



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

VOICING THE VOICELESS: CONSCRIPTING THE SUBJUGATION OF QUEER IDENTITY IN THE  
PLAYS OF VIJAY TENDULKAR AND MAHESH DATTANI

PRIYANKA CHANDEL

Ph. D Research Scholar

School of Languages, Literature and Culture

Central University of Punjab, Bathinda



PRIYANKA  
CHANDEL

ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the analysis of Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story* and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* with respect to treatment of queer issues, their repression and social stigma faced by queer individuals. The focus is to find out how various social, economic and political discourses work towards repression of queer identities and reaffirming the oppressive discourse of heteronormative sexuality. Both Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani have employed the fundamental themes of queer identity, oppressive attitude of society and psychological dilemma of queer individuals in their respective plays. In both the plays under study i.e. *A Friend's Story* by Vijay Tendulkar and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* by Dattani, there runs the unconventional theme of alternate sexuality which has been dealt with compassion and understanding. This paper takes into account various unexplored issues related to queer identity. This study explores how these plays raise the issue of the emancipation of rights of queers and undertakes a comparative analysis of the two plays in order to discover varying attitudes towards this issue in Indian drama corresponding to the periods of the two playwrights.

Key Words: Queer Identity, repression, oppressive discourses, dilemma, heteronormative sexuality

©KY PUBLICATIONS

A literary art accomplishes true and worthy significance when it becomes able to faithfully present the existing scenario, experiences shared by the common folk, and various indiscrepancies prevailing in the society, dilemmas of existence, human sensibilities and also conforming to the universal socio- moral codes. This task of representation of true human predicament is very aptly carried on through a very effective literary genre of drama. Drama in a way is the direct communication between the writer and the audience through the means of artists. Drama is not new to Indian literary scene as it has been representing the universally acknowledged human sensibility without any constraint of time or space. Indian English Drama has been successful in commencing its own distinctive tradition by deploying a series of avant-garde themes and innovations. The contemporary playwrights revisit and reinvestigate the unaddressed and unacknowledged issues present in society for a very long time, within the present socio-culture and political scenario.

Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are among this creed of the contemporary playwrights who can be comprehended as the social realists who being dedicated towards the society have made unending efforts to bring forth the evils present in the contemporary society. Both of them are essentially social commentators who have delved deep into the evils, problems and the harsh realities of the contemporary social ambience. Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar both have employed the fundamental themes which form the common ground for their dramatic merit. Thus this huge diversity of themes traversing the untouched and unexplored arenas has added to the excellence of both these writers. This approach towards theatre has resulted in emancipation of the rights of the marginalized as well as discriminated sections of the society.

In order to maintain its supremacy over the lives of individuals in a society repressing their sexuality has always been the most efficient tool in the hands of the power structures. Sexuality is reduced to the status of a matter not to be discussed or talked about in the public sphere. This strategy is operative in the society for a long time and is still operative in the present day world. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault very efficiently has pointed towards the repression of sexuality as:

The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship. (17)

Thus, in order to maintain supremacy the heterosexual power structure repressed the free expression of sexuality by prohibiting any discussion about it. The issues related to sexuality of an individual have most of the times been swept under the carpet under the name of values, culture etc. which are nothing more than the discourses created in order to maintain the heteronormative supremacy. The plight of the homosexuals and various atrocities they face in the homophobic society have been very well depicted by the dramatists in contemporary dramatic scenario. Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are the towering figures who have dealt with the issues of the queers with utmost care and attention. The treatment of the queer identities is not only rational but also the treatment of these issues is having a realistic approach. The plays which have been most successful in bringing out the plight of homosexuals are *A Friends Story* by Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Both these plays are emblematic of the experiences of homosexuals and their dilemma regarding their own sexualities. At the social level, heterosexual relationships are taken to be unethical, so individuals with queer inclination have to hide their real identity under social pressure. All this start from quite a very young age when parents start repressing the sexual orientation of individuals and they are taught to behave in specific ways as prescribed by the society. Vijay Tendulkar in his play *A Friends Story* brings this repressive technique embedded in society, operating right from the childhood where they are forced to behave in certain ways. While narrating her story to Babu, Mitra says:

