

**THEATRE, SUBALTERNEITY AND COUNTERPUBLICS:  
READING MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS**

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In an illuminating discussion of political performances and attendant scholarship, E.J. Westlake remarks,

Ultimately, the “political” in the performances we study springs from the new constellations of relationships we form; hinges on being able to locate ourselves and our work and our intended audience in a way that highlights our position on a map of political context and political action. The politics of representation is the politics of multiple relationships... Being able to see those relationships, and hopefully the possible consequences of forming them, leads to an opening where political change can take place. (Westlake 8)

Such openings become possible only because the performances are able to intervene in the public sphere and thus contribute to various democratic processes. In this paper I will first go over the concepts of public sphere and subaltern Counterpublics and then apply them to some of Dattani's plays in order to discuss some of the specific features of his representation of subalterneity.

**Public Spheres and Subaltern Counterpublics:**

Habermas represents the bourgeois public sphere as “the sphere of private people come together as a public” in order to claim “the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour” (Habermas: 1989, 27). This is precisely why Habermas sees the development of the public sphere as an integral feature of gradual democratization since this public sphere was characterized by a sense of “parity of ‘common humanity’” (36), emancipation of the “domain of ‘common concern’” from the monopoly of the Church and the Court and most importantly, the establishment of “the public as in principle inclusive” (37). As Habermas notes, theatre also played a crucial role in the formation of such public spheres as it became delinked from the province of the court and created a space where enactment of issues related to

public relevance coalesced with the emergence of a public which was no longer constituted by a parading of ranks. While the situation of the British, French or German societies cannot obviously be associated with the development of the public sphere in colonial and postcolonial India, there is no denying that in India too newspapers, public associations of many kinds and various congregational spaces (for example, the Indian Coffee House in Kolkata) played a crucial role in the development of a public sphere through which issues of ‘common concern’ and general rules of social existence were debated as part of an attempt to contest the power of public authorities, both British and Indian. Theatre in India also played a crucial role in the formation of such a public sphere which is eminently evident from the Dramatic Performances Act, 1876 and the wrath of the colonial authorities against certain plays that lampooned the representatives of colonial authority as well as their native collaborators. The same process continued in post-independence India as well which necessitated governmental crackdown against Utpal Dutt’s plays like *Angaar*, *Kallol* or *Dushwapner Nagari*.

However, Habermas’ own conceptualisation has been subjected to a thorough critique by a number of theorists like Joan Landes, Geoff Eley and Mary Ryan who argue that not only have there been multiple competing publics from the very beginning of the public sphere but that far from being inclusive in principle, the public sphere has always operated on the basis of certain definite patterns of exclusion. As Nancy Fraser explains,

In general, this revisionist historiography suggests a much darker view of the bourgeois public sphere than the one that emerges from Habermas’s study. The exclusions and conflicts that appeared as accidental trappings from his perspective, in the revisionists’ view become constitutive. The result is a gestalt switch that alters the very meaning of the public sphere. We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule. (Fraser 61-62)

This is further reinforced by Geoff Eley’s Gramscian contention that the public sphere further served as an institutional vehicle of consolidating hegemony which was “never defined solely by the struggle against absolutism and traditional authority, but...addressed the problem of popular containment as well” (Fraser 61). This, however, is equally applicable to

the domain of Indian politics as well since the nationalist movement as well as the public sphere associated with it was in many ways a process dominated by a bourgeois, Hindu, masculinist, upper-caste, heterosexist elite which projected itself as the nation, often at the expense of the other sections. This is precisely why, in consonance with the Gramscian paradigm used by Eley, Partha Chatterjee defined the nationalist movement for independence as a 'passive revolution' in which the leadership was in the hands of the educated middle classes who went on to occupy the seats of power left vacant by the colonial administrators without effecting any substantial change either in the sphere of administration or in the sphere of production relations. Gramsci defines 'passive revolution', a term originally used by Vincenzo Cuoco, as a concept that "applies not only to Italy but also to those other countries that modernize the state through a series of reforms or national wars without undergoing a political revolution of a radical-Jacobin type" (Gramsci, 1996: 232). As Domenico Losurdo states:

The category of passive revolution is a category used in the *Prison Notebooks* in order to denote the persistent capacity of initiative of the bourgeoisie which succeeds, even in the historical phase in which it has ceased to be a properly revolutionary class, to produce socio-political transformations of significance, conserving securely in its own hands power, initiative, and hegemony, and leaving the working classes in their conditions of subalternity. (Losurdo, 1997, quoted in Thomas, 2009: 147)

