dattani plays, with an accent on his dramaturgy. Samipendra Banerjee discusses in his article “History

Through Modernity: an Analysis of Final Solutions” how history, represented to serve the interest of certain groups, becomes the architect of destructive present and the individual gets enmeshed in mass identity with reference to the Dattani play. Ketaki Datta’s “Mahesh Dattani’s Final Solutions: A Reconsideration” records how Dattani could be placed in the literary tradition which situates communalism as a faceless violence on civilization. While R. Manjushree in her article, “Political Exploitation through Communalism in Mahesh Dattani’s *Final Solutions*,” concentrates on the colonial legacy of the policy of divide and rule in modern Indian scenario explored in the play, Sanjeev Kumar analyzes how subalternity gets unfixed with the change in the status of majority and minority in his chapter “Spivak, Subalternity and Mahesh Dattani’s *Final Solutions*,” and Pinaki Roy in his “Mahesh Dattani’s *Final Solutions*: A Brief Rereading” draws our attention to the manifestation of the venom of communalism in the play. We are confronted with a sustained theoretically informed approach to the issue of communalism and its contextualization both in Indian history (modern) and global arena of racism in the article by Ashis Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion, Nation and Violence: *Incident at Vichy* and *Final Solutions*”.

Indranee Ghosh’s article “Dattani and the Drama of the ‘Babalog’: A View of *Bravely Fought the Queen* as Theatre” discusses the dissociation of form and content in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* and both the privilege and problem (having almost no peer to be compared with) Dattani enjoys for writing in the very little explored area of Indian English theatre. Anindya Sen focuses on the subtle ironic tension between the apparently projected reality of the same play in terms of characters’ success/failure and the author’s own stance complicating the whole process of “seeing” in “The Ironic Gaze:

A Reading of Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*." Angelie Multani's "On Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man: The Politics of Production and Performance*" interrogates fixed gender categories in relation to the production of plays. Indranee Ghosh's observations on "Form and Content in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*" chiefly deals with the set up of a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist social structure in which characters change places at any possibility of alternation. Shiv Kumar's "Child Abuse and Its Psychological repercussion in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*" analyzes the post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome and their damaging impact on the characters of the play. Bishwanath Bite in his article "Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September: A Critical Study*" focuses how by opening the discourse on incest in the play Dattani provides observations on the social aspect of the issue of child sexual abuse. The outline of the literature on Mahesh Dattani makes it amply evident that it has left a pretty large critically potential area unexplored. Curiously enough, there are very limited number of books and published dissertations on the playwright. And most of the reviews focus on a single play or offer an overview/preview of the work under discussion. Most importantly, the critical materials I have come across so far, demonstrate poor inclination to offer a sustained critical evaluation of the major themes and issues broached in the plays and their inter-connectivity from contemporary theoretical perspectives. Hence my humble attempt will be directed towards a full-length study of Dattani's plays which deserve more critical attention and situate them in a continuous process of evolution and within a potential critical framework. In choosing the theme of my proposed work I relied on what appeared to me to be the thematic crux of the Dattani plays; yet I was no less influenced by the conversation between Dattani and Erin. B. Mee, published as "Mahesh Dattani:

‘Invisible Issues’” in *Performance Art Journal* (1996). Much valuable have been the insights provided by the book *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Mahesh Dattani* by Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri. Moreover, in favour of my strong inclination towards the thematic issues of Dattani’s plays I may also add, to put it comprehensively in the words of Sengupta, that “Where theatre’s representational, rather than presentational, status is concerned , its relationship with social and historical reality becomes most important ...” (Sengupta, 12). And in a complex world like ours, the theatre can hardly work on the “principle of Aristotelian catharsis”, and very aptly, Dattani’s plays “leave the audience perturbed and destabilized so that the impressions they carry along beyond the performance space linger long enough to affect their lives and action” (Sengupta, 16).

## **Culture**

“Each society has its own regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth” (Foucault, quoted in Champagne, 95). The act of writing in a country like India with its amazing multiplicity of cultures with their own, to borrow words of Sengupta, “aesthetics” and “politics of truth-making” (Sengupta, 13) poses a great challenge since India has emerged as a concept far beyond its geographical boundary defying both the “Western imagining” of it as “an exotic land” or a “sheer backward region of illiteracy and poverty” (Sengupta, 1). Dattani’s enterprise becomes all the more daring as he takes up issues either marginalized as a form of deviation from the matrix of normality as constituted by the belief systems/cultural practices of the majority or kept under the layers of secrecy through a conspiracy of silence and denial. His plays contain a social and political statement that problematizes what has been almost unquestioningly accepted as the “Indian tradition.”

No culture is monolithic, as Dattani rightly observes, “In a plural society such as ours, which is culturally as diverse as European continent, and a civilization as ancient as the world, it is very difficult to define what is quintessentially Indian” (“Contemporary Indian Theatre and Its Relevance”, 2). What Sengupta observed about South Asia could well suit the description of India itself – this is “a volatile region embroiled in the ‘twin dialectics’ of nation and state, centre and region, region and community, secularism and religious extremism, neoliberalism and the fading idea of welfare state” (Sengupta, 1). Indian culture has embraced manifold differences within its corpus. More than 4500 cultural communities exist here with their actual or potential differences. The mingling of interregional traits of language and behavior, a phenomenal growth in bilingualism and proliferation of electronic mass media – all have contributed positively to accelerate mutual reciprocity. But unfortunately the colonial strategy/legacy and the industrial economy that activated the rigorous homogenization during the British rule have unfortunately been supplemented by neo-colonial forces which attempt to reduce Indian “tradition” into a singular identity. The entertainment revolution has converted culture into commodity, which requires homogenization of both consumer products and market processes even in the arena of cultural symbols, styles and behavioral pattern (Singh, 31-8). Consequently, a tension builds up between the anxiety to preserve the peculiar communitarian/regional inheritance and the threat of overarching nationalization and globalization. Culturally sensitive persons have been active to deconstruct the monolith. Dattani’s plays, by seeking to bring upon the stage several contemporary issues, have affirmed the multiplicity of India at social and cultural levels. From this point of view, his plays might be said to be an arena of, to put it in Gramsci's words, “the cultural battle that

transforms the popular mentality” by “renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity” (quoted in Champagne, 96).

There are plays by Dattani which seem to ask if we can think of difference/otherness without devaluing it. This is to think of the other/different—in the manner of Rosi Braidotti—not as other-than/different-from, but as a positively other/different entity (Braidotti, 177). The goal here is not to deny difference but to recover it by giving it a substantive content and generating an autonomous entity. However, Dattani has also written plays which rethink difference in terms of an expanded understanding of equality that can simultaneously respect difference. This equality is to be understood not as a universal value because of likeness between subjects, as Rita Felski would argue, but as a notion “that is genuinely open to diversity” (85-86). As the traditional discourse of equality may subsume difference, to borrow phrases from Felski again, the argument for openness to diversity may also exacerbate “the problem of formulating values and norms that can mediate between the claims of competing forms of difference” (87). However, it is possible to accept in principle that there is “no reality-in-itself that can provide ultimate proof of the...value of either difference or similarity” between subjects. Both the construction of commonality and the assertion of difference are, Felski rightly maintains, “political acts, gestures of affiliation and disaffiliation that emphasize some properties and obscure others” (87). It is only in such contingent terms that their value/truth can be assessed. In this light, then, “difference is not a foundation but a relation, not an inherent property but a distinction engendered within a given semiotic framework” (87).

In an interview, the playwright observed: “Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that’s a great advantage and a great disadvantage as well, because . . . we’re living in the present and there are so many challenges facing us . . .” (quoted in Mee 319). “All ‘modern’ exercises of negotiating tradition begin with the realization of a rupture within the tradition,” as Javeed Alam observes, which in turn “implies a notion of crisis” (172). Dattani implies that when tradition refuses or fails to have an ongoing dialogue with itself, which, if conducted over a long period, can alter what Alam calls “its own conceptual terrain[s] as well as those of its people,” it gives birth to a cold and static society (171). By foregrounding many serious but “invisible issues,” as Erin Mee notes, Dattani actually challenges the construction of “Indian” that conveniently ignores whatever deviates from our age-old conceptions of “right” and “normal” (Mee, 319). He dramatizes the tensions of contemporary Indian society, that include “gender troubles,” the stereotyping of gender roles/gender-role identities, destabilization of sexual categories, communal disharmony, the predatory nature of the disablist society, and the like. The central drive of the present thesis is an attempt to appreciate the way “the issues under the rugs” are laid bare and the possibilities of decentering the majority experience as only “authentic” is explored.

### **Family**

Dattani does not work on a grand scale to drive home his objectives; rather he chooses the family as the locus for the working of the issues as they unfold with potential complexity. He chooses the smaller arena of the Indian family to show how power functions at the micro level, to use Foucauldian vocabulary, how “technique of power,

one which pervades everyday life, categorizes individuals, ...and attaches them to their identity, which in brief constitutes individuals as subjects in both senses of the word that is, subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to... (their) own identity by conscience or self-knowledge” (Smart, 135). Every relation, familial or social, is a multilayered phenomenon and a site for control, domination, belonging and security. In fact Dattani shows how the family, contrary to being the shaper of a society, can be an image of the very society -- a product of the value system the society stands for and of the cultural discourse it propagates. Instead of turning the family situation outward, this means turning the social system inward in order to see how individuals and homes are mediated and even constructed by the system of which they are but part and how they in turn are conditioned to perpetuate the so-called Indian tradition. The family is exposed chiefly to be a version of the operation of power on state level rather than a symbolic representation of it as in Rushdie. The policy of preventing hijras and homosexuals from entering into the ambiance of marriage, and by implication, of family, only validates their status of outsider to mainstream in the similar fashion as various state apparatuses, including legal system, media, medical, educational and other institutions perpetuate on microcosmic level the operation of patriarchy, communal intolerance and other marginalizing forces.