When she came of age, rather early, they got worried. They became very strict. 'What will people say?' was the bugbear they set up to control her. They sought to stamp her mind with the fear of men, at a time she didn't know why men were dangerous. (431)

Thus, the repressive matrix of heterosexual society which starts instilling the heteronormative norms in the children can be easily observed. This repression of sexuality gets started right from the childhood. Under the societal pressure the queer individuals have to repress their true identities. They are not able to openly accept their true identities as they have a very strong fear of being made an outcaste by the society. Mahesh Dattani in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* brings out the plight of the queer individuals who under the pressure of society repress their desires. At the very beginning of the play it is clearly suggested that the two men i.e. Kamlesh and the guard had sex in the bedroom. There goes on a conversation between them which follow as:

KAMLESH.Tum, kya . . . yeh sab . . . paise ke liye karte ho?

GUARD .Nahin. Hahn! Hahn, main paise ke liye hi to karta hoon sab kuch! (51)

It is clear from the gestures of the guard that he is telling a lie. There is a sort of irony present in his reply as money could not be the only reason for which he is doing this. The truth is that in order to hide his actual desire for the companionship of a man he makes an excuse that he is doing all this for money. Later on when Kamlesh further asks him whether he likes it or not, he has no answer but understanding his situation Kamlesh himself remarks, "But we will have to pretend you do it only for the money!" (51)

The pressure of social forces is such that the queer individuals themselves are not able to accept their own identity. They are ashamed of the identities they have and also they try to avert from their true selves in order to gain acceptance. Ed or Prakash in the play had been the former lover of Kamlesh who being ashamed of their relationship decides to get rid of his homosexual inclination and become straight. He says, "I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest" (92).

Thus we can easily see that these queer individuals are repressed to such a level that they themselves are not able to accept their own identities as they are well aware that the heteronormative social norms would never provide any sanction to their orientations. This predicament is further highlighted by Ranjit when he says, "At some point or another we all wish to be something we are not" (69).

The hollowness of homophobic society can be easily seen as they are not able to understand or just don't want to understand the situation in which the homosexuals live. The sort of confusion, dilemma, mental conflict and the identity crisis faced by them are not easy to comprehend. The only reason behind this is that there already exists a pre-notion about the sexuality which prevents the further rational introspection regarding this matter. They feel alienated in the homophobic society as they are not able to identify completely with the heterosexuals who turn a deaf ear towards their sufferings. This plight of homosexuals is brought out very effectively by Tendulkar who makes Mitra the mouthpiece for the homosexuals. Mitra brings out this pain of alienation among homosexuals alive when she says, "It's useless. Certain things can be shared only if you accept things as they are, here and now" (424). Here we can easily visualise the frustration of the homosexual individuals who always face the non-acceptance of the society.

Dattani also raises the same issue of non-acceptance by the heterosexual society where the queers have to repress their identity. When Kamlesh, suffering from severe depression consults a psychiatrist in hope of being understood and getting some help, he finds no respite for his present situation. Sharing his experience with his friends Kamlesh says:

I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while, I believed him. Because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society, he said, but it may be possible to reorient yourself. (69)

This is one of the ways out from the dilemma as suggested by the heterosexuals to the homosexuals, to change themselves as they cannot change the society. Even the most rational individuals offer such kind of remedies which further alienate these homosexuals in the society. Here we can also observe psychiatry as a powerful discourse in the alienation of homosexuals. Instead of understanding and working towards providing space to homosexuals, psychiatry further tends to be helpful in their subjugation by encouraging them to avert from their real sexualities and accept the sexuality with which they can't really relate to. Psychiatry as a part of psychoanalysis should help in resolving the problems faced by homosexuals not by making them repress their actual sexualities but by helping them to accept their real identities. It is treated like a disease which can be cured by medication and reorientation. Thus through the discourse of psychiatry, the heteronormative norms are further strengthened which results in further repression of homosexuals.