As Partha Chatterjee has shown, this is exactly what happened in India as well as a mature and fully developed nationalist discourse, manifested through the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru squarely identified the masses as 'irrational' and 'backward' entities of India who have to be guided and steered by the educated and scientific elite, aware of the spirit of modernity and progress. What this meant was the implementation of a programme of socio-economic development that was based more on the bureaucracy and less on popular mobilization. While there is no denying that such processes did contribute to certain developments and associated economic upliftment, the larger portion of the population still remained grossly marginalized and disempowered as bourgeois nationalism effected a "molecular transformation' of the old dominant classes into partners in a new historical bloc and only a partial appropriation of the masses, in order to create a state as the necessary precondition for the establishment of capitalism as the dominant mode of production" (Chatterjee 30). The growth of several forms of protest movements, governed by various

factors of class, caste and gender which continued to mark the Indian nation-space during the sixties and the seventies of the previous century represent the gradual disillusionment of such subalternized classes and consequent unrest against the nation-state. Such manifestation of widespread dissent also testifies to the need for competing and plural public spheres which better secures the prospects of participatory parity and open access than the notion of an over-arching singular bourgeois sphere. Nancy Fraser therefore states how “members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics”. She identifies these alternative publics as “subaltern counterpublics” which operate as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 66-67). According to her analysis, such counterpublics not only contribute to the “widening of discursive contestation” but also as “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” in the face of dominant, exclusionary and exploitative practices. As Fraser argues,

It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (Fraser 68).

The plays of Mahesh Dattani are particularly important and relevant because they are able to generate and circulate such emancipatory potential through the foregrounding of subaltern counterpublics.

### **Dattani’s Counterpublics:**

Dattani’s plays focus on the subaltern in the metropole and analysesubalternization based on gender and sexuality. Such subalternization, in fact, is vividly portrayed in his plays through the physical, sexual, psychological and economic subjugation which the women persistently face and attempt to resist. Whether it is *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara* or *Thirty Days in September* – in all of these plays what comes to the foreground is the sheer vulnerability of women owing to the pervasive nature of the patriarchal discourse which continues to subjugate women across generations. It is the acknowledgment of such crises that becomes evident from the following conversation between Hardika and her granddaughter Smita:

Hardika: I hope you have the same freedom in your own house, as you have here.

Smita: I think one can create one's own freedom wherever one may be.

Hardika: You are also very foolish.

Smita: Foolish?

Hardika: To think you can create your freedom.

Smita: Well, I suppose they could beat me up and lock me in a room...

Hardika: Yes. They could. (Dattani: 2000, 220)

Such statements seem to corroborate Habermas's assertion that "the exclusion of women has been constitutive for the political public sphere not merely in that the latter has been dominated by men as a matter of contingency but also in that its structure and relation to the private sphere has been determined in a gender-specific fashion" (Habermas: 1992, 428). It is precisely this realisation that necessitates the formation of alternative public spheres which too are glimpsed by Dattani on certain occasions. For example, in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, when Dolly, Alka and Lalitha listen to Naina Devi's songs and move into their world of sexual and affective fantasy we do notice the tentative emergence of a set of desires and demands which generally remain unarticulated within conventional orthodox public spheres. The trope/motif of art as self-expression does play a significant role in this context as a similar prototypical counterpublic is also suggested by the meetings and practice sessions of Ratna and Chenni Amma in *Dance like a Man*. While the nation-state can forge a self-image through dance genres like the Bharatnatyam which are elevated to the level of national heritage, the same patriarchal nation-state also marginalises former devdasis, like Chenni Amma, who were the original exponents of this genre, on account of the stigma of sexual promiscuity attributed to them by the contemporary patriarchal authorities. Through Dattani's plays such structures of hypocrisy, exclusion and marginalisation are scrupulously exposed and such critique indeed constitutes one of the constituent elements of subaltern counterpublics.

Similar alternative spaces are also staged in other plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* where the play revolves around the conversations and relations of a group of queer Indians whose discussions foreground the many processes of abjection, isolation and humiliation which members

of queer communities experienced and continue to experience within the predominantly heteronormative nation-space of India where alternate sexualities are still subjected to manifold forms of subalternization. Written during the late 80's or the early 90's, most of Dattani's plays, dealing with queer individuals, were pioneering texts which sought to dramatize what he termed 'invisible issues' since most of these topics were considered taboo and were therefore subjected to stringent erasure. By presenting to his readers and audience, concerns that were rarely addressed till then, Dattani helped to add new dimensions to contemporary public debates and thus paved the path for the emergence of counterpublics focusing on and comprising sexual subalterns from various social strata. Consider for example the following dialogues from *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*:

Kamlesh: If only they could see how beautiful we are together.

Ed: Are we?

Kamlesh: What?

Ed: Beautiful?

Kamlesh: Yes

Ed: I don't know. (Points to the people on the road) They wouldn't think so.

Kamlesh: They don't really see us. (81)

Such lines are remarkable because they serve to humanize homosexuals and give voice to both their isolation and their need for mutual love which a typically heterosexist society neither acknowledges nor understands. Dattani's insistence on such issues is perfectly in keeping with Fraser's arguments about subaltern counterpublics as she categorically mentions that "In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out" (Fraser 67). Especially notable in this regard is the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* which focuses on eunuchs or transsexual individuals who are victims of both wretched poverty and sexual subjugation of different kinds. Such individuals are generally ignored altogether by dominant public spheres and the dominant discourses generally represent them, if at all, as objects of ridicule or revulsion. The conversations of eunuchs like Anarkali and Champa with the sociological researcher Uma serve to unravel the extent of administrative, financial and sexual subjugation which eunuchs or hijras regularly face and these insights are complemented by the foregrounding of those desires which govern their lives – desires which are neither

recognised nor accepted by the dominant heteronormative and patriarchal discourse. Note, for example the following dialogues between two hijras in the play:

Champa: It hurts?

Anarkali: Yes...Do you think the doctor will see me?

Champa: I tried.

Anarkali: If we give him more money?...

*Champa shakes her head. Anarkali winces*

Champa: It will go away. Let me give you some brandy.

*She gets up Anarkali pulls her back.*

Anarkali: I drank it. It is not going away, the pain.

*Champa holds her and puts Anarkali's head in her lap.*

Champa: What can I do? What can I do?

*Champa rocks her like a baby...*

*Anarkali closes her eyes. Champa sings a lullaby from a film. La lallalori, doodhkeikatori...Champa has tears in her eyes as she continues to sing. (273-74)*

Such lines not only emphasise the yearning for family and maternal/filial affections which punctuate their lives but forces us to recognize that fundamental humanity which society often denies to them. Quite naturally, that universalisation of civil rights which is generally supposed to be the basis of public spheres, is often not applied to these sexual subalterns as evident from either Anarkali's imprisonment and torture or the murder of Kamla. Dattani's plays are critical in this respect as they serve to suggest an expansion of the public sphere where these individuals ought to be included as full citizens. Not only does this set up the possibility of polycentric public spheres but also sets in motion "a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it" (Habermas: 1989, 232). Theatre thus becomes, in Jean Cohen's words, one of those institutions of "public reasoning and argument among equal citizens" that establishes "a framework for free public deliberation" (Habermas: 1992, 446-447) which is essential for an inclusive and functioning democracy.

What renders such a framework all the more significant is Dattani's relentless insistence on those material circumstances which are fundamentally responsible for various ongoing processes of subalternization. For example

one of the primary reasons behind the subjugation of Dolly and Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* is their absolute financial dependence on their husbands who can therefore repeatedly threaten them with expulsion from the house. Similarly, in *Tara* an entrenched network on patriarchal chauvinism and commercial interests collude to ensure Tara's literally crippled status and she is even left without any inheritance by her grandfather. Likewise in *Dance like a Man*, due to the hypocrisy and elitism of the nationalist discourse, the Bharatnatyam exponent ChennaiAmma languishes in miserable poverty while the appropriation of her art makes it possible for middle-class practitioners like Ratna and Jayaraj to ascend to national celebrity. However, as Dattani shows in *Thirty Days in September*, financial independence does not necessarily ensure end of exploitation as Mala is made to bear the scars of the trauma of sexual abuse in childhood well into her adulthood. Similarly the homosexual characters of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, despite belonging to middle-class society, remain constricted, ostracized and alienated by the dominant heteronormative social structures.