Here we come across traditional, joint (fast disintegrating though) Indian patrilineal family unevenly constituted, subjected to a process of constant reconstitution, manifested differentially in the collision of ancient cultural mores and present/emergent realities. Malavika Karlekar remarked, “[I]nequality is embedded in oppressive structures of a family ideology committed to an age and gender hierarchy which is worked out

within a household” (Karlekar, 1742). Several generations are shown caught in the complex fabric of relationships; individuals keep changing roles within the power structure. The plays are powerful subversive re-reading of the popular television serials nursing the hearts of Indian viewers which are nothing but the variants of the “eternal” family saga, with a family at its centre presided by a Babuji (father) and Maji (mother), going through trials and tribulations, followed by the eventual triumph of, to use the blanket term, “Indian tradition”. The present family dramas, however, pose a potential threat to the manipulated patriarchal project of reinforcing the gender stereotype and gender hierarchy. To be specific, Dattani concentrates on the “complicated dynamics of the modern urban family” (Mee, 319). It is chiefly the patriarchal and patrilineal Hindu joint family where all members are expected to unquestioningly ascribe to the autocratic father/mother figure. Any individual voice- especially of women and children – is subsumed by the unwritten laws of family conduct. Any potential rupture is thwarted. The playwright does not venture to present exemplary rebellion or enormous revolution in the life of victims, rather his characters feel or learn to feel the constructed nature of the oppressive mechanism. “The earlier, idealized, Indian view of family harmony, domestic comfort, supportive relationships or nurturing intimacy is somewhat jeopardized in Dattani’s plays” (Kanthan, 32). Critics make an important distinction between the household and family, and maintains that whereas “household is a physical structure, localized and a specific constellation of emotional and economic relationships among its core members,” family is “more amorphous, seen as larger kinship groupings, spread over time and space” (Ghosh, “Contextualizing Domestic Violence: Family, Community, State”, 58). Household is the “operational unit” that “provides the ground,

so to speak, for a working out of family ideologies around specific roles and expectations” (Karlekar, 1742). While familial ideologies remain the same, household structure gets shifted according to emergent social, economic and political changes outside. Hence, woman’s participation in public role may change the structure by destroying the sexual division of labour or win women agency in home, but sometimes it may subject the working women to violence consequent upon the threat to masculinity. New trajectory of aspirations breeds new anxieties and adjustments in patriarchal arrangements. The economic empowerment of women by working or inheritance brings an awareness of the fissures between ideological and material production (subjugated even after being economically equal), makes the oppression visible, and breeds an awareness of the inherent contradiction and opens up the possibility of resistance as well. Extra income by women (sometimes better than male members of the family) necessitates alternate forms of parade of masculinity.

With the extension of globalization, liberalization, privatization and urbanization, the relation of class, caste and community is rearticulated, and since “women’s link with cast and community”, observes Nivedita Menon, “is made through family” (quoted in Ghosh, “Contextualizing Domestic Violence ...”, 61), the form of violence in private and state level gets changed with historicity and the locale. Sangari points out, “[Patriarchies] are simultaneously located in specific modes of production, in class structures and mobility, in particular forms of class-caste status and inequality, and intersected by specific forms of self-identification with custom, tradition or religion” (Sangari, 373). Often Even female body becomes marker of class or community and makes women vulnerable to violence.

Clarifying his position as a deliberate portrayer of middle class, Dattani observed, “[here] writing about the middle class is seen as unfashionable” (quoted in Chadhuri, 24). The upward mobile middleclass, more than 200 million in number -- maintaining a fragile balance between value and disvalue -- forms an appropriate site for the dramatic tension between conflicting emotions and desires. Dattani maintains that his attempt to write about working class people would amount to an outsider’s view since he does actually belong to the middle class and naturally,. ”The setting for all of Dattani’s plays then, is necessarily embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class Indian family, and this is the context from which he operates” (Chaudhuri, 24). His plays expore what lies under the facades which characters and families put on in order to conform to the normative truth, but in the process reveal the essential loneliness...the emotional price they pay for successful appearance in their need to belong and to cope with social vigilance. However, they are not long to maintain the mask: “...their prejudice, hypocrisy, jealousy and sense of deep guilt stand exposed” (Meena, 8).

### **Marriage**

If domesticity is the chosen area of the playwright, he must direct his attention to the institution of marriage, which, in a hetero-patriarchal society, is the foundation stone of the family. Yep held, “As an institution, heterosexuality is rooted in gender hierarchy and manifested through its central mechanism, marriage” (Yep, 29). Then again, to put it in terms of Yep, “Implicit in the marriage contract is men’s appropriation and exploitation of women’s bodies (e.g., sexual, reproductive) and labor (e.g., domestic, emotional)” (quoted in Yep, 29). Hence, the institution of heterosexuality positions man as “sexual

subject” and Woman as “sexual object” (Jackson, quoted in Yep, 29) and defines sex in purely phallogocentric terms. The identities/roles conjectured for women regulate the behavioural and attitudinal choice of both men and women and women are valorized or denigrated according to her conformity to or rebellion against cultural expectations. Marriage is sometimes exposed as a labour contract that ties women in unpaid domestic work commonly trivialized as “housework” (Tyson, 98.) Women are considered non-workers and remain unpaid. What she receives from the man/provider is not in exchange for her work, but as a gift handed out to perpetuate his interest and maintenance of labour power. The wives/mothers in Dattani’s world like Sonal, Dolly, Alka and Aruna are subjected to various forms of direct physical appropriation of their labour which Guillaumin termed *sexage* – such as the appropriation of women’s time, sexual obligation and care for dependent family members and healthy male members (referred to in Tyson, 99).

Marriage has remained a powerful tool by which society maintained and validated a lifestyle based on peaceful and conscientious cohabitation of partners and permanent sexual partnership from time immemorial, but the problem arises when the tough cultural policing of sexuality and sexual practice under the garb of so-called liberalism in modern India valorizes only the\_hetero-sexual intra-religious marriage (based on reproductibility, preferably son) relegating to the margin or expelling other kinds of (nonreproductive) sexual union. Dattani takes issue with the Indian custom of arranged marriage that privileges family prestige over personal choice, subordination of the bride’s family, validation of heterosexual relationship as only “normal”. In the Indian variety of meritocracy the husband and his family top the pyramid, and the bride and the

bride's family occupy the lowest stratum, the relational importance gets complicated if the bride's family holds remarkably greater property and prestige. Sobha Venkatesh Ghosh rightly observes, "in most Indian marriages women enter as strangers into an already structured world, the creation of a permanent inequality in the relationship of the natal and conjugal homes, and over-arching domestic ideologies that legislate gender status and role" (Ghosh, "Contextualizing Domestic Violence ...", 58). In Dattani's plays, however, the bride's family is not presented as merely passive recipient of exploitation, rather, as a part of the patriarchal mechanism, plays its own part in oppression. The woman is regarded as a burden and could be given away in marriage. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* we meet a brother – exploited by the in-laws of his sisters strictly protective of his sisters from "men", marries one to a "letch" and the other to his former gay partner.

Most threatening is the fact, as Hossang Merchant puts it, that: "...most homosexuals get married due to social pressure.... Most adjust to a double life, so do their wives...there is no greater misery in such marriages than in most Indian marriages which are arranged" (Merchant, xvi). His plays are a fair case study of how social intolerance works in the oppression and extermination of any outsiders to the social matrix of marriage. In the feel-good comedy *Do the Needful* Dattani explores how society's hegemonic intolerance forces two rebels (a gay man, already divorced, and a Hindu girl in an affair with a Muslim man) into a marriage contract/compromise ignoring all other considerations (difference in community, educational background, taste, culture etc) under the veneer of liberal cosmopolitanism. The discursive privilege the marriage enjoys is evident from its ubiquitous nature cutting across the cross sections of society,

and even the way it destabilizes the power mechanism based otherwise so effectively on class (the liftman gets upperhand with owner of the flat). However, a classy resistance is conceptualized by subverting the tragic potential into something liberating and refreshing – which is a fine strategy of silence -- “Teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup” (*Do the Needful*, 142) (your silence and mine as well). What the plays bring out is not the undesirability of the institution, but these oppressive aspects.

However, in Dattani an absolute freedom from the pressure of tradition, culture or family is hardly conceived as the goal or even a possibility. Rather he tries to forward his argument against the stricture of exclusion and inclusion which so rigorously projects substantial number of people as outsiders like homosexuals and hijras, and also uncovers the thin crust to expose the fractured narrative which exploits its insiders like women and children.

### **Gender**

One of the recurring issues that surfaces in Dattani’s plays is his characters’ struggle to break free from the hetero-patriarchal intolerance of any discontinuity in the regime of gender identity and gender hierarchy in the specific cultural context. Indian society still maintains the centrality of patriarchy and fixity of the gender polarity. The patriarchy reinforces itself by privileging a habit of seeing, a way of looking at life using men’s experience as standard to judge the experience of both sexes and thereby ignoring woman’s take. We meet a set of people programmed to see life with internalized patriarchal norms and values. The plays attempt to exhibit the culture- specific Indian urban variation of the operation though on a deliberately varying screen. We also feel

how the inclusive Indian culture is monolithized by neo-colonial forces in name of reclamation of the discourse of Indian tradition and is used to perpetuate hetero-patriarchy which is nothing but a colonial legacy. As the playwright himself remarked, “You can’t talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with the cook or actually having a sex life – that isn’t Indian either – that’s confrontational even it is Indian” (quoted in Mee, 319).

Hetero-patriarchy is an overarching system of male dominance through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Tamsin Wilton (1996) observed: “This heteropolarity is necessary for patriarchy, for it must be possible to distinguish men from women in order to institute and reproduce a power differential that is (precisely) predicated upon that difference” (quoted in Yep, 31). The oppressive hetero-patriarchal power is visible in various ways- validation of women’s oppression by marriage, changing name, restricting movement, stunting aspiration, compelling women to tolerate husbands’ sexual promiscuity, forcing unwilling woman into a marriage, physically assaulting the pregnant wife leading to the birth of a spastic child, tricking the ignorant woman and the gay man into a marriage of convenience, defining woman as a sex object and marketable commodity, exploitation of child’s need for love for sexual gratification turning her into either frozen (like Shanta) or promiscuous (like Mala) -- both categories detested by patriarchy -- and so on. Stories of Baa, Daksha, Dolly and Kiran provide further evidence. The double standard applied to women as wife and mistress, as well as the slippery morality allowed for men is dealt with explicitly.

Steven Seidman and Kath Weston observed, “For centuries, the biological act of reproduction has been, and continues to be, a ‘defining feature’ of kinship and families” (quoted in Elia, “Queering Relationships”, 64). In a hetero-patriarchal society, reproduction becomes the axis around which evolves the binary of men and women. Hasmukh Mehta realizes: “I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son ...Because the son will carry on the family name?” (*Where There’s A Will*, 475) Following an inevitable logic the absence of reproduction is conceived in terms of the woman’s inability, and Uma continues to see the doctor though he finds nothing wrong with her and suggests a check up for her husband.

The ideological contingency of patriarchal arrangement is the cooption of women in its network, and possession of their consent in their own subjugation. Patriarchy ceases to be a one-way traffic of male domination over women through the internalization of its norms by its victim-turned-agent. As family becomes the site for struggle over power and resources, the perpetrators of violence find women allies and secure their complicity and active participation in inflicting abuse on other female members. Women members are inserted in hierarchy based on marriage, maternal status, age, ranking among daughters-in-law and so on. This differential access to power and resource leads to re-division of household works, antagonism between relations and “re-entrenchment of patriarchy” as the more privileged women become or act as “surrogate or violent agent” (Ghosh, “Contextualizing Domestic Violence...” 58) of male hegemony and control. Women are also incorporated into the patriarchal narrative: mother in law instigates her son to hurt his wife; the wife colludes with the father-in-law to destroy the career of her dancer husband to make him a man. Most telling is the way the mother

becomes an accomplice to deprive the girl by grafting the third leg of the Siamese twin onto the boy, while his twin sister had the better claim. The possibility of women collectivity remains unrealized and, even in the non-nuclear families, women members feel isolated. Natal families show reluctance either to intervene in the sanctity of marriage or take the responsibility of the woman. Patriarchy also operates through the constant pressure exerted to repress what it conceives as feminine within a man and denigration of rebels.

Gender also works in the world of profession and vocation. As Kumkum Sangari rightly observes, “[I]n practice, the public and private not only interpenetrate, but are produced together in varied and often systematic ways connected by condensation and displacement ...” (Sangari, 367). The father (Patel) sharply reacts against his son’s (Chandan) helping his mother with her knitting, but bothers little – though very much concerned about Tara’s health -- about his daughter’s career who might have proved smarter in the work world. The transgressive act of taking up dance as a career by a man poses a major threat to the gender ideology and every measure is taken to deskill him in the woman’s art.

Dattani’s preoccupation with gender question, to quote the playwright himself, has much “to do with my own comfort with both the feminine and the masculine self in me” (“Of Page and Stage”, 32). He also adds “since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It’s subsumed, Yes, it is marginalized, but it fights back” (“Of Page and Stage”, 34). He is contemptuous of traditional mother figures and de-stereotypes the

images in characters like Bah, Aruna, Prema Gowda, Sonal and Bharati; and creates “calculated troubleshooter” like Ratna (Chaudhuri, 48). However, the playwright also states, “I don’t mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry in our mind are politically generated images and we accept them to be as true... My characters are simply a personification of my perception” (Nair, 2001).

Dattani’s family dramas present gender stereotypes, but only with a view to exploding them. While his plays are revelations of the endemic and pervasive realities in women’s life of being victim of domestic violence, to borrow the words of Rinki Bhattacharya, “they are sagas of immense courage that challenge accepted cultural ideals of womanhood and question conforming to female destiny” (Bhattacharya, 13). Besides, they expose the politics of power that lurks beneath patriarchal constructions of fixed gender identities/roles and proliferation of the hyperbolic versions of “man” and “woman.” Dattani’s work shows quite interestingly how the policing of gender can be equally damaging to men and women at both domestic and social levels. The question of gender identity has been developed in some of his plays into the more crucial issue of sexual identity, dealing with the travails of the gays and transsexuals who do neither belong to the family nor to society. However, there is still a sense of the family—a family, if you will, of sexual deviants—loving and betraying one another in a hetero-patriarchal society and at times revolting against it. The individual in Dattani therefore largely suffers as a consequence of an oppressive cultural ideology, which, with all its prejudice and duplicity, determines the moral fabric of the family.

With a view to building a gender-just society, for last decades, domestic violence has been at the forefront of various feminist movements. The world conferences on woman organized by United Nations first held in Mexico 1975, and especially in Vienna conference 1993 on human rights, woman's rights are recognized as basic human rights and violation is defined as the violation of fundamental human rights. The theory of Family Violence gradually gave way to the theory of Violence Against Women, and brought domestic violence out of private sphere to violation of woman's basic human right to equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity (Adelman, 196). It also marked a paradigm shift with the introduction of a new concept of human rights itself. The state responsibility and accountability in the case of Domestic Violence ensued a process of gendering of human rights, and whereas previously the territory of human rights violation was limited within the relation between government and individual, now onward the state is directed to control and regulate the relations between individuals and family members as well.

In India, the New woman's movement taking its shape in 1980s, took up the issue of violence against women ensued from asymmetry of gender, legal bias and lack of women's citizenship rights and mainly centered round incidents of violence against women, with special emphasis on the protest against custodial rapes, dowry murders, suttee, procurement of minor for prostitution etc (Ghosh, "Contextualizing Domestic Violence...", 51). Though the movements offered a message of the political awakening among women, as Flavia Agnes argued, "placing dowry violence on a pedestal" in their movement, Indian feminists got incorporated into conservative agency of counting gender violence more as exceptionalism than as the defining context of woman's life

(Agnes, 109-10). In 1983 and 1986 criminal laws were amended to include the “cruelty to wife” under the impasse of law, but the term remains rather clumsy and therefore difficult to explain and easy to circumvent. “Cruelty” was defined as any act resulting in “grave injury or danger to life, limb or death” (Ghosh, “Contextualizing Domestic Violence... ” 52), leaving out of its ambit other non-physical forms of violence. Moreover, with its excessive stress on dowry, police and legal system showed reluctance to register the offence unless it is appended on dowry demand.

After the 1990s domestic violence began to be seen as an endemic and pervasive reality in woman’s life and violation of her fundamental rights. Then onward the paradigm shifted in consonance with the international laws and regulations regarding violence against women. The LCWRI’s (Lawyers’ Collective Women’s Rights Initiative) definition of Domestic Violence encompasses “any act, omission or conduct which is of such a nature as to harm or injure or has the potential of harming or injuring the health, safety or well-being of the person aggrieved or any child in the domestic relationship and includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and verbal and mental abuse and economic abuse” (quoted in Ghosh, “Contextualizing Domestic Violence... ”, 52). The form of Domestic violence of course varies with the material, cultural and ideological context, geographical locale, and social structure. The 2001 bill against domestic violence moved by the Government of India was rejected by different feminist groups on the ground of its overwhelming prioritization of welfare of family over the wellbeing of the woman. It held that, in order to be counted as a legal offense, the violence should be the habitual assault, cruelty of conduct, forcing women to live “immoral” life or otherwise “harm[ing] or injur[ing]” the aggrieved, and when it is not done for “his own protection or

protection of his or another's property" (quoted in Ghosh, 54), thus giving the perpetrator greater opportunity of self-defense than the victim of redress. No mention of child custody, right over matrimonial property and right to continue in marital home was made, in effect, compelling women to live in abusive environment for economic vulnerability, fear of losing children, lack of support outside home and family structure.