The only way out for homosexuals to gain acceptance is to hide the reality of queer individuals. The only way out of this predicament is to pretend to be straight in this homophobic society which categorises everything, even the identities on the basis of straight and queer. The deviants have to maintain their sexualities in secrecy and have to pretend to be following the sexual norms of the society. In order to survive

they need to fake their identities as is evident from the remarks of Bunny when he says, "Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can't find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage" (70).

The notion of marriage in heterosexual society holds an important place in the social structure. It is not just possible to always live in social isolation as there is always a need of being socially accepted in the social structure. The homosexuals are denied this right of being together and are unjustly denied the companionship of their partners. The homosexuals are often turned into hypocrites who hide their real identity by wearing a mask of heterosexual identity by getting married. Many times, they have to camouflage their identity for the fear of being ostracised. One has to pay a very heavy price if he accepts to be a gay. They know it very well that they can't love the person with the same intensity as they can do with the person of the same sex, but still under pressure they accept it. Nama Deshmukh in *A Friend's Story* despite of being in relationship with Sumitra gets married just out of the social pressure which won't provide any sanction to their relationship. In the same way, bringing out the dogmatic nature of the society and marriage which is not based on love for companion, but is meant more for social acceptance and security, Dattani making Bunny as the mouthpiece for this prevailing hypocrisy of society says that, "She boasts about my work to all her neighbours. Our children are popular in school. And they all love me. And they all love me. At least I am not depressed like Kamlesh" (84).

The attitude of heterosexual individuals can be seen with much gravity in the comments of Kiran, who herself is a heterosexual and knows about the homosexual tendency of her brother Kamlesh. She also suggests him to repress his sexual desires in order to live with dignity in the society. When Kamlesh asks for suggestion from Kiran of what he should do and whether he is wrong in having orientation towards same sex, the following conversation takes place:

KAMLESH: Let them talk! If two men want to love one another, what's the harm?

KIRAN: Kamlesh take my advice. Don't let people know about you. You will spend your whole life defending yourself. If I had a choice, I would stay invisible too. (91)

The suggestion as given by Kiran to her brother Kamlesh is in many cases used by homosexuals in order to have social status and to protect the identity they have made in the society by being heterosexual. This is evident proof of the hypocrisy present in the homosexuals who try to put their identities inside the closet under the pressurizing norms of the society. Bunny, who is an actor and plays the role of an ideal husband in some TV programme is an example of this prevailing hypocrisy among homosexuals. When Kiran questions his sexuality, he simply abstains from accepting his reality and averts the question.

KIRAN. I just wouldn't have guessed.

BUNNY. Guessed what?

KIRAN. That you are . . . well, like my brother.

BUNNY. Oh no! I am not . . . like them. They are such intelligent people and good company. I am a very liberal-minded person. (76)

Dattani explores new horizon of human experiences that can provide more comprehensive images of the struggle of existence in the backdrop of socially constructed images. Dattani very strongly keeps his own point of view regarding the gender identity of an individual through the medium of Bunny when he says, "All I am saying is that we should all forget categorising people as gay or straight or bi or whatever, and let them do what they want to do" (88).

Gender is the repetitive performance of various acts, so it is our notion of different acts which further takes the form of gender roles. As a common notion of male and female roles are already decided, so any divergence from these performances leads to the designation of an individual as deviant. Through the enactment of these roles one not only earns acceptance but also gives him or her power and authority. As Sharad puts it:

All it needs is a bit of practice . . . Don't sit with your legs cross keep them wide apart. And make sure you occupy lots of space in the 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. . . .

Watch the speech. No fluttery vowels. Not 'It's so-o-o hot in here!'-but It's HOT! It's fucking HOT!  
(101)

Thus these superficial performances of an individual decides actually his identity to a great extent. It has nothing to do with the sexual orientations of an individual. If a person has homosexual yearnings but still he behaves as per the norms of society even then he is taken to be heterosexual. So, the deception of appearances as well as mannerisms are used as useful trope by the homosexuals to hide their real identity. Ed in the play breaks his relation with Kamlesh and says that he has become straight. He uses the performance to hide his homosexuality and pretend to be straight. Taken by the fake identity as presented by Ed, Kiran makes the following remark about him, "He is so . . . male. So protective, so caring and so assertive" (104). But the truth is completely different and the disguise of Ed as a heterosexual comes out when he confesses in front of Kamlesh that he still loved him and wants to maintain his homosexual relation with him even after marriage as no one would suspect them that way.

This repression is not just evident from the dialogues between the characters but also the settings of both the plays bring out many things. The title *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* itself points towards the suffocating conditions in which the queer sexualities dwell in the heteronormative society. The characters repeatedly talk about the hot air and high temperature which points towards the heat which these queer sexualities are facing against them in the society. The reference to working air conditioner in Kamlesh's flat hints towards the satisfaction and comfort all these queers experience there. This is the place where they longer have to camouflage and can breathe freely. It is the place which gives them respite from the oppressing society. Thus we can feel the presence of society whether directly or indirectly as Konar remarks, "In the qualitative progression of thought through the interpretative impasse of dislocation, collocation and allocation, there is no abrupt break with society" (11). The wedding in the same compound where these queers are meeting is ironical. At one place the marriage of heterosexuals is celebrated and everyone blesses them. On the other side are these homosexuals whose relationships are not sanctified and face contempt. Thus, the music and noise of the marriage procession seems to be unbearable for all the queers. It reminds them of their failure in gaining acceptance in the society. The multi-level stage setting also provides an insight into the psyche of the queers. "Different zones and levels on the stage indicate the different psychological impasse of different characters" (Konar 10). In other words it is the representation of their mental spaces. In the introduction of ACT-1 there is a description of Kamlesh's flat which goes as:

The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first is a small flat, beautifully done up in 'ethnic chic fashion' . . . The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city with its glittering lights. The entire flat is almost too perfect to be real. Yet it speaks a lot of its occupant, Kamlesh and his attempt at creating a world where he can belong. The second area, a completely non-realistic set comprising three levels, is black and expansive. Characters in this area are immediately suspended in a 'shoonya' where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts. Below this is Kamlesh's bedroom. The bedroom is realistic, but hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy. The backdrop of these three acting areas is the Mumbai skyline, engulfing the created world of Kamlesh, the secret private space of the bedroom and the deeper space that belongs to the inner thoughts of the characters. (49)

Thus we can see how not only the characters are the representatives of the oppression, dilemma and truths of their sexualities but also the stage setting itself talks about them. *A Friends Story* also is full of symbolic representations which allow an individual to peep inside the psyche of homosexuals through the medium of Mitra. Babu's room is a symbol of a safe place where Mitra can be herself; she need not hide her homosexual identity. When the room is clean then it represents the harmony of Mitra's life and the peace in her mind. At the other time everything in the room is scattered and cigarette butts are lying everywhere, this points towards the disturbance in Mitra's life and her mental agony when she feels cheated by Nama. The cigarette butts too are a symbol of the lives of homosexuals. Just as the cigarette butts are of no use after the cigarette is over, similar is the case with the lives of homosexuals. The society treats them as useless pieces and wriggles them under their feet as they know they are not able to fulfill the heteronormative norms of the

society. Later in the play when Mitra writes unnamed love letters to Nama, this reflects the loss of identity of Mitra and other sexualities. Her visit to the filthy and unknown areas in order to meet is clear symbol of her strong repulsion towards the moralistic and social codes. This in turn is her disappointment with the norms of the society. Bapu, who tries to understand Mitra is the symbol of writer's sympathy towards homosexuals, whereas Dalvi is a symbol of the oppressing society and its hostility towards homosexuals. At the end death of Mitra symbolises the loss of hope in the society which is homophobic at large. Thus we can easily see how the character themselves become the symbol throughout the play. They are not just single characters but represent a whole community on a whole.

Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar have very successfully brought out the suffering of homosexuals by the representation of the repression which they face not only on the account of society but also because of the inner conflicts going on within themselves. The repression grows stronger when the queer individual is a female like that in the case of Mitra. The repression of female homosexual is at a much larger scale in the patriarchal heteronormative society. By making the central character a female, Tendulkar has pointed out towards the role of society in repression of doubly marginalised females. "Tendulkar observes that woman suffers largely as the victim of the institutional body of powers in the Indian society. Often there is a collision between the two i.e., woman and society sparking off Violence" (Janardhanreddy et al. 179). Repression of queer sexuality is in play everywhere in the heteronormative society by making heterosexuality natural and legal and on the other hand homosexuality illegal, unnatural and abnormal. The repression of queers gain momentum when the discourses which are otherwise believed to provide some space for them, themselves become operative in repression of queer sexualities. Psychiatry which is otherwise thought to provide space for the repressed queers itself treats queerness as a disease which needs to be cured. Complete restraint from queer tendencies are recommended to cure queerness. Thus psychiatry itself becomes handy in repression of queer sexualities. The repression of society goes on to such extent that the queer individuals are forced to follow heterosexual norms of marriage which is considered to be the best cure for homosexuality in the homophobic society. This becomes very clear when Mitra's parents being suspicious of her queerness make many attempts to marry her. Similarly Bunny Singh, who is homosexual, asks Kamlesh to get married in order to get over his desire for Prakash. Religion also plays an important role in the suppression of queer individuals by regarding queerness as a sin and the work of devil. In order to get rid of queerness, they recommend regular prayers as the only way out of this sin.

It is not the individuals alone who disapprove homosexuality but the high institutions of society like church who do not approve and sanctify such relations because relations between same sex, since they cannot be procreative are seen as unnatural and carnal. (Singh 2)

Power is also used to repress the queers, sometimes it may take the form of physical assault and at the other time it can be seen in the form of misuse of authority. When Dalvi in *A Friends Story* comes to know about the relationship between Mitra and Nama, he abuses her verbally as well as physically. This is the use of power to repress the queer inclinations by the threat of force. At the other occasion, when Mitra's affair with Nama becomes public, the college authorities throw her out of the college. This is the misuse of authority to repress queers. Misuse of power is not just against Mitra but she also uses power to subjugate Bapu and Nama, "Nama was frightened of the power of Mitra exerted over her and surrendered to her overtures easily. Bapu too, was forced to allow them to use his room" (Janardhanreddy et al. 182). Thus power is not only exerted by queers but also by them in order to maintain their relationship. An outcome of all these repressive attitudes results in the camouflaging of identities by queers which proves to be devastating for themselves also as they face identity crisis. Thus both the playwrights have very efficiently brought out the repression of queer sexualities at different levels and by different modes in the society.

#### WORKS CITED

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York : Routledge, 1999. Print.  
 Dattani, Mahesh. "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai". *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.  
 Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Vol.1 An Introduction*. Trans. R. Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.

- 
- Janardhanreddy, K. and P. Satyanarayana. "Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story*: A Problem Play of Gays and Lesbians." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature* 1.3 (2013): 136- 139. Web. 24 Jan. 2014.
- Konar, Ankur. "Drama, Dattani and Discourse: Position and Exposition." *Lapis Lazuli- An International Literary Journal* 2 (2012): 1- 14. Web. 11 Dec. 2013.
- Singh, Jaspal. "Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 3.2 (2012): 1-6. Web. 2 Feb. 2014.
- Tendulkar, Vijay. "A Friend's Story".*Collected Plays in Translation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
-