Furthermore, since Dattani presents before us a number of varied characters, the plays convey a sense of undeniable plurality which obviously serves to negate the vilifying stereotypes through which dominant discourses generally perceive sexual subalterns. It is this same sensitivity towards heterogeneity that also prompts Dattani to create uniquely individualized characters in all of his plays without ever creating a monochromatic mould for any particular social section. This is evident from a play like *Final Solutions* where Bobby and Javed, despite operating as representatives of subalternized religious minorities, virtually function as each other's foil and their individual voices are also complemented by the cluster of voices which together make up the chorus. Similarly in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the characters of Dolly and Alka are pointedly different from those of Baa or Lalitha and even the sisters have rather different approaches to the same crisis within which they find themselves. Such examples demonstrate how Dattani is acutely aware of the fact that subalterneity is fluid and a person who acts as the subaltern in one context may well become the dominant character in a separate context. For example, despite their own subalterneity, Dolly and Alka are equally dismissive and contemptuous towards the beggar woman who frequents their house, without being concerned about their shared subjugation by the same patriarchal discourses. Even homosexual characters like Ed/Prakash or Kamlesh, despite their own role as sexual subalterns, are entirely unconcerned about the victimization faced by Kamlesh's sister Kiran. Likewise, someone like Baa, despite herself being a victim of patriarchal oppression, also operates as an agent of patriarchal



subjugation. These scrupulous representations of heterogeneous and fluid subjectivities leads to these plays that combination of authenticity and plurality which prevents them from falling into the trap of what Rushdie scoffs at as the process of “new-behaviorism” (Rushdie: 2002, 60). This is precisely why in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* we see Kamlesh having no qualms about sexually objectifying the caretaker for his own gratification or Alpesh utilizing Mali in the same way in *Do the Needful*.

This is not to suggest, however, that the plays are bereft of emancipatory potentialities. Dattani succeeds in creating through his texts a number of powerful dramatic moments through which the spectators come face to face with their own prejudices which create the opportunity for bridging that gap between the self and the other which is at the root of many discourses of discrimination and victimization. For example, in *Seven Steps around the Fire* we have a dramatic representation of the moment of Subbu’s marriage with Kamala the eunuch, dressed as a bride with wedding garments and jewelry, when both of them passionately embrace each other. Not only does such a scene help to visualize a union which the public sphere is unwilling to acknowledge but it forces the spectators to confront their own biases and thus helps to open the space for discursive expansion through which their presence as equal citizens might be facilitated. Similarly the curtained space in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* which serves as Kamlesh’s bedroom and also by extension his entire apartment, where the play unfolds, operates as a site for the emergence of a queer counterpublic where individuals are free to air their emotions and thoughts without worrying about whether it is possible to be Indian and gay at the same time. More importantly, the various representations of queer relationships on stage serve as reminders of the otherizing principles at work within us which prompt us to view many from a dehumanized perspective which contributes to their victimization. It is these very possibilities of challenging, clarifying, amending or re-shaping dominant attitudes and behavioural patterns which contribute to the creation of counterpublics.

In all of these plays, however, the crisis remains generally confined to either the individual or to family or to a close group of friends and the prospect of collective action of one form or another remains entirely absent. Even in *Final Solutions*, where collective actions are enacted on stage, collectivities only serve to disseminate communal violence and hatred and do not create the possibility of any substantial emancipatory action by subaltern agents. The only other play by Dattani where subaltern collective action does come to the foreground is *Seven Steps around the Fire* where the final dramatic intervention of Champa, Anarkali and their fellow eunuchs

during the minister's son's wedding does manage to uncover the truth behind Kamala's murder. However, even in this play, the single performative intervention by the hijras is shown to be utterly incapable of producing any substantial change as evidences are hushed up and doctored reports are circulated through the media so as to erase the subaltern out of the elite archives. As opposed to the historical failures represented by the plays of Utpal Dutt, which always looked forward to a future of fulfillment, Dattani's portrayals generally operate on a discursive level and project a scenario where either resistance is restricted within individual domains or resistance by subaltern agents is far too weak and isolated to make significant differences. To a certain extent, these features are indicative of the withering of emancipatory visions and constructive collective actions which may help to sustain those visions. In a rather postmodern turn of events, due to the absence of emancipatory macronarratives, Indian politics has been marked by the presence of a series of resistant micronarratives which, however, do not show any sign of crystallizing into a politics of praxis that will effect a convergence without any compulsory uniformity.

However, even if the plays are not always able to offer alternate visions of collective change, their representative characters still serve to effectively critique through their experiences and actions the dominant ideological paradigms through which several forms of subalternization are carried out. Such critique not only helps to thwart the continuation of existing predicaments but also implies the need for unborn futures capable of transcending such subalternizing processes which would obviously mean a radical redefinition of the nation-space of India. In a country where print and electronic media often seems far too preoccupied with vested interests of the elite and the rhetoric of shining India, theatre continues to operate as a significant site for resistant counter-discourses which contribute to the deepening of democratic ethos. Dattani's plays are enactments of such possibilities which also continue, in their own ways, the legacy of the IPTA during the inception of modern Indian theatre.

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