Various patriarchal state apparatuses were activated to resist the perspectival shift. The discourse of Indian culture "Bharatiya sanskriti" was forwarded to justify the sanctity of family and preservation of marriage. The structure of normative "family" and notional "Indian woman" were accorded dignity and honour which necessitates the disempowerment of women. The majoritarian state policy interprets Hindu as Indian which valorizes a specific version of womanhood, and thus keeps other women beyond its ambit (Ghosh, "Contextualizing Domestic Violence..." ,55). The state policy of co-opting women in its ideological rubric is attempted to be realized by assigning women public role and giving agency in a structure basically patriarchal. The problem lies in the fact, even if the state is recognized as a "stabilizer of patriarchy and class interest", it is still regarded as the "guarantor of rights and entitlements to its citizens" (Adelman, 197).

Dattani touches upon this very contemporary and burning issue of domestic violence in some of his plays. Kiran is compelled to live in a severely abusive atmosphere where she was a victim of the "habitual" violence of her husband first interpreting it as his way of showing care and then due to an inability to convince her parents of the impossibility of continuing in the holy bonding. Both Kiran and Baa recount the same story of either hiding their scars and thus preferring to be hurt in covered body surfaces or

explaining it away as to the consequence of an accidental fall. Even the legal system grants the perpetrator of violence an easy bail. Dolly is beaten up in her pregnancy leading to the birth of a spastic child. Most importantly, Dattani does not try to offer any reason/justification for such acts and presents them in black and white.

Dattani consciously avoids what Lois Tyson termed “ oversimplified, negative view of feminism that still persists in...culture at large-the home, the work place, the media, and so on ” (Tyson, 82). He de-stereotypes both the image of “real” man – essentially hetero-sexual, rational, assertive, decisive, protective/patronizing, autonomous, and self-sufficient and fund provider and that of women – compulsorily hetero-sexual, irrational, submissive, incoherent, nurturing, contingent, relational and economically dependent. Men are exposed to use aggression only to block their unmanly fear and pain, and women fantasize (the utopia transgressing both class and gender ethos) sexual liaison, and contrary to expected concealment, announce it to answer back to their husband’s promiscuity.

### **Child Abuse**

The endorsement of women’s lib in India initiated the process of ‘breaking the silence’ about some of the issues wrapped in secrecy for centuries regarding women’s experience, and with the acknowledgement of the existence of child sexual abuse in our society, got exposed “family’s best-preserved skeletons from the ‘khandaani closets’” (Virani, 46). Every society has its own arbitrary criteria of defining the border between silence and speech into which experience is divided. Patriarchy maintains its centrality in both ways - -first by its eloquence in condemning incestuous women and by implication, subjugating

them to the privileged role of angel in the house, and, secondly, by its silence about men's role in creating such deviants. If the promiscuity of adult could be safely deposited into account of the "bad" women, the child sexual abuse remains, by definition/implication, beyond the boundary of language/speech. The extent of society's denial to accept the fact could well be gauged the way Freud was compelled to replace his observation about bitter childhood sexual abuse being the root cause of most cases of women hysteria with that of Electra complex. In the same manner, Sandor Ferenczi (for his insight into CSA), John Caffey (findings of internal injury of children due to sexual abuse) and others were shouted down. It is only with the publication of Henry Kempe's *The Battered Child Syndrome* in 1962, the phenomenon got accepted as an "in-family evil" (referred to in Virani, 44). However, the victims still continued to face denial and strategic minimization of the abuse. (In India doctors continue their indifference and denial either by avoiding any investigation in the matter or terminologizing them with other medical jargons.

Child sexual abuse encompasses acts like the adult exposing his own or touching the child's genitalia or vice versa; involving children in pornography; having oral, anal or vaginal intercourse with children; making any kind of sexual suggestion; engaging children in sexual activities among themselves; and inserting any foreign object in child's body for his/her sexual pleasure (Virani, 6). According to Driver and Erosion, the definition of child sexual abuse refers to "any sexual behaviour directed to a person under sixteen of age without that person's informed consent", (quoted in Virani, 7).

Indian parents detecting the fact (in most cases the child guards the shameful secret or is either hushed up or denied credibility), concentrates on the physical aspects and social standing -- the emotional feelings being locked up. As the child grows up, s/he displays long-term “sleeper effect[s]”: mental health problem (anxiety, phobia, depression, suicide, addiction,), sexual traumatization (propensity towards sexual feelings and attitude leading to developmentally inappropriate and interpersonally dysfunctional relation, promiscuity, aversion to sex, confusion of sex with love and care showing, re-victimization), inappropriate parenting skill (over-protectiveness, fertility control, abusing own children in sexual or non-sexual way), stigmatization (negative and shameful self-image), social dysfunction (delinquency, criminal behaviour, violence against self or other, victim role), the feelings of powerlessness (curving of the child’s desire and sense of efficacy making him anxious, inefficient and escapist, eating and sleeping disorder, disassociation, employment problem), sense of betrayal (loss of faith on near ones, vulnerability to re-victimization, discomfoting intimate relationship, marital disharmony, ) etc (Virani, 64-6). Most importantly, the act remains outside the ambit of legal sanction due to lack of evidence, and no law can save an adult from his/her childhood abuser.

The issue of child sexual abuse is set in a larger frame of patriarchal power play by Dattani. Since the hetero-patriarchal framework of ethics dumps shame and sin on victim rather than the perpetrator, the child becomes a survivor of sexual trauma through developing defensive strategies to protect his or her inner core like repression, denial, detachment and dissociation and even denial of access to memory of sexual abuse. Virani observed, “The cycle continues, wheels within wheels, spokes of shame being added each

time the child recalls the sexual abuse and the sense of powerlessness” (Virani, 65). The “survivor cycle” which the victims undergo serves the interest of patriarchy: “confusion” about own identity (child’s inability to stop the thing which s/he does not like, confusion about what is actually happening and to whom to turn to, doubt about its moral status), self-estrangement (counting oneself as bad, abnormal, unwanted), sadism (hiding/protecting the “real” me from being exposed, aggravation of torture by confirmed silence), entrapment in sense of guilt (shifting responsibility onto oneself for allowing, attempt to seal the secret, confinement within the cave of “It is My fault), negative image of self and isolation (sense of being lone sufferer and deserving for being extra-ordinarily mean). In this regard we may quote the observation by Dr. Rani Raute, “women who have survived in dysfunctional relationships, tend to react negatively when they enter a functional one. They may even try and spoil it for themselves with some kind of psychobabble” (quoted in Virani, 198). When the child is emotionally, physically and financially dependent on the abuser, the sense of helplessness and betrayal and need for secrecy put huge pressure on the victim. The child gets silenced, and as Pinky Virani observes, “Ethics, thus, is what society can use as its framework of values and with which it can justify ‘interference’ in the private life of the perpetrator and his victims” (Virani, 43). Patriarchy thus ensures its centrality by detesting the frozen and promiscuous women – both unable to satisfy the patriarchal demand- and when exposed to be its author, tries to absolve itself by a simple formula of “she made me do it”.

*Thirty Days in September*, to put it in words of Anuja Gupta and Aswini Ilawadi, “is part of RAHI’s effort to turn incest/child sexual abuse from a private issue to a public one and help women survivors come into recovery” (Gupta and Ilawadi, Foreword, IX).

The artistic contribution forwarded by the playwright thus serves the vital purpose of “breaking the silence and myth surrounding the perpetrators, victims and survivors in our society” (Gupta and Ilawadi, “Foreword”, IX). By situating the play in an upper middleclass family, he also shattered the defensive myth – to put in Virani’s term – “...what happens among People Like Them, specially People Like That (Plat), does not touch, and therefore should not concern, People Like Us (Plus)” (Virani, 12). It was part of Dattani’s conscious design -- “I chose this setting because I did not want them to dismiss sexual abuse as something that does not happen to people like them” (quoted in Bite, 7). The six year old Shanta and seven year old Mala abused by their brother and uncle (the same person), justify what Syeeda Hameed in her opening address to the seminar “Recognizing Violence Against Children in the Private Sphere” said, “It can be a myth that home is the safest place for children” (quoted in Virani, 14). In the same seminar Kiran Bedi observed, “the victim cuts across all categories of class, caste, religion and educational background; the offender belongs to no particular age group” (Quoted in Virani, 15). Hence most cases of CSA are categorized as “invisible crime”, to put it in police terminology, and this is “a denied social syndrome and we can do nothing. We can only deal with evidence” (Quoted in Virani, 18). Dattani’s is an attempt to break into the cultural reticence and provide the absent language that may reverse the strategy of transferring the loss of ‘honour’ from the victim’s part on to the perpetrators.

### **Hijra community**

In the course of “uncovering some of the hidden India” (Mortimer, “A note”, 4) Dattani explores an area outside the ambit of social relation, a periphery which hijras are pushed into by the highly gendered and sexist society that fails to define them in terms of social relations. However, as Kira Hall observes, “Marginalized both socially and spatially, the hijras have created an elaborate network that spans all of India, establishing a divergent social space that both parallels and opposes organizations of gender in the dichotomous system that excludes them” (Hall, 429). They are institutionalized as third sex and are identified by a flamboyant and subversive semiotic system distinguished by the unique choices of dress, gesture and discourse. The hijra identity is enmeshed in an extremely complicated network of performative markers (sartorial, sexual and presentational) than mere anatomical – It is not merely the penetration which determines the koti-panti discourse, but the body is located in multiplicity of disciplines and difference, which include economy, religion, class, cast, the language choice, behavioural pattern (whether completely feminine or superficial) and others problematizing each other (sometime they call themselves musulmans for circumcision and some times for marrying a Muslim panti). The presence of the concept of third sex and other varieties of sexuality in the narrative of Indian consciousness is evident from the abundance of transgender desire, stories of same sex procreation and other non-normative fantasies in mythological, folk-lore, Vedic and Puranic literature.

Ancient, medieval and colonial (still powerfully prevalent in postcolonial India) narratives, specially literature, represent the hijra people through society’s own ideological agenda and framing premises, while the objects of representation themselves remain silent. The pan-Indian acceptance of the third-ness of sexuality in ancient time is

evident in the convention of dividing humanity into three sexual categories -- man, woman and napumsaka -- depending on presence and absence of certain physical features, procreative ability and the differentiation between material or physical (dravyalinga) and psychic sex (bhavalinga) (Zwilling and Sweet, 365). They were often called “Kliba”, the signification of the term ranged from eunuch, sterile or impotent man, and man having oral or anal sex with man, transvestite, hermaphrodite to man giving birth to female children alone. In Islamic medieval India the focus was shifted on to the eunuchs (“khoja” or emasculated man) in their important courtly and imperial role as political adviser and administrator, religious figure and slave -- specially recruited as protector of the female domain. Their social and embodied difference -- both for many of them being imported from outside the boundary of the state and for the inability to perpetuate the lineage -- stereotyped them as clever, strong and loyal servants in a world of nepotism and shifting loyalty.

With increasing colonial intervention, gendered, sexist and racist principles got functional: European travelers tried to explain their high status in oriental imperial and religious sector by referring to the not-man aspect availing them to handle women without impropriety, and thus, sexualized the role of eunuchs. They could not understand or appreciate the sentiment of veneration of these “ugly brutes”, and their narrative of gendered sexuality replaced slave discourse with sexualized love. Colonial narrative, however, repudiated their slave or third sex status and projected hijras as one of the castes or tribes stratified by gender and religion. The Criminal Tribe Act of 1871 officially included the caste in the list of criminal tribes, compulsorily under registration, surveillance and control. Citizens were encoded in gendered sexuality and all the

previous discourses of active and passive sexuality that were accorded free and slave status were uniformly reinterpreted as masculine and feminine or natural and unnatural propensities. This secularization of the discourse on the eunuchs resulted in epistemic shift of understanding of “homoeroticism, social hierarchy and embodied difference” (Reddy, 25-8). Male impotence was categorized as the defining feature of eunuchs: cross-dressing and performances like dancing of men in public places were prohibited; laws were passed criminalizing their body and proscribing their labour -- sexual or asexual work/occupation. The knowledge legitimized the moral condemnation and subjugation of the criminal castes by which these bodies must be servile, regulated and control, in effect, made docile Reddy, 25-30).

Indian culture had found a very Indian way to “...validate a positive identity for hijras by identifying their alternative gender role with deities and mythic figures of the Great Tradition of Hinduism” (Nanda, 13). Apart from their social prestige derived from their position in Muslim court, Hinduism invests the impotent hijras with the paradoxical power of generating fertility. “The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable [are] – marriage and birth – ironically the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature” (“Seven Steps...” 10-11). In India, Sadhir Kakkar observes “...the subordination of the individual to the super ordinate family interest and relationships is a preeminent value” (Kakar, 124). Hence in an Indian mode, the hijra people try to situate their identity in relational and social context and position themselves in the discourse of marriage. Of course the “Baddhai” hijras, ideally leading ascetic life, are of greater honour, but the concept of marriage between a “koti” (female) and “panti”

(male) and even of “kanda” hijra as sex workers are equally prevalent. *Kamasutra*’s mention of the figure of “sukumarika” appeared in ancient Indian literature.

But the hegemonic allegiance to the sexual dualism in the sexist society of modern India, which dominated with neo-colonial forces in order to enjoy its discursive privilege, tends to oppress the erotic aspect to the point of immorality and unnaturalness. Yet the sexual arousal and sexual appeal of the outcasts to the mainstream led to sexual intimacy between the hijras and so-called “normal” man. In this case, either the non-normative practice is kept under secrecy or the minority is cast out and even exterminated. On the other hand, the increasing regularizing of secular temperament corresponds to the weakening of the mythical sanction of their role as ritual performers leading to the decline of their ascetic importance.

The hetero-patriarchal society feels it disturbing to allow the hijras the sexual role which is not only threatening to the male identity but is transgressive to the feminine image since their mimicry of the image, to follow Homi Bhaba, is at once a resemblance and menace. The ideals subscribed to and the practices deployed to enact the gender role as well as the repeated political claim clearly mark the hijra people’s identification with female sex. To look like woman is highly valued and cherished, but it is not an unproblematic imitation of the role. Their loud clap announces their difference and allegiance to the category, and signals destructive potential -- social, symbolic and physical. In fact, as Kira Hall observes, “By employing what some Indian sociologists have named as *lil e-uarh dviarthi bhasa* ‘obscene and double-meaning language’, the hijras are able to assume a position of control in their interactions with the public,

inviting their non-hijra listeners to enter a linguistic space that questions dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality” (Hall, , 432). Their sexual ambiguity perhaps gets reflected in their linguistic ambiguity from historical period. Niccolao Manucci, an Italian physician traveler in mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, thought they were friendly to women and inimical to men owing to the jealousy for what they were deprived of (Hall, 432). The European travel reports of the court eunuch frequently highlight the verbal insolence with physical cruelty, vulgar language and oral abomination. In the modern period, their speech style may be described as symptomatic of gender disphoria -- different from women by lewd jokes, obscene and aggressive style, and from men by penchant for gossip and excessive chatter (Hall, 436-7). Traditional Indian prejudice accords their speech a negative performativity since they can stop lineage with curse/utterance of omen by virtue of their own impotence. Hall further adds, “The Hindi-speaking hijras I spoke with in Banaras see their use of verbal insult not as a logical consequence of a self-motivated withdrawal from society but as a necessary survival technique in a society that enforces their marginalization” (Hall, 442). Being denied access to the “normal” epistemic standard, like disabled people, the term “hijra” is often used metaphorically to point out the ineffectiveness of the referent by writers like Hindi poet Ved Prakash Vatuk, Khushwant Singh and others. The hijras live without “sharm” (shame), propriety associated with class, caste and gender. G. Morris Carstairs notes that the hijras he worked with "had the security of knowing that they had no vestige of dignity or social position to maintain; and their shamelessness made people reluctant to provoke their obscene retaliation in public" (quoted in Hall, 445). They often use abuse to fight marginalization, to strengthen solidarity and reclaim “izzat” (respect). The hijras’ constant reference to the secret male

body parts and implied prostitution shamelessly collapses traditional divisions of the secret and the known, private and public, home and market, feminine and masculine (Hall, 447-48). Interestingly, they avoid “mardana gall” (Hall, 450), manly abuse, which includes violence against women to settle the anxiety to show masculinity. Moreover, to quote Hall again, “the hijras have a kind of between-sex status in contemporary India, their very existence serves as a theoretical challenge to previous characterizations of women's speech and men's speech as discursive styles indexically derived from the sex of the speaker” (Hall 452). Their enactment and production of the gender identity both reflect their yearning for femininity and at the same time parody the gender role by the very attempt at imitation. Thus they embody a potential ambivalence in India’s cultural universe.

Apart from the threat to normative body, the sexual discourse of Hijra people disturbs the normative structure in another way: their sexual cartography differentiates gender depending on sexual or gender performativity rather than anatomy. Centered on penetration in sexual intercourse, *pantis* refer to the penetrative masculine men and *kotis* to the receptive feminized men as well as *narans* i.e. all women. It also refers to the complexity and specificity of the configuration of gender identity that varies with the spatial, temporal and life/history positioning and could be contested, negotiated and reconstructed. In fact, the cartographic understanding which positioned their self-definition against the *koti-panti* spectrum, challenges the hermeneutical theorization of gender difference by showing the embeddedness of sexual difference in other differences and problematizes the construct of hijras as personification of third sex (Reddy, 74-7). In a research among transvestites in Salvador Brazil, Kulick observed that they have

changed the “man/ woman schema into man/not-man” -- penetrator and recipient (Kulick, 579).

Yet the fact remains, with the decline of their traditional role the hijras have become a butt of sexual exploitation and are being engaged in criminal activities. Only secrecy permits the practices to slip through the moral net. But the complicity arises, as Dattani shows in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, when Subbu, a ‘normal man’ attempts to acknowledge his relationship with a hijra publicly, through marriage. The young, beautiful hijra, Kamla, is burnt down.

### **Sexuality**

A question is asked in one of Dattani’s plays, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, and is reiterated through most of his work --“What Makes a Man a Man?” (*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, 55) Judith Butler once observed that despite the production of normalized subject by the disciplinary society and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain, “the distinction between sex and gender comes to seem increasingly unstable”, “a free floating artifice” (Butler, 6). She farther argued that our gendered/sexed body has “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, 136). The construction of coherence only conceals the gender discontinuities Mahesh Dattani is the first dramatist in India to bring the issue of homosexuality on stage and he does it with a boldness which is really quite ahead of his time.

Foucault claimed, “...sexuality, far from being a natural force repressed by the imposition of power in the interests of social order, was deployed through various micro-

political processes” (quoted in Wilton, 516). The sexual stratification system socially privileges heterosexuality which enjoys social legitimacy, juridical-administrative recognition, symbolic esteem and moral/ethico-cultural validity. “Heterosexuality is not an independent and stable master category but rather, a subservient and unstable construct in need of constant affirmation and protection” (Yep, 12). This is a very powerful process of othering which creates categories that are attached lesser importance, deemed as less consequential, less authorized, and often recognized to be less human – a process which creates categories based on gender, race, class, sexuality and even ability. The process of normalizing of hegemonic heterosexuality presents itself as an area of knowledge foreclosed to analysis which is to be accepted uncritically. In fact, “Heterosexuality is not merely sexual; it is social” (Yep, 28); heterosexuality pervades our life as an institution, as identity, as practice and as experience. Even after cornering homosexuality as illegal, irreligious, un/anti-social, unnatural, abnormal and immoral, heterosexuality cannot absolve itself from the anxiety of losing identity: “heterosexuality secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachment of its contaminated other, homosexuality” (Fuss, quoted in Yep, 12). The destabilizing potential of gender structure of the discourse is perhaps the most threatening to the hetero-patriarchy. Moreover, hetero-polarity becomes the essential instrument for patriarchy to perpetuate the power differential.

In ancient India variation of sexual configuration was venerated and tolerated, recognized under cover of stories of circumlocution. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their book *Same Sex Love in India: Reading From Literature and History*, record that

before the 19<sup>th</sup> century such relations were not actively persecuted despite disapproval. Different circumstances- occupational, cultural, religious- leading to extreme sexual segregation in single sex institutions, obsession with mother image as well as misogyny had ever encouraged condoned same sex love. However, in modern India, observes Suparna Bhaskaran, “Heteropatriarchal ideologies of shame and duty coupled with cultural and structural violence continued to be powerfully articulated by the post and neo- colonial forces of homophobia” (Bhaskaran, 27). Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code reads: “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.” (quoted in Bhaskaran,, 15) The postcolonial nationalists’ responses to non-normative sexuality have defined a colonial sexual code as “Indian tradition”, and posited the advocacy of civil right of homosexuals as elitist mimicry of the west. Thus, legal bias legitimates exploitation of the myrmidons of law; psychiatrists level it as gender identity disorder, and medical science finds homosexuals as carrier of HIV. Putting the practice under moral scanner, hetero-patriarchy prevents the practitioners from entering the ambit of civil rights like marriage, adopting children, inheriting parent’s property, and protest against discrimination and so on. Consequently, most of them suffer from humiliation, sense of guilt and alienation leading ego alien homosexuals to commit suicide. The distorted and derogatory representation of such relations in movies like *Girlfriend*, *Masti* and *Kal Ho Na Ho* makes the case worse for the ostracized minority.

However, at last increasing social visibility through sharing public places, mushrooming queer organizations, proliferation of help lines, recent legalization of such relation under French law at Goa, marches and other organized protests are helping homosexuals to come out of their cloistered existence. In addition to these factors, as Anjali Arondekar puts it, “The transnationalism has emerged as a heuristic modality with endless promise, creating connecting conversations across a diverse and previously segregated range of spatialities and temporalities” (Arondekar, 114). In 2001, NAZ Foundation in collaboration with a progressive legal-reform group filed a petition against the Government seeking to declare the section as violation of some of the fundamental rights of Indian citizens like equality (Article 14), the right to freedom (Article 19), and the right to life and liberty (Article 21) of the Indian Constitution. The petition referred to the proliferating global conscience, the demand of post-colonial India, the historical/traditional support for indegenity and acceptance of such relationship, relationality between citizen/subject and civil rights, privacy of sexual life and most importantly, the necessity of coming out to take precaution against HIV. The term MSM was chosen carefully and unlike USA where the emphasis shifted from “protection of act” to “protection of identity”, it depended on issues of civil rights and medical risk, and tried to formulate the continuance of the statute as instance of judicial westernization and legacy of an outmoded Christian law. The petition did not see success at first, but it was able to bolster the conscientious in its favour. Amartya Sen in his brief note remarked that “the Civil War in the United States began the same year as the establishment of 377 (1861) and that while the United States had managed to abolish slavery as a result of the war, the Indian state had, as yet, not stepped up to its promise as a modern democracy by

refusing to abolish Section 377” (Quoted in Arondekar, 118-120). The 2009 dictum of Delhi High Court went in favour of de-criminalization of homosexuality in accordance with global pressure and increasing protest from grass root workers for this cause, victims and a major portion of intelligentsia. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court repealed the verdict in 2013 on ground of constitutional restraint necessitating political consciousness or consciousness of political parties for a need of a breathing space for all.

Even before *Fire*, films like *Andaaj*, *Sangam*, *Sholay*, *Subhah* and the creative writings like the *Golden Gate*, *The Starry Night*, and *The God of Small Things* have addressed the mindset. Dattani took up the daring enterprise of treating the subject on stage – a dangerously potential arena of direct public contact. Talking of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, McRae observed, “It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behavior and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates” (McRae, “A Note”, 45) Dattani’s plays also bring out the threatening fact of the marriages in which the homosexual persons are tricked into by their desire and compulsion to belong to the fold of secured mainstream life patronized by establishment.

### **Art**

In Dattani’s world, art ceases to be a mere aesthetic pursuit and enters into discourse making, often redefining the inter- and intra-dependence of the art, artist and the socio cultural context. It determines the operation of power and controlling strategy of family, state and society at large. We are introduced into a world where social

surveillance is active in the arena of art with a double standard. Art is both a product of consumption and an object of denigration. *Arthashastra*, chapter-xxvii, states in a clause that the rules prescribed for the ganikas were also applicable to dancers, actors, singers, musicians and pimps. The monolithic state of independent India, unable to interrogate the mode of practice of associating the artistic pursuit of women with prostitution, perpetuates it by the program of rehabilitation. Instead of promoting, de-stigmatizing and preserving the art of Bharatanatyam performed by Devadasis, which could be a part of the process of reclaiming the identity of multicultural India, the monopolizing leaders triggered off the mission of reforming the practitioners and thus permanently affiliating their status as prostitutes. If state regulates its production, foreign recipients are found to be the chief consumer -- as the veteran Devadasi in *Dance Like a Man*, Chennaiamma is occasionally visited by foreign tourists and journalists. The state program of rehabilitation of 'devadasi' is balanced by Amritlal's objection to Ratna's practice of a "harlot's pursuit". As described by Dolly in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the thumri queen Naina Devi is often mistakenly conceived as a 'tawaif'. The dancer niece is unscrupulously conceived as an object of consumption by her uncle since she is "meant for entertainment" (*Dance Like a Man*, 410).

Entertainment revolution initiated the process of commodification of art with a view of men being the chief consumer. Manusmriti prescribed the constitutionally adulterous women to be man's property in ancient time; in modern India that property could be commodified and presented as a package for the global market. Consequently, in order to fulfill the demand of the patriarchal market for the supply of women as sexual object, the entertainment industry, thus, dissociates sexual "sanctity" from the

manufacturer of artistic pleasure, and denies artist women any socially acclaimed role, denigrates art from something creative into catering. The alienation of the art form of dance from the 'authentic' male behavioral pattern thus gets a close link with the marketing strategy of the product. More over, the association of art with masculinity problematizes the discourse of hetero-patriarchy. Male dancer is marginalized since it would otherwise authenticate a strong homo-erotic implication. Naturally, Ratna's uncle doesn't find it disturbing anyway to the "normal" pattern of morality to propose "incest" to his dancer niece, since the entertainer resides outside the moral regime. Following the same discourse, culture acquires feminine identity.

Naturally, the culturally disruptive image of a male dancer threatens the rubric of hetero-patriarchy and jeopardizes intimate relationships. Amritlal, given the alternatives between allowing his son to continue the woman's art and his daughter-in-law to perform the stigmatized art of the prostitute (implicated through the facts that devadasis had to take up the profession), decides to tolerate the woman's pursuit of the harlot's art in exchange for the wife's strategic participation in deskilling her husband in woman's art in order to materialize the alluring prospect of making him a man. The male dancer dancing feminine number leads to graver identity disorder and intensifies sexist fear of homoeroticism. The process of gendering gets so intense that seems natural. Woman/feminine is asserted and appropriated only to conceptualize and materialize the man-making process. Here the woman makes the most useful tool partly by conscious design/choice (itself part of and controlled by trans-individual network), and partly by collective ideological preference.

Dattani's handling of the issue attempts to create a rupture in the oppressive narrative and hits upon a process of re-negotiation with the established ideological terrain. In Amritlal's brand of Indianness "sadhus (saints) with long hair are revered, the dance guru of Jairaj is leveled "abnormal" for his long hair and the financially dependent son is prohibited to grow his hair. Fracture is also visible when a man dances and is applauded for dancing a feminine "ashtapadi" in female costume. The events disturb the process of gendering which seemed so natural and once again exhibits how cultural genital takes little care of the biological sex. An alternative view of culture is perceived in the myth of "Nataraja" (the Hindu dancing god), though its mortal version Sankar – the son of Jairaj and Ratna -- gets killed by an overdose of opium, symbolizing culture's rigorous attempt to keep it dormant or dead. A variant of priority/preference in constructing the idea of masculinity is sought by valorizing men with greater androgyny like Jairaj, Deepak, Subbu, Dan, Sharad and others over "manly" men like Amritlal, Hasmukh, Ed, and Ramnik.

### **Communalism**

When religion transgresses the boundary of individual feelings/faith into the arena of public sentiment with strong a political foundation, the sense of community hardens into communalism with its emphasis on -- to borrow words from Anderson -- "relativization" and "territorialization" which enthrone a particular faith as "truest" than "true" (Anderson, 17). Now religion becomes the uniting principle of a fundamental socio political unit irrespective of difference of language, class, nationality and even culture, when the unit identifies its politico economic interest as same and the interests of

different communities appears at variance with and even oppositional to each other. With the coming of Islam, the Hindu identity got transformed from a geographical to a cultural identity, but the political anxieties apart, Hindus and Muslims lived side by side without maintaining any policed border between their socio cultural identities until the fissure became visible between the Westernized Hindus and the defensively self-conscious Muslims during the colonial rule. The colonial policy of divide and rule circulated through the entire body politic of the colonial and post-colonial state. Unlike the Western concept of secularism where it stresses separation of religion and state, in India an attempt was made to coordinate between different community's religious selves. The crisis takes shape when the communal identity of Hindu gets identified with nationalism and that of Christians and Muslims is categorized as separatism since, in that case, there is no equation of holy land and their fatherland (Goswami, 137-152). Thus, the animosity between the communities -- Hindus and Muslims in particular --, to quote Paul R Brass, was "seeded and grown in the hothouse of British imperial rule, implanted in the minds of the Indian populations, tended carefully by specialists, allowed to remain dormant for varying periods, and released when the conditions are favourable for their full growth" (quoted in Sengupta, "Of Race/Religion...", 223). Ashis Sengupta further observes, "If it was a matter of imperialist advantage during the days of colonial rule, it may be added, it is predominantly electoral politics that systematically cashes in on communal riots in post-independence India" (Sengupta, "Of Race/Religion..." 223).

Commenting on his play *Incident at Vichy*, Arthur Miller remarked, his play is neither “about Nazism” nor “a wartime horror tale”, but about “our individual relationships with injustice and violence” (quoted in Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion...”, 218). In a country where religion was the key determiner in imagining the nation, and where communal tension informs the lifestyle of millions, the invisible channels of communal hatred obviously offered a large unexplored area for the present playwright. In Dattani’s world history emerges as an active participant in changing patterns of communalism and the frameworks of history and theatre merge. Shanta Gokhle rightly observes, “What saves Dattani from the pitfall of equilibrium, from the deadening effect of symmetry, is his historical vision. He shows that communal attitudes have evolved over a period of time and are often based on ignorance” (quoted in Banerjee, 280). *Final Solutions* – written in line of Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot*, Manohar Malgaonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges*-- performed in 1993, in the background of post Babri Masjid Bombay where the experience of Bombay blood was still fresh, offered a powerful statement of the need for reevaluating our “normal” attitude and innocent/neutral life style.

“This inglorious legacy of the land theatrically unfurls in piecemeal through Hardika’s readings from her private diary, punctuated by ‘present’ happenings, of the entries she made in 1948 about the riot she lived through during the historic Partition. Ironically, contemporary India continues to be virtually divided into Muslim and Hindu India, lacking mutual trust and confidence and often erupting into violence” (Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion...” 223). The fifty-six line description of that turbulent time (the British-sponsored communal riot) by Hardika (herself a victim of colonialism) during her

stay in Hussainawad, and the two Muslim boys in desperate need of shelter from a blood-thirsty mob, show how subalternity is situational. The use of the device of the chorus serves yet another purpose: as Samipendra Banerjee pertinently remarks, "... the theatrical gesture of the continuous stage of the Mob/Chorus in stylized and 'becoming' postures suggests extended selves of the characters that are stripped off of cultural restraints as fluid locations where communal hatred reigns" (Banerjee, 282). Communal consciousness is strategically construed, hardly to be founded on the ground level of human consciousness. Rather it is historically produced and self-alienable like Hardika's fissures of identity -- a staunch hater of Muslim community (consequent upon previous experience), however, cannot identify with Hindus ("Where were our own people when we needed them?" *FS*, 191) The act of wearing different masks to express different religious attitudes and removal of them to become an opportunistic mob is in itself symbolic of the constructed nature of the sentiments. Religion is shown to be oppressive which works its way through the logic of binary opposition between the outsider and the insider. It makes the choice compulsory between the positions of being defensively apologetic or offensively aggressive. The majoritarian politics defines the mainstream, and the minority either undergoes the process of acculturation as a means of self-defense (as Bobby in *Final Solutions*) or chooses violence for self-assertion (like Javed). Consequently, as Benegal observes, "The viewer can no longer view the spectacle of faceless loompane mobs slaughtering one another and go home catharsized and feeling comfortably superior...One is forced to review one's own automatic assumptions and the postures one takes for granted..." (Benegal, 61)

Dattani does neither conclude in despair nor offer any simplistic solution; in fact the “s” appended to the title of the play *Final Solutions* opens up possibilities of multiple solutions. The author’s own remark in this regard may be mentioned: “The title is in the plural to suggest that Hitler’s pogrom . . . can [recur] and *has* recurred in different ways . . . Bigotry and nationalism need not go together, although that is what both Nazism and the . . . Hindutva movement were trying to do” (quoted in Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion...” 216). Arbind Garh, the director of the Hindi translation staged by Asmita observed, “No concrete solutions are provided in the play to the problem of communalism, but it raises questions on secularism and pseudosecularism. It forces us to look at ourselves in relation to the attitudes that persists in the society . . . communalism has no face, it is an attitude and thus it becomes an image of the characters” (quoted in Datta, 265). If for some characters experience becomes the circuitous course of hatred like Hardika and Javed until too late, other relations like the friendship of Smita and Tasnim, Smita and Bobby and Bobby and Javed signal a better future. However, the self-criticality of the text deters any simplistic assumption, as Sengupta observed in the comparative analysis of Arthur Miller’s *Incident at Vichy* and Mahesh Dattani’s *Final Solutions*: “The endings of both plays posit a certain notion of justice, but without clarifying whether it can be realized through ‘the true humanly valuable concepts’ of decency and love or whether it functions more as ‘a claim made by the oppressed’” (Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion...”, 215).

## **Disability**

An attitudinal barrier has been at work in excluding the issue of disability from social theorizing for encouraging other marginalized issues like women's issue, environment, and caste, poverty and so on and thus making disability physically and metaphorically invisible. Invisibility renders a further marginalization, reinstating centrality of the able-bodied. In India disability is chiefly seen as personal tragedy, therefore unredeemable or working of fate – in both cases essential and individual. The view conveniently omits the role of a disablist society for creating and perpetuating marginalization. Medicalization also tends to overlook the non-pathological disabling factors and sociocultural role allocation. The negative image is further reinforced by the widespread inaccessibility of the disabled to the public area, their nonrepresentationality in educational sector, rampant unemployment, unavailability of satisfying personal relationships, and their general non-acceptance in society. Hunt argues that “the problem of disability lies not only in the impairment of function and its effects on us individually, but also, more importantly, in the area of our relationship with ‘normal’ people” (Hunt, 146). The shocked reaction at the obvious deviant stimulates culture's deepest fear of tragedy, loss, dark and unknown. Disability, Irving Zola observed, “[A]s the object of medical treatment evokes the image of many ascribed traits, such as weakness, helplessness, dependency, regressiveness, abnormality of appearance and depreciation of every mode of physical and mental functioning” (quoted in Barnes and Mercer, 10). What Dattani focuses on here is not the impairment or the biological destiny of the individual, but the process of handicapping the individual by the disablist society by creating social barriers in order to maintain its power relations.

Disability paradoxically always attracted artistic pursuit which tends to use it for serving the greatest of all purposes, namely, being “different” as opposed to “normal” commonality. However, the aesthetic craze about representation has mostly carefully tended to omit the disagreeable aspects of the originals, denied the experience of the persons concerned and used disability as a signifier of something beyond and besides itself. Disable persons are even excluded from the normal epistemic standard of knowing by experience and the outsider commentators’ version got prioritized over the lived experience. Actually the metanarrative has always dictated the knowledge by leveling terms which in fact helped to bolster the confidence about superiority of the able-bodied and the nourishment of the fiction of their perfection. Even the celebration of freakishness remained no more natural or no less social and participated in the history of what Mitchell and Snyder call “metaphorical opportunism” (Mitchell and Snyder, 17). It acts as a depository for the centre to expel its anxiety and contradiction. To quote Davis, “[d]isability is more than a background ... it is ... the basis on which the ‘normal’ body is constructed... disability defines the negative space the body must not occupy” (Davis, 68). Thus disability/disabled persons continued to be artistically devalued as negative symbols, politically made “invisible” and socially Otherized -- yet never absented from the narrative of the able-bodied mainstream.

Dattani attempts to set a different aesthetic standard for the representation of people whose actual appearance is repulsive by subverting the reading of the fact and turning the direction of the mirror. The lack of stability and coherence in Dan’s narrative

(in *Tara*) proves that renovation and revitalization of our moral and aesthetic criteria and the standard of knowing are possible. The present playwright tries to come out of any metadiscursive commitment and avoid the voyeuristic gaze of an aesthete. He addresses the problem rather from within and even accords space to the atypical and impaired body (prosthesis becomes body parts) which is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium” (quoted in Iwakuma, 76). Dattani also places the issue in disability to the larger arena of power play. It is in this specific point, where both discourses of disability and femininity intersect, that the special charm of Dattani’s play. Both gender and disability make up the conceptual frame which gives meaning to the body. For years, biological destiny was the accepted rationale behind the exclusion of women, coloured and disabled people from the life they desire and deserve, and, compelling them to a particular social role as subordinate and dependent. However, the identification gets complicated when disabled women are excluded from the traditional gender role of care-giver and they come out of the boundary, men feel feminized and their impairment is seen as a threat to the autonomous patriarchal male body presenting a grave consequence. Here Dattani’s concern is not to prove some disabled persons are as productive as the able-bodied, valorizing health over illness (illness is an undeniable factor of the life of many impaired people like Tara), and autonomy over dependency, but to challenge the biological determinism without devaluing or obliterating the biological difference.

## Resistance

The plays of Dattani endorse a sharp disbelief in any neutral narrative and explore points of conjunction and disjunction of various narratives challenging, omitting, destabilizing and even disqualifying one another. Words go beyond text, and create meaning through performance of the act of even mere reading. We meet an author painfully aware of the artistic capitalization of the angst and suffering of the subject, and his plays both embody and narrate the events. The author sometimes talks directly to the audience through symbols or in style of a parabasis, and the Prospero merges with the dramatist. The process of reading turns out to be a constant interplay of making and unmaking changing hypothesis.

The playwright once stated, “I am not interested in characters asking existential questions in a limbo. My characters exist in a definite space and time, in a social context that’s what stimulates me. I don’t focus on a message but the context is important” (Santhanam 2003). Hence the appearance of his characters is never taken for granted nor of any relation. The plays explore what lies under the “facades which characters and families put up to fool the world” (Meena, 8). Here, as Indranee Ghosh points out, tragedy does not bring character closer, but “[l]atent tensions, ancient grudges, thwarted ambition, shameful secrets churn like lava beneath” (Ghosh, 300). They suffer from, as Dattani puts it referring to Tara, “...in tension with their own sensibility as opposed to the cultural sensibilities, they may have knowingly or unknowingly subscribed to” (“Muffled Voice,” 129). The process is finely illustrated by Chandan’s miming of removal of

masks. In this world love is not often an end in itself, but a means. Bharati uses her love to compensate for the grievous deed of depriving the girl to privilege the boy as well as to assert her superiority over her husband. Ed and Bunny Singh deploy their affairs to camouflage homosexuality and be acceptable by larger society. On the other hand, Mala's sexual promiscuity turns out to be only a revictimization of an early nightmarish experience.

“Science's claim to truth carried a social authority that made it productive of forms of personal and social life” (Seidman, 199). Naturally, the so-called neutrality of science stands exposed in Dattani and is presented as something formed by and forming the mainstream discourse. Pseudo-scientific categories mystify the “...socially desirable behavior as natural, and undesirable behavior as result of abnormal psychosexual development (a deviation from *The Way to Healthy Manhood*). Thus psychiatry leads the homosexual person to hate himself for being what he is and leads him to further ego-alienation (*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*). Medical science is exposed to be a machinery to perpetuate the gender hierarchy under the garb of performing miracle to undo nature's design to destroy Tara. However, the authentic science is valorized as, to quote Steven Seidman, could be used “against its own stereotypical, stigmatizing constructions” (Seidman, 199). In plays like *Thirty Days in September*, science, more specifically, psycho-analysis, is seen to provide the necessary support system to victims of child sexual abuse and helps the victim to fight the gendered social construct.

We, the reader/consumer/interrogator/appropriator, of literary “composition”, are stumbled on to the title of the product (if not already conditioned by other reviewers), and if the plays are by Dattani, even a cursory look at them it difficult to situate them within a normative pattern. *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, glittering with all the glamorous paraphernalia of marriage, exposes the flipside of the coveted institution; *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* with its gorgeous metropolitan feel of a party atmosphere, introduces us to a group of marginalized cloistered for their sexual preference; *Do the Needful* turns out to be a “needful” modern adaptation of a utilitarian phrase; while *Thirty Days in September* shocks our sensibility with a dreadful dystopia. Anxious to construct a definable form of the disturbing “expectations” roused by almost non-normative phrases in *Dance Like a Man*, the unusual cohabitation of the marginal words, “DANCE” and “MAN”, creates a constant commotion, anxiously trying to find a definite order/“meaning” at the centre of signification. In fact, after reading the plays, one is smoked out of his/her “anxiety of influence” by the revoltingly ironic appropriation of the phrases by the playwright. The titles thus constantly disturb any fixity and create space for contesting ideas.

However, Dattani’s plays are not pessimistic. He actually challenges the construction of “Indian” that conveniently ignores whatever deviates from our age-old conceptions of “right” and “normal”. His plays dramatize the predicaments of those, who, either are compelled to live the roles assigned to them by the family/society or break away from them, no matter at what price. Dattani’s characters feel “a need for acceptance and at the same time a need for rebellion” (Dattani, “Of Page and Stage,” 31).” They want to be accepted for being different and simultaneously come to accept

“those areas in [themselves] that are different” (Dattani, “Of Page and Stage,” 32). It is not simply the individual against the establishment since s/he is also the establishment, says Dattani, but the individual pushing “the boundaries of what the establishment is” (Dattani, “Of Page and Stage”, 32). Naturally, “His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire” (Mee, “a Note”, 319). They struggle for space, yet desperately want to belong: “This is my hell. This hell is where I belong!” (*Thirty Days in September*, 67) In Dattani, an absolute freedom from the pressure of tradition, culture or family is hardly conceived as the aim or even a possibility. However, the possibility of resistance always remains there: “...it comes with a bit of practice. In the beginning, you will have a lot of dead shoots on your hands. But then you learn and it ...comes” (*Bravely Fought the Queen*, 246).

The network of power is paralleled by multiple forms of resistance. Here is no grouping together; rather the characters direct their opposition to local and immediate exercise of power. Most interestingly, to quote the dramatist himself: “... they are going to fight those battles and they are going to stay right there” (Dattani, “Of Page and Stage,” 32). It ranges from Subbu’s ‘violent’ escape by committing suicide to re-codification of the state-program of rehabilitating devadasis as a version of subjugation to the colonial norms. A forced marriage is countered by an escape or ruse as the couple rediscovers the marriage to be a convenient cover and catalyst to continue their respective romances outside marriage. The boundary with the abuser in childhood is renegotiated by a recovered adult. The camp, by parody, mimicry and a performance to the excess, undermines the categories that exclude him. Wife’s fancy of sexual liaison is a potential

appropriation of the husband's disapproving behavior. Mimicry and performance release potential destabilizing power. The sociocultural disjunction of male and female self is conjectured to be recycled into a union on a cosmic level. The family, built by homosexuals and hijras counter the narrative of family that excludes them. The essentially comic vision of Dattani is evident in the life-affirming possibilities conceptualized in the plays and the resilience demonstrated by his characters. Hence he often presents very serious issues with heavy doses of humour. The spirit may well be recognized in the manner he makes jokes about the teachers teaching in his missionary schools, eulogizing British and Anglo-Irish writers like Shakespeare, Yeats, Whitman and others, perhaps without thinking that some of them were "gay, bisexual and were considered immoral in their time" (Nair 2004).

The only Indian English playwright to be awarded Sahitya Accademy, Dattani shows a rare efficacy to synchronize his love for Indian traditional art form with his admiration for western 'well made' structure to produce dramatically his concern for contemporary issues. Working within the traditional art form he addresses the potential differences within the rubric of Indian culture which is getting distorted as a monolithic discourse by marginalizing the rich variety that it has encompassed through the ages. Chaudhuri observes, "In a typically reactionary postcolonial situation, to write in English -- the language of the colonial ruler -- in the newly independent India, came to be largely considered politically incorrect" (Chaudhuri, 10 ). In the same breath, he adds, "people have to come to terms with the fact that English is an Indian language! ...India has this

enormous capacity to absorb from all sources” (Ayyar, 2004). Technically his Indianness is reflected in creation of a shared space by audience and performers to make possible a true synergy or “Rasa”. Since “Theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began” (Nair, 2001), the target audience of Dattani is not a passive receiver but an active producer of meaning. He explores the issues existing in form of potential ruptures, and exhibits the way they manifest themselves in Indian contexts to help create a public discourse on them. Therefore, as Sengupta puts it, “‘Relations of power’ remain, but waiting to be given ‘the rules of law, the techniques of management, and *also* (my emphasis) the [situational] ethics’ so that the games of power are played ‘with a minimum of domination’ and some communication, or transaction, established” (Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion...” 227). Thus, the reading of the plays initiate a journey – a journey bound to chart out conceptual landscape, conceptual mobility and evolving conceptual spaces.