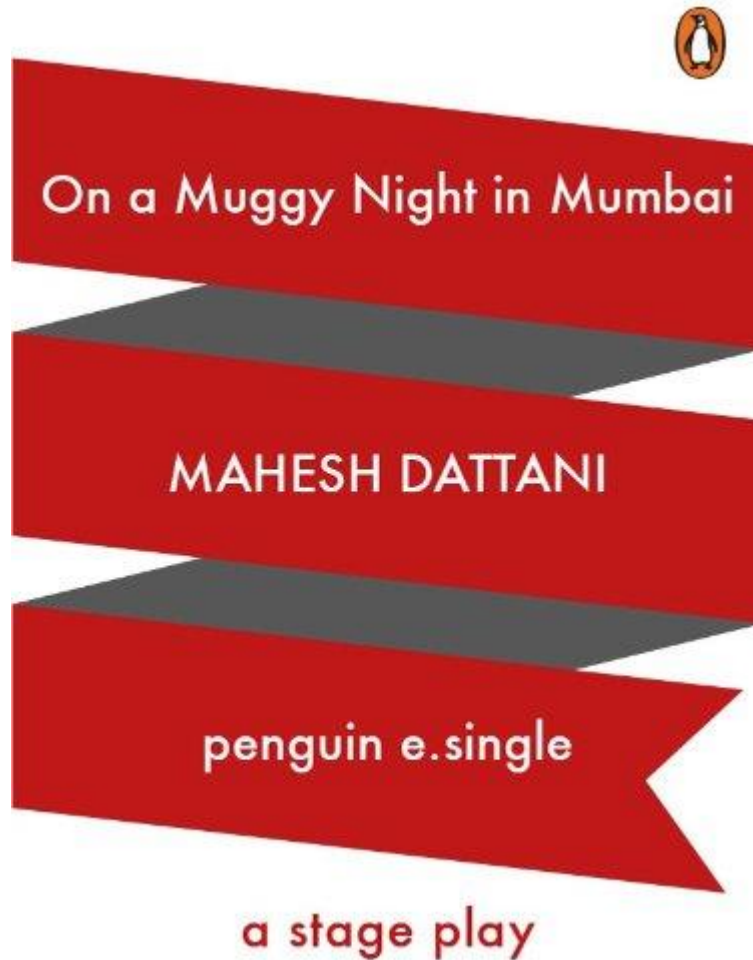


**A Study for the Search of Identity:
Queer Space in Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In
Mumbai* and *Do The Needful***

Vinu C. James

=====



Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a versatile playwright, actor, director, screen writer, film maker, teacher and a man of erudite aspects. His writing is the metamorphosis for the modern contemporary Indian society, of his own life and of others too. The present paper is a brief study of the major plays of Mahesh Dattani. Here my attempt is to highlight the 'Queer Space'

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:3 March 2017

Vinu C. James

A Study for the Search of Identity: Queer Space in Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai* and *Do The Needful*

(homosexuality, gender issues) by Dattani in his plays. (The term *queer* is used here in non-pejorative modern sense, as analysis of the history of the use of the term clearly shows that it is used as part of gay pride.) The themes of taboo relationship and homosexuality are the prime motives of the plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful*. Queer presence in Dattani's work can be seen in the play *Do the Needful* (1997). The plot centers on the negotiations for an arranged marriage between Alpesh, a Gujarati man, and Lata, a Kannada woman. It is revealed that the woman is not ready for the marriage because she loves Salim, a Muslim man, while the prospective groom is in love with a man named Trilok. Although she tells Alpesh about her love for another man, Alpesh keeps mum about his homosexual relationship. Alpesh's homosexuality is revealed to Lata when she surprises him and the gardener of her family having sex in the cow shed, just as she is about to flee with Salim. At first horrified, she decides that the best way to cope up with the situation is to marry Alpesh. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) places homosexuality at its central attraction. In this play, five are gay men and one is a lesbian. The plot hinges on Kamlesh's trying to conceal from his sister Kiran the fact that he was in a relationship with the man she is about to marry. The play samples a wide canvas of male homosexual presence in Indian society. Kamlesh is a compromising & straight-acting gay man. His ex-boyfriend Sharad is intelligent and campy. Ed is in denial and is ready for a heterosexual marriage after having an affair with his fiancée's brother, Kamlesh. Bunny is a celebrity and in the closet. Having all these themes and ideas into focus, in this paper my attempt is to analyze the plays of Dattani in the light of Queer Space.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, Queer space, identity, heterosexual, Mahesh Dattani and His Choice of Themes

Mahesh Dattani's Works

Mahesh Dattani occupies a very prominent place in Indian English literature. His presentation of problems from real life situations is noteworthy contribution to Indian English drama. Among modern Indian playwrights, Dattani stands forth for vividness, artistic perception and immense dramatic soul. He tackles some serious problems prevailing in urban India in his plays. Specially, he gives tone of voice to the troubles and sufferings of the marginalized people

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **17:3 March 2017**

Vinu C. James

A Study for the Search of Identity: Queer Space in Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai* and *Do The Needful*

of our society. His plays contain human pathos, passions, conflict and appeal to human sentiment. Dattani plays an essential role to put Indian English drama to the level of world drama. The current study is an analytical account of Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful* where he challenges the traditional norms of heterosexuality and finds the queer space in it.

Shared Space: *On Muggy Night in Mumbai*

Queer theorists argue that labelled speech acts are the proof of the nature of one's sexuality. Words like "gay" and "gay bashing" are considered negative words in the predominantly hetero normative Indian society. But Dattani uses the word "gay" with a different connotation—as a form of sexual orientation and a reality. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani highlights the way the contemporary urban Indian works against the existing social order. In this play, a whole range of homosexual characters are presented and their experiences throw light on various aspects of the struggle of the homosexuals in the traditional Indian society. This play opens with an informal gathering of a group of homosexuals: Kamlesh, Sharad, Bunny Singh, Ranjit and Deepali. They all are invited by Kamlesh to discuss his sister Kiran's love life with Ed/Prakash. Kamlesh is disillusioned because his sexual relationship with his first partner has broken down and he seeks in vain to overcome this trauma in the companionship of Sharad. Sharad's relentless efforts to erase memories of Kamlesh's early life take him away from Kamlesh. Kamlesh requests his friends to find a solution to his problem and pleads with them to co-operate with him in sorting out his sister's love life. Kiran is in love with Ed/Prakash, the person with whom Kamlesh shared his first love life. Humiliated, Ed/Prakash attempts to commit suicide but is rescued by Kamlesh and he leaves with the sense of a debacle. He is a typical Indian homosexual who is not ready to accept his sexual identity openly and plans to marry Kiran to both mask and continue his clandestine relation with Kamlesh. In this play, Dattani targets not just a single mind but three individual psyches which divulge their inner self to the audience/reader. They are: Kamlesh, Kiran and Ed/Prakash. All three characters are caught in a social and psychological web. Their persistent combat with the society and self in establishing themselves as independent individuals is highlighted in this play. Upfront and unambiguous, the play journeys into the world of gays through a love triangle.

Celebration of Freedom and Possible Threat

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai has been well received in urban India despite its unconventional theme. The play is a celebration of freedom in a sense, but it also points out that the freedom is threatened the moment one steps out of the privacy of home. Kamlesh, the protagonist of the play, has shared an unsuccessful relationship with his male friend Ed. The relationship comes to an end due to the traditional social beliefs on heterosexuality which makes Ed to switch to normal heterosexual mode.

With a broken heart Kamlesh starts another relationship with Sharad, a very lively, intelligent and confident person. Kamlesh and Sharad live together for some time. But, unable to forget Ed, Kamlesh breaks up his relationship with Sharad. At the same time, following the advice of his psychiatrist Ed starts courting Kamlesh's sister Kiran. They have fixed their marriage and plan to meet Kiran's brother Kamlesh before the wedding.

Kamlesh who is still unable to get over his relationship with Ed decides to tell the truth to Kiran. The play opens with the scene when Kamlesh has invited some of his queer friends including Sharad to his place. Among the people there are Sharad and Deepali; Bunny Singh, a TV actor who secretly enjoys gay relationship while being happily married and presents a macho, heterosexual exterior; Ranjit who thinks that India is not a good place for queer people and so he has gone abroad.

All of them have found solutions to the societal oppression and opposition in different ways. In other words, they have employed different survival tactics: Sharad and Deepali by being very upfront and honest about their identities, Bunny by exhibiting a normal married life and Ranjit by escaping to foreign lands. On the other hand Ed consults a psychiatrist who advises him to adopt heterosexuality. Dattani uses this opportunity to criticise mainstream psychoanalysis for being status-conscious.

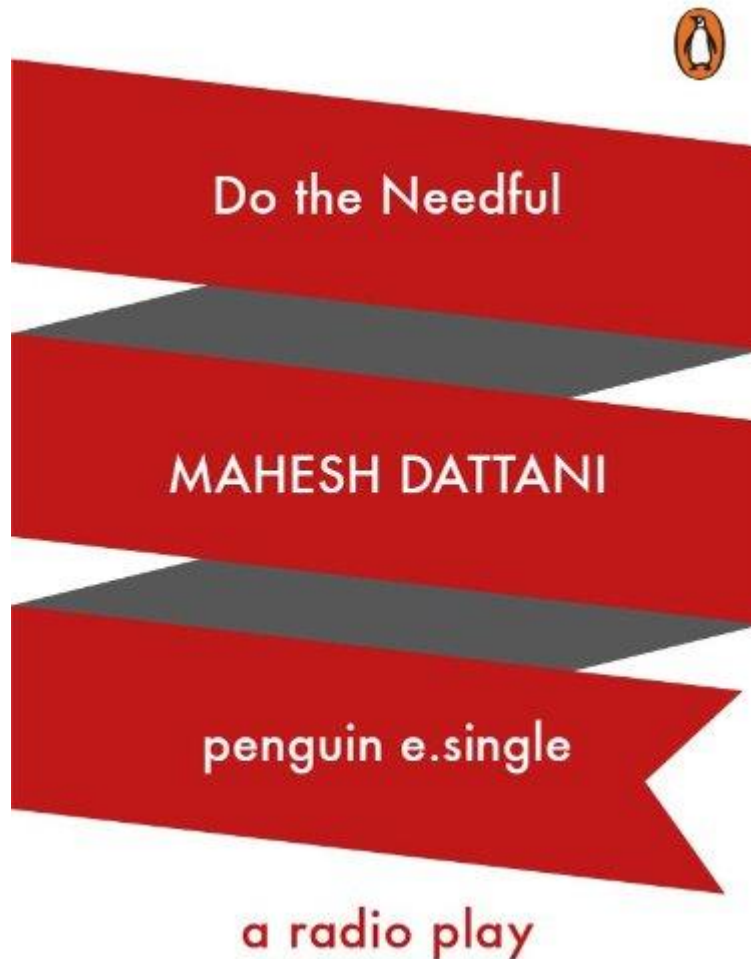
Ed's relationship with the sister of Kamlesh provokes Kamlesh to think Ed has changed and will keep his sister happy. But the queer friends of Kamlesh force him to reveal Ed's secret to Kiran. While Kiran is shocked to learn that both Kamlesh and Ed have been deceiving her, Ed reveals another secret to Kamlesh that his real motive behind marrying Kiran is to remain close to Kamlesh and fulfil his homosexual desires secretly. This is how the matrimonial institution of heterosexual society is used for purposes which are entirely opposite to that institution.

Exploring Alleged Hypocrisy, Escapism and Introvert Nature of the Queer People

The play ends with Kamlesh rediscovering love with Sharad and humiliated Ed is trying to commit suicide. The social pressures are so overpowering that for a person like Ed it becomes impossible to live a normal life. It is also important to note that through the play Dattani tries to find out reason behind hypocrisy, escapism and introvert nature of the queer people. The society does not allow the queer people to live as what they are and forces them to live like what they are not. It creates self- alienation in their life. To prove themselves normal people in front of society Bunny Singh and Ed get married while secretly carrying with their gay relationships. Ed is also under the same social pressure and he decides to marry Kiran to secretly get Kamlesh's love. Then there is Ranjit who leaves India in order to guide a life of his choice. There are others like Deepali and Sharad who are very honest about their sexuality and display it openly. Throughout the play the heterosexual world peeps in time and again and makes its presence felt. The outside world which is alien to the insiders of the house keeps on exerting its pressure. The wedding, the children chasing Bunny for an autograph and the neighbours finding out the incriminating photograph of Kamlesh and Ed are all forces of the outside world. The noisy outside world is a metaphor of domineering atmosphere in which a queer person has to live. The presence of the divergent force in the form of the outside world creates a discourse of opposition to homosexuality. By restricting and suppressing, it shapes the subjectivity of queer people. The leading discourse of heterosexuality suppresses the homosexual culture. The cultural and social codes within a society further enhance subjectivity towards queerness. The ending of the play is not on the expected lines. Conventionally, it could have ended in Ed's suicide; but Ed is saved

and is shown to get up, although with some help. He starts walking towards the people he earlier dreaded facing

Shared Spaces: *Do the Needful*



The play traces the coming together of heterogeneous linguistic and ethnic groups within the larger category of the Indian system of arranged marriages. Dattani makes simple and dexterous use of dialogues, thoughts spoken out loud for the listener and sound patterns that are richly evocative of different spaces as the play travels through the soundscapes of Mumbai and Bangalore to the Kannada countryside and back. *Do the Needful* is another radio play that has been adapted for the stage by Dattani with his usual flair for bringing in unlikely twists in the most mundane of situations.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:3 March 2017

Vinu C. James

A Study for the Search of Identity: Queer Space in Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai* and *Do The Needful*

Culturally a given, arranged marriages are actually never-so to speak arranged between ethnically/linguistically/racially divergent groups because they would believe very reason to perpetuate and strengthen the very differences to maintain distinctive identities. Instead what we have here are the Patels travelling all the way from Mumbai to meet the Gowdas of Bangalore to fix a match between their progeny. The exploration of the shared spaces common to women and homosexuals is put to active use here with the identities of the protagonist. The common oppressor in the picture is the patriarchal structure that refuses to allow any space for the growth of individual identities beyond its periphery. Categories of class, literacy, wealth, power and politics make their obvious statement of differences in two parties. Food habits, non-vegetarianism and other little nuances occupy as much space in the conversation as do the bigger issues land ownership, business or heritage. Latha and Alpesh marry and carry on with their respective partners even as Patel and Gowdas leave huge sighs relief at having averted cultural disaster and ruin in their own context.

Thus we see the interesting scenes of movement in the play that at first find their feet as they try to locate themselves; then goes on to face hardfacts that have been conveniently pushed under the rug. In this process of laying bare speaking the unspeakable, and taking nothing at face value, Dattani arrives at the point where the identities have begun to take on specific contours and colours. the progression remains one where identities make and unmake themselves, adding or shedding new perceptions, never complete but always in the process of becoming. Mahesh Dattani, though not very noisily, makes an appeal for an atmosphere of approval and acknowledgement of the queer community. He also brings out the gay issues out of the closet into the open. He deals with a variety of queer sensibilities, including men and women, showing how they react to societal pressures. Dattani's play thus raises a host of rarely addressed issues and by placing them into the forefront he challenges the traditional heterosexual codes of the society.

Works Cited

1. Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005. Print.
2. Dattani, Mahesh. Collected Plays. Penguin Books, Noida: 2000. Print.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **17:3 March 2017**

Vinu C. James

A Study for the Search of Identity: Queer Space in Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai* and *Do The Needful*

3. Reddy, K. Venkata, and R. K. Dhawan, Ed. Flowering of Indian Drama: Growth and Development. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2004. Print.
4. Bhatia Krishna S. - 'Indian English Drama: A Critical Study', Sterling Publisher, 1987. Print.
5. Naik M. K.-'History of Indian English Literature', Sahitya Akademi, 1982. Print.

=====

VINU C. JAMES, M.Phil. Scholar
CMS College
Near CRI Pumps
Chinnavedampatty
Coimbatore 641049
Tamil Nadu
India
superbrainmjv@gmail.com