

## Gender Performativity: A study of Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Dance Like a Man*

**Rajasi Ray**

Asst.Prof., Dept of English,  
Narula Institute of Technology,  
Affiliated to W.B.U.T and AICTE,  
81, Nilgunj Road, Agarpada  
West Bengal 700 109

*When I look in the mirror, I see two things: what I want to be and what I'm not. I hate my abs. My chest will never be huge. My legs are too thin. My nose is an odd shape. I want what Man's Health pushes. I want to be guy in the Gillette commercials.<sup>i</sup>*

The speaker of the above extract is Narcissus a college student, who talks about his desires to the journalist. It is the desire to attain the projected self image so as to be accepted and admired by others. The flip side of this desire is that when one cannot adhere or perform to the given norms set by these luring self images, society pushes them to the fringe, thus creating the marginalized. This is what we find in Dattani's plays. In many of his plays Dattani talks of homosexuals and their subordination. Gender performativity remains a major issue in his plays.

In the 1990's the themes of queer identity and relationships which talked of alternative and non-heterosexual identities, met strong denunciation. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code sets the law which says:

*Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature, with any man, woman or animal shall be punishable with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine.*

'Compulsory heterosexuality', as Adrienne Rich defines it, is an important tool of patriarchy in maintaining its hegemonic authority. Such a view is shared by others like Gayle Rubin who stresses the 'obligatory sexuality' that is built into male-dominated kinship systems and how homophobia is a necessary corollary of such institutions as the heterosexual marriage. The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the suppression of homosexuals, is a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women. The problem of homosexuality hovers over our society like a ghost. Discourse is used to foster institutional subjugation of homosexuality by classifying it as an 'abnormality' and its practitioners as 'perverts', resulting in the transformation of, "barbarous intolerance into civilized intolerance" ( Jeffrey Weeks). Intolerance creates a claustrophobic atmosphere for all alternate sexualities, not just homosexuals, as they find themselves faced with a kind of terrifying alienation that seems to corrode all those ties of family, friendship or nationality which secure our existence as social beings. In the process, what becomes endangered is that notion of 'horizontal comradeship' which according to Benedict Anderson, is supposed to form the basis of "imagined community". The "imagined community" of GLBTQ is compelled to adjust to

these forces of RSA (Repressive State Apparatus) and ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) in order to develop into “passive subjects”. So, the question remains is homosexuality an unnatural aberration? Are people homosexuals by choice? In other words, can one choose one’s gender and sexuality? And can homosexuals convert into heterosexuality? Contemporary theory suggests that gender is performative. According to Judith Butler, it is possible to make a choice since we become the gender we perform. In other words, gender identity is not fixed and permanent. It is a sequence of acts and utterances and there are ways of doing one’s identity which may upset the conventional binary opposition of masculine/feminine or straight/queer. Now, let us look into the manufactured identity as far as Dattani’s plays are concerned. The plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Dance like a Man deals* with people who are forced to the margin. The two plays are of different kinds. The first one is on homosexuality and the other one is on masculinity or lack of it.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a play which is unique because it does not deal with one individual who is homosexual but a whole community of homosexuals and their psychological traits. The plot hinges on Kamalesh’s trying to hide from his sister Kiran the fact that he was in a relationship with the man she is about to marry. Prakash and Kamalesh were deeply in love with each other. The separation between Prakash and Kamalesh causes immense pain and distress in the heart and mind of Kamalesh. Thereafter, he comes in contact with Sharad and develops a homoric relationship with him. However, Kamalesh can’t adjust himself with Sharad as he is haunted by memories of Prakash, who is now known as Ed and intends to marry Kiran, divorcee sister of Kamalesh. The play samples a wide range of male homosexual presence in Indian society. Kamalesh is a well-adjusted straight acting gay man. His ex-boyfriend Sharad is intelligent and campy. Ed is in denial and is about to enter into a heterosexual affair with his fiancée’s brother, Kamalesh. Bunny is a celebrity and is in the closet. Ranjit is visiting from the UK, working with HIV Counselors. The play foregrounds the subjectivity of queer people in contemporary metropolitan Indian gay society. The play begins with the description of Kamalesh’s flat which is “too perfect to be real” (Dattani 49) which shows his effort to create “a world where he can belong”. He knows well that he will not be accepted by the heteronormative<sup>ii</sup> society as it always tries to subordinate homosexuality. This can be supported if we focus our attention to the relationship that Kamalesh shares with his flat’s security guard. The guard being conscious of his identity as gay, replies “no” when being asked by Kamalesh if he does this for money. The reply suggests that he is also a gay but he is ashamed to admit the fact. So, he instantly changes the answer and says that he does this for money. The guard knows that if he proclaims himself of being a gay then the heteronormative society will not accept him. In order to survive he has to construct an identity for himself. Sharad is the only character who is not afraid of homosexual identity. Sharad, obviously does not believe in performing gender. He is ready to accept who he is.

Judith Butler when theorizing gender, sex and sexuality as performative maintains that the natural seeming coherence is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. Heterosexual society, Dattani suggests, wants everyone to repeat the stylized acts in sanctions. Their repetition establishes the appearance of an essential ontological ‘core’ gender. The play reveals how the closet gays under the pressures of the heterosexual society put up a performance of ‘normal’ sexuality so as not to stand out against the straight heteronormative man. This is what Ed plans to do to get accepted, what Bunny has been performing and what the

straight psychiatrists advice all the gays. Sharad remarks on this performance while mocking it thus:

*Sharad: All it needs is a bit of practice. I have begun my lessons. Don't sit with your legs crossed. Keep them wide apart. And make sure you occupy lots of room. It's all about occupying space, baby. The walk: walk as if you have a cricket bat between your legs. And thrust your hand forward when you meet people . . . And the speech. Watch the speech. No fluttery vowels. Not 'It's so-o-o hot in here!' –but 'it's HOT! It's fucking HOT'"(Dattani 101)*

This kind of camouflaging is humorously portrayed by Dattani in *Do the Needful*<sup>iii</sup>. Alpeh wants to conceal his homosexual identity in order to get married to Lata who comes to know about Alpeh's true identity later. However, she marries Alpeh so that she can continue her love affair with his boyfriend who is a Muslim. So they both compromise to "do the needful". This psychology is prevalent in many homosexuals. Butler draws from Monique Wittig who says that heterosexuality "suits the economic need of patriarchy" to show why homosexuals opt for a more accepted identity. Herein crops up a sense of crisis which leads to a kind of identity confusion. Kobena Mercer places the issue of 'identity' in the wider context of post modernism:

*Just now everybody wants to talk about identity. As a key word in contemporary politics it has taken on so many different connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing. One thing at least is clear- identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. From this angle, the eagerness to talk about identity is symptomatic of the post modern predicament of contemporary politics.*<sup>iv</sup>

What we can understand from Mercer's view is that to overcome the crisis of identity an individual puts up different self images which are nothing but social masks which he or she adjusts according to the need of the given situation. This can be paralleled with the real life story of Hassan<sup>v</sup>, a 20 year old man from Morocco. He says, "I have got three faces." Hassan has accepted homosexuality keeping in mind that according to everyone homosexuality is a 'sin'. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, perhaps, has such undercurrents. Jack's unknown friend Bunbury can be interpreted as a homosexual and Jack is having a relationship with him but has to keep it under the veils in order to be considered as 'natural'. Bunny Singh is no different from Hassan and Jack. Ed[ Prakash] is also not free from these feelings and homosexuality has become unaccepted for him as the fear of social ostracization has grasped him. According to Foucault, the dominant discourse constraints the free development of queer subjectivity and makes the person a minority, always protecting and defending themselves against the incriminating discourse of heterosexual majority. Hypocrisy, is thus a part of the damaging discourse. It is only Sharad who does not believe in performing gender. He accepts himself as a homosexual. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* was published in the year 1998 when the homosexuals were treated as subhuman and they were a subject of laughter in the heterosexual world. With the start of the Gay Liberation movement in the West and after Denmark becoming

the first country to recognize same-sex unions in the form of 'registered partnership', many countries have recognized same-sex relationship. Changes started to take place in India since 2004. Delhi High Court recognized the same-sex relationship in the year 2009 and reports suggests that attacks on homosexuals by police have lessened. Yet many homosexuals still share the same feeling as Ranjit who proclaims that, "you can't be both Indian and gay at the same time." Thus the question remains: are they really liberated? Is Gender still preformed?

The next play in discussion *Dance like a Man* apparently does not deal with homosexuality and gender performativity but does definitely deal with heteropatriarchy and raises question on gender construction (masculinity in ref. to the play). Jairaj the main character of the play has to pay his price for not performing the role that he is supposed to play. He does not take up the manly path that his father thought he would and that is why he has to pay the ultimate price of sacrificing his dream. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that, "one is not born, but rather becomes a man". This has become a catch line for the later feminists and they explored female exploitation in these terms. They have concentrated on how a woman's gender is constructed. Indian text like *Manusmriti*<sup>vi</sup> has also set codes of conduct not only for women but also for men and it is said that one is not born but rather becomes a man. The society has imposed gender stereotypes on both men and women and if anyone does not follow these stereotypes, they are considered as outcasts. This issue of gender construction has been explored in Dattani's in *Dance like a Man*. Dattani is talking of gender construction; not of female but of male. He does this by portraying Jairaj, who wants to deviate away from his father's wishes of fulfilling his dreams by pursuing his passion of dance. In the play Amritlal represents the patriarchal society and imposes manliness on his son. He comments, "a woman in a man's world can be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (Dattani 427). Dancing is considered to be something meant only for women and according to Amritlal these men who want to dance are not man enough. John Beynon in "*Understanding Masculinities*" observes:

*The [still] widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as 'Just like a man!' or 'Just like a woman!'..... Masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast, are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional.* (56)

Amritlal Parekh a self-proclaimed freedom fighter agreed to the marriage of Jairaj and Ratna because, according to Jairaj, it suited his "image – that of a liberal minded person – to have a daughter-in-law from outside your own community". Liberal or not gender prototypes of a man remain fixed for Amritlal. Dance, remains for Amritlal, a craft of prostitutes and thus a man who learns dancing is not manly. In an article "Men will be men... stuck in patriarchal role", Nandita Dasgupta writes, "She may have got rid of her meow, but he's stuck with his alpha roar. For men there seems to be no other way to be. Sure he may wax his chest and do the washing up today, but he's still trapped by patriarchal stereotypes and continues to play protector, procreator and provider." Dasgupta in her article quotes Roop Sen, who conducts workshops on gender imaging and roles,

“We question the stereotype. Because if you’re not in the mould, every part of you is questioned. If you’re anything else, you’re demasculinised.”(Sen) Therefore alongside the ‘demasculinised’ Jairaj , or Alpesh we find the heteronormative portrayals of men like Amritlal Parekh and Hashmukh Mehta. Amritlal thought that dance was “just a fancy” for Jairaj. He would have happily made a cricket pitch for his son to play as because cricket epitomizes manliness. He resists his son from taking up dancing as his career because it does neither give him social status nor any income. He is baffled as Jairaj goes against social norms. “Why does he grow his hair long?”(Dattani 414) is the question that Amritlal asks his son about his guru as men are not supposed to wear his hair long. The underlying fear is obvious- it makes him womanly. To Amritlal, Jairaj’s decision to grow long hair ‘to enhance his *abhinaya*’ (Dattani 416) is ‘abnormal’. Amritlal’s concern has always been to make his son a ‘man’. In a question that he asks to Ratna (Jairaj’s wife), ‘Do you know where a man’s happiness lies?’ he immediately answers back ‘In being a man’. But Dattani questions the norms/rules of being a man. If the question remains of social acceptance and strict adherence to the patriarchal gender construct then Jairaj’s conversation with his daughter Lata regarding ‘erotic numbers’, reveals that Jairaj has hardly accepted his father’s proposal of gender performativity.

*LATA. Daddy, you make it sound so crude. ‘Erotic numbers’?*  
*JAIRAJ. There’s nothing crude about it. I danced the same item. For the army. A friend of ours arranged a programme and the money was good. Your mother was too scared and they only wanted a woman. So I wore your mother’s costume, a wig and... whatever else was necessary to make me look like a woman, and danced. They loved it. They loved it even more when they found out that I was a man. (Dattani 435)*

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* argues that phallogentrism<sup>vii</sup> is understood as regimes of power and hence Amritlal is afraid that his dancing son would loose power in the heterosexual society that he lives in. In a bourgeois society power is synonymous to earning money and Amritlal believes that dance cannot be a way of earning money for Jairaj because in a highly gendered society dancing can never be considered to be a man’s profession. In a recent popular Hindi film *3 Idiots*,<sup>viii</sup> we find how a son commits suicide as he fails to persue his father’s dreams of taking up engineering as his career. He wanted to persue Literature as against engineering the shortcut to economic success and social acceptance. Jairaj also considers himself to be equally oppressed by his father and the social conventions. The father figures do not understand that their sons do not want to grow under their shadows. With the growth and development of education and employment opportunities, the young men today have become individuals and can make their destinies without their support.

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* argues that social power lies in the hands of the patriarchy. Amritlal plays an ideal sexual politics as he robs his son Jairaj of his dreams. Ratna falls in the patriarchal troupe set up by Amritlal and forms an unlikely alliance with him. She comments that audience comes to watch a young beautiful woman dance and not a man. Thus Ratna is echoing Amritlal and giving away her stance as an ideal heterosexual/programmed partriarch. She has the same stereotypical idea of gender as Amritlal and plays sexual politics to get what she wants. Both Ratna and Amritlal achieve what they want to achieve in expense of Jairaj’s dream. Thus Jairaj becomes an ideal symbol of gender trouble. The do’s and dont’s that society imposes on

every gender, becomes a nemesis for Jairaj. The problem with Jairaj is that he does not opt to perform gender. Jairaj does not appear to be natural because he is not like a true man. His body is not stylized like a man's body. He is rather womanly. Jairaj's 'acts' and 'gestures' are not manly and thus he cannot be considered intelligible as far as recognizable standards of intelligibility are concerned. Jairaj tries to defy the "expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity" but his defiance ends in a tragic note.

The two plays discussed in this paper are different in nature. But it deals with a common concern- the subjugation of the self. The characters are forced to perform a gender to manufacture an identity, those who try to defy are termed as 'unnatural'. This concerning feature of a heteronormative society is aptly portrayed by Mahesh Dattani.

#### Notes:

- i) Cited in Richard Morgan, "The Men in the Mirror", *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 27, 2002, A53
- ii) Heteronormativity refers to an ideology that believes that heterosexuality is the only mode of sexuality.
- iii) *Do the Needful* is another play of Dattani that focuses on homosexuality. It was first broadcasted on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1997 by BBC Radio 4.
- iv) Mercer, Kobena, *Welcome to the Jungle, New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1994, p 259
- v) The story is taken from Paul Bailey's *Censoring Sexuality*. The story was first published in *Index and Censorship* 'Gay and Arab' (3/2000)
- vi) *Manusmriti* is an ancient text which talks about the laws of sage Manu.
- vii) In critical theory an deconstruction, phallogocentrism or phallogocentrism is a neologism coined by Jaques Derrida to refer to the privileged of masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning.
- viii) 3 Idiots, a popular Hindi movie directed by Rajkumar Hirani, acted by Amir Khan, Kareena Kapoor, Boman Irani. (Vinod Chopra films, 2009)

#### Works Cited:

1. Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
2. Bailey, Paul, *Censoring Sexuality*, Oxford, Seagull Books, 2007
3. Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 2010
4. Beynon, John, "Understanding Masculinities", *Masculinities and Culture*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002.

5. Beynon, John, "What is Masculinity?" *Masculinities and Culture*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002.
  6. Dattani, Mahesh, *Collected Plays Volume 1*, New Delhi, Penguin, 2000
  7. Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage, 1980
  8. Jagose, Annamarie, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York, New York University Press 2004.
  9. Nandita, Dasgupta, "Men will be men.....stuck in patriarchal role", TNN, March 8, 2010. 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2010 <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/men-will-be-men-stuck-inpatriarchal-role/articleshow/565640.cms>>
  10. Rich, Adrienne, *The Kingdom of the Fathers*, Partisan Review, 1976
  11. Rubin, Gayle, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex*.
  12. Sen, Roop, is a counselor in Kolkata and the quote is from his byte in Dasgupta's article "Men will be men.....stuck in patriarchal role", TNN, March 8, 2010. 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2010.
1. Cited in Richard Morgan, "The Men in the Mirror", *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 27,2002,A53
  2. Mercer, Kobena, *Welcome to the Jungle, New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1994, p 259

I have used (i) Niladri Ranjan Chatterjee's words from a published paper on Mahesh Dattani in [www.glbtq.com/literature/dattani\\_m](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/dattani_m)

(ii) Saptarshi Mallaki's words from Impression a bi-annual refereed e- journal titled "What a Man! Is he a man?" The Constructs of the Patriarchs and the Deviants: Re-framing Mahesh Dattani's *Where There is a Will and Dance Like a Man*"

(iii) Alpna Saini's (Reader, Department of English PunjabUniversity Reg. No. 124-PUP (PhD) 07),Ph.D thesis, *The Construction of Contemporary Indian Subjectivity in the Selected Plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani*.

(iv) Sudipto Mukhopadhyay's, *Critically Engaging with Mahesh Dattani, Unaccommodated Identities: The problematics of Marginality in Mahesh Dattani's Selected Plays*, Center of English Studies, JNU.

The Criterion