Chapter 3

Mahesh Dattani and the Metropolitan Subaltern

The plays of Mahesh Dattani take us to a realm altogether different from those of Dutt or Karnad. Without foraying into either history or myths, Dattani, a staunch realist, focuses exclusively on urban metropolitan society and strives to expose through his plays the different forms of subalternization, based on considerations of gender, religion or sexuality, which menacingly lurk beneath the sophisticated veneers of modernity. In the process, Dattani not only extends the rich dramatic tradition of India but also breaks new ground with his unconventional themes and subjects. The chapter will be divided into four sections and will successively explore Final Solutions and its representation of Muslims’ subalternization, the subalterneity of homosexuals, which Dattani has often focused on, the subalternization of eunuchs in Seven Steps around the Fire and finally the multifaceted subalternization of women which too he has consistently explored in various plays.

Final Solutions

Both Utpal Dutt’s Hunting the Sun and Karnad’s Tale-Danda demonstrate how the growing menace of Hindu nationalism, a predominantly Brahmanical phenomenon, contributes to the processes of postcolonial subalternization by subjecting lower castes or minority communities to both systemic discrimination, on the one hand, and genocidal violence, on the other. Such processes in turn rupture the imagined community of the nation and create essentialist religious categories on the basis of which minority communities are pushed to peripheries, if not altogether annihilated, and thus breed a corrosive internecine hatred that can devastate the nation with vicious cycles of fratricidal violence. Mahesh Dattani’s Final Solutions, written during the height of the Ramjanmabhumi movement, explores all these issues and more and offers an intriguing representation of communal hatred, the way in which it exacerbates subalternization and the chain of violence it can unleash. This section would explore these concerns by
grounding the play in the particular context of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the virtually pan-Indian forces of hatred and fear it generated, which have severely ruptured the secular fabric of the nation. Since domination functions on the basis of both coercion and ideology, the analysis would initially dwell briefly on the ideological facets of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the corporeal violence which it incited and fostered, before moving into a discussion of the play and its exploration of these processes of subalternization. If Utpal Dutt’s and Karnad’s plays operate as an ideological challenge to revivalist historiography and the attendant forces of Hindu nationalism, through the foregrounding of dalit voices from the past, Dattani not only critiques its violent present manifestations but the complicity of the urban middle classes in the entire course of events.

Hindutva, the Ramjanmabhumi Movement and the Context of Final Solutions

Survey of a recent anthology of essays⁶¹ on Mahesh Dattani’s Final Solutions showed, rather surprisingly, that apart from one solitary quotation from M.S. Golwalkar and one reference to the violence and counter-violence in Mumbai, there was no attempt to ground the play, by the scholars, in its particular context which certainly shaped the contours of the play as we have it. Without ever denying that the play continues to resonate beyond its immediate context, it is indeed baffling how one could choose to ignore the ideological force of Hindutva and the gruesome violence and sporadic counter-violence its engendered, especially since the events and dialogues of the play astutely mimic much of what was going on, during and after the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the destruction of the Babri masjid on 6th December, 1992. Instead of following the usual plot and character analysis, which most scholars of Dattani’s plays seem to reproduce, this chapter would seek to initially analyse the ideological and material manifestations of the discourse of Hindutva which alone can explain the subalternization of Muslims in India and these factors are essential for our understanding of the characters and their responses in the play. These ideological and material manifestations were not just a result

---

⁶¹ Aneglie Multani ed., Final Solutions: Text and Criticism, (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2009). Apart from one admittedly ‘political’ reading, the other articles generally steer clear of any reference to the discourse of Hindutva and its consequences. Whether this was because of lack of space or other material constraints related to publication, or not, I obviously cannot confirm.
of the social, economic and political imperatives of particular temporal junctures. They were also a product of a fundamentalist communal politics which originated well before independence and gruesomely heightened during the Partition riots and the subsequent assassination of Gandhi. This process has continued to grow across much of India, by adding both numbers and dimensions to the platform created by the likes of Savarkar and Golwalkar, as already indicated in a previous chapter.

It is in acknowledgment of this continuous process that D.N Jha, while elaborating on the links between Hindu nationalism and revivalist historiography, states that

The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by RSS-trained Godse on 30 January 1948 and the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on 6th December 1999 are two important and unforgettable milestones in the unfolding of the backward-looking Hindu revivalist and fascist politics of contemporary India. (Jha 23)

The validity of Jha’s assertion is borne out by looking at some of the statements which have laid the foundation of the discourse of Hindutva in India. It has sought to imagine the nation exclusively on the basis of religious identities and thus impose on the heterogeneous Indian society and culture that uniformity which has been bequeathed to certain Indian minds as an aspirational ideal by a colonial modernity based on European Enlightenment and its notion of nation-states based on uniform language, culture and religion. The previous chapter on Utpal Dutt’s *Hunting the Sun* and explores the impact of colonial discourse in the construction of Hindutva and this stance becomes evident from the Hindu nationalism of Savarkar, who blatantly eliminates all Christians and Muslims from the imagined community of India:

That is why in the case of some of our Mohameddan or Christian countrymen who had originally been forcibly converted to a non-Hindu religion, and who consequently have inherited, along with Hindus, a common fatherland and a greater part of the wealth of the common culture – language, law, customs, folklore and history – are not and cannot be recognised as Hindus. For though Hindusthan to them is Fatherland, as to any other Hindu, yet it is not to them a Holyland too. (Savarkar 113)
It is on the basis of this logic that M.S. Golwalkar would go on to assert: “All those not belonging to the national, i.e. Hindu race, Religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of real ‘National’ life…” (Noorani 20).

The entire Ramjanmabhoomi movement is born out of this discursive paradigm and the movement may well be seen as a spatial strategy, with Ayodhya as the focal heterotopia, which not only seeks to redefine the nation-space by making it a Hindurashtra, as opposed to a secular entity, but holds out to the followers of the movement the promise of a ‘Ramrajya’ which provides motivation for assertive and aggressive action, including both communal violence and the destruction of such sites as the Babri Masjid (Deshpande 172). The transformation of Ayodhya in such a manner coincided with several ‘Yatras’ planned and organised by the different wings of the Sangh Parivar which sought to effect an unprecedented mobilisation of Indian Hindus to evoke the notion of Hindurashtra as a shared ideal towards which all may strive and the attendant liberation of the land from all those minority communities and rival political formations whom Golwalkar had already identified as ‘internal threats’. The destruction of the Babri masjid for the supposed liberation of the sacred space where Rama was born, in order to build a temple, was only a symbolic act connoting the desired liberation of the whole of the nation from the supposedly contaminating influence of the Muslims to make India that Hindurashtra which Savarkar or Golwalkar had envisioned. The violent act and its gruesome consequences, as well as the organised escalation of communal violence which preceded it in many states, not only ruptured the secular fabric of the nation but pushed the Muslim communities of various localities into a state of pervasive subalternization where mere survival becomes a struggle.

This becomes vividly exemplified if we look at the various accounts of communal violence in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Bihar and of course Uttar Pradesh. The name of Gujarat may seem particularly conspicuous in this regard on account of the state-sponsored genocide of Muslims in 2002. But the events of 2002 were hardly an aberration as the state has been prone to communal violence for a long time. Already in 1969 there was widespread violence in the state and especially Ahmedabad which left almost two thousand dead after five weeks of clashes which also led to the
destruction or damaging of certain mosques and mausoleum, few of which were also replaced by temples, such as the Hanuman temple at Raipur Gate in Ahmedabad, whose icon is known as ‘Hulladia (riot-related) Hanuman’ (Nandy et al 104). Such clashes continued to erupt throughout the 1980 as the Sangh Parivar gained more and more influence in the state, following changing political equations and discontent with the Indian National Congress, then the dominant political force. As any survey would reveal, the mobilisation of Hindus by the Sangh Parivar and the communal clashes developed simultaneously and in most cases such violence erupted on account of organised religious processions of one sort or another as these processions were regularly marked with provocative statements and slogans designed to incite violence from any of the opposing groups. The yatras associated with the Ramshila Pujan ceremony organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, one of the most militant wings of the Sangh Parivar, throughout Gujarat, in 1989, may be seen as an apt example of this particular crisis. As Nandy and others inform us,

According to the state government, in the wake of the Ramshila Pujan, 180 towns and villages witnessed Hindu-Muslim clashes. Even after the processions with sanctified bricks were banned by Chief Minister Amarsingh Chaudhuri of Congress-I, there was communal tension at 95 more places. (Nandy et al 108)

The situation became even worse in 1990 as L.K. Advani, one of the principal political leaders of BJP, launched his Rath Yatra from the Somnath Temple in Gujarat. The Somnath temple has often been raised by members of the far right as an evidence of Muslim intolerance and violence as the temple was successively raided and destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni during his incursions into India in the twelfth century. The initiation of the yatra from Somnath temple tallied with the Sangh Parivar’s larger narrative of avenging the supposed humiliation and injustice meted out to Hindus for hundreds of years, leading to rampant murder, assault, arson and destruction of property, with unprecedented participation from the urban middle class youths who systematically targeted Muslim houses and shops and looted at will. As the chilling documentation by Nandy and his colleagues reminds us, while on the one hand the violence affected all

62 A ceremony involving the laying of the foundation stone for the proposed Ram Temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya.
sections of the city, including the murder of women and children (something which never happened in earlier riots), on the other hand, teen-aged boys and girls, prompted by their parents, enthusiastically joined in the looting of destroyed Muslim shops (Nandy et al 120). Middle-class youths were also involved in the destruction of the Navrangpura dargah and the subsequent building of a temple at the same place without there being any action by the administration. In all this, the administration often played a callously collusive role as violence continued to ravage even houses located around police stations.

Not only did this spate of violence leave 63 people dead and hundreds homeless, it created a vitiated ambience of mutual antagonism which inflicted seemingly irreparable damage to any hope of a peaceful and just future for the city. The following excerpt deserves to be quoted at length to indicate the intensity of such hatred and the combustible cauldron of circumstances:

The Hindu driver of our auto-rickshaw, realising that we were retuning from a relief camp meant for Muslims, asked point blank ‘Don’t you think that Nehru committed a blunder? He should have sent the Muslims to Pakistan!’ A retired government official was only slightly more suave. He said that he knew it was impossible to drive the Muslims out of India, but many problems could be solved if their voting rights were taken away. Others sought more drastic solutions. And when some volunteers of Ahmedabad Ekta went to purchase food for the riot victims, a Muslim bakery owner said straight out, ‘Sir, why do you give us bread? Give us gunpowder…Just across the road, a Muslim college student lamented:

Now my friends are so desperate that they are asking for guns. No one in my community trusts the local police after the recent experiences. All my friends think that now they have to protect themselves on the basis of their own strength and create a line of defence.

(Nandy et al 121-22)

Such are the responses of a besieged subalternized community who suddenly became almost like migrants in their own country as their homes and shops were destroyed and the tolerance and amity of the past was replaced by mistrust, fear, hatred and an everyday struggle for survival. This is all the more true in case of cities like Jaipur and Kota whose celebrated tradition of religious cooperation and co-existence was jolted for ever at this particular historical juncture during 1989-90. In all these instances of communal violence what we witness is less the spontaneous outburst of violence, triggered by some particular incident or occasion, and more the consequences of
organised and meticulously executed violence, born out of systematic indoctrination. This is evident from various reports which document how various processions organised by different organisations of the Sangh Parivar included a large number of armed cadres who kept on shouting such slogans as ‘Hindustan mein rehna hai, to Hindu bankar rehna hai’ (If you want to live in India, you will have to live like Hindus), or ‘Babar ke santanon ko Hindustan mein nehi rehne denge (We will not let Babar’s progeny live in India) (Nandy et al 131). What is also remarkable here is the fact that indoctrination was not limited to the Sangh Parivar cadres but had adversely affected the administration as well which failed to preserve law order precisely because of, as Nandy and others point out, “police inaction and the tacit police support to the Hindu rioters.” (Nandy et al 139) What happened in the process is that people belonging to Muslim communities suddenly found their lives at stake owing to organised assaults launched by political organisations mobilising majority Hindu support and a prejudiced administration that was reluctant to protect its citizens’ fundamental rights.

The trauma of such pervasive subalternization finds another illustration through the examination of the nature and aftermath of the Bhagalpur riots of 1989, in which around a thousand people were killed of which nearly 93% were Muslims. What specifically distinguishes this particular instance of communal violence is that in Bhagalpur, the villages were as affected as urban centres and that there was active and brutal collusion between the rioters and the police which persisted even after the restoration of normalcy and the initiation of the judicial procedure regarding the crimes during the riots. As the report of the People’s Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) observes,

The Bhagalpur riots which claimed the lives of nearly 1000 persons are one of the worst instances of communal riots in the recent past... In the seven years between 1986 and 1993, the toll of the Bhagalpur riots stands the highest. For the survivors of the riot, the years after have meant innumerable visits to the law courts, police station, welfare officers and so on... Filing of FIRs and framing of charges is the task of the police. But when the police which had participated in the riots returns as investigating authority, the result is wilful delay and incomplete investigation. (PUDR, 1996)
The gruesome nature of such collusion and the brutal irony embedded in their appointment as investigators of riot-related crimes becomes evident when we recall the police-engineered massacre that took place in the village of Logain:

Led by ASI Ramchander Singh of Jagdishpur thana and other policemen in uniform, a 4000 strong mob attacked Logain village at 7 O’clock on the morning of 27 October. 115 people are estimated to have been killed. The bodies of the victims were at first thrown into a pokhar in the Muslim mohalla. Then they were pulled out and thrown into a well. Finally the corpses were pulled out again, buried in two fields whereon cauliflower was planted. 108 bodies were gradually recovered, only after 8 December. (PUDR, 1996)

While such incidents indisputably corroborate the location of Indian Muslims as subalternized communities, especially in times of communal mobilization for electoral politics, it also exposes the fact that such subalternization occurs not just because of their own vulnerability to majoritarian violence but also because of the active participation of the administration in communal atrocities. Instead of finding the long road to hegemony through the privileges of democratic government, the Muslims, in such situations find themselves to be up against forces both within and outside the governmental institutions and are thereby subalternized.

What happens as a result is that while one section of the society continues to suffer from the ravages inflicted by the violence and destruction unleashed during the riots, on the other hand, those who were responsible for their suffering and trauma remain beyond the arms of the law, thus corroding all faith on both governmental institutions and the very notion of democratic justice. Furthermore, the problems are not confined to the comparatively brief time-frames within which riots unfold in a specific place. Not only do the rioters operate as interpellated agents of that Hindutva ideology which is propagated incessantly through many different channels, the ideology seeps into everyday life to such an extent that the members of Muslim communities are subjected various modes of discrimination which imposes on them an uncivil isolation. Following the analysis of Hussain Shaheen (Shaheen 82-87) we may argue, that communalism too uses both ‘software’ and ‘hardware’ and while communal violence, especially of the kind that is unleashed during riots, may be termed as ‘hardware’, that is complemented by various other modes of discrimination based on one’s religious identity which is
identified as ‘software’. Such ‘communal software’ builds into the existence of minority communities a pervasive sense of deprivation and alienation born out of prejudiced prevention of access to various facilities of secular modernity, such as education, employment, medical care etc. All of this has been scrupulously mentioned in the analysis of the Prime Minister’s Committee, led by Justice Rajinder Sachar. As the report itself documents,

Since Independence, India has achieved significant growth and development. It has also been successful in reducing poverty and improving crucial human development indicators such as levels of literacy, education and health. There are indications, however, that not all religious communities and social groups (henceforth socio-religious communities – SRCs) have shared equally the benefits of the growth process. Among these, the Muslims, the largest minority community in the country, constituting 13.4 per cent of the population, are seriously lagging behind in terms of most of the human development indicators. (Sachar 1-2)

Such human development indicators include access to education, jobs, healthcare etc along with widespread accusation against law-enforcing agencies of identifying any Muslim as an ISI agent or one associated with terrorist activities which makes public markers of Muslim identity a source of constant peril. And the report of the committee categorically mentions how Muslims often remain deprived of required opportunities and necessary rights, much more than other socio-religious communities in the country, and how much of it stems from governmental inaction regarding the implementation of the recommendations of various earlier committees and commissions.

The cumulative effect of such software and hardware of communalism is a sense of utter deprivation, discontent and abject poverty which is indeed a volatile brew capable of explosive consequences. Quite naturally, around the country, subalternized Muslims of various regions become vulnerable to the lures of Muslim counter-fundamentalism which not only indoctrinates various sections of Muslim youths but provides them easy access to money, validates their desires through warped and distorted religious doctrines and

---

63 Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report, Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India (November, 2006) 1-2. The text would henceforth be referred to as Sachar and page numbers are provided parenthetically.
provides temporary succour to the sense of persistent victimization. For example, Ashis Nandy and others, while analyzing the impact of riots in Jaipur, argue that

As for the Muslims, earlier the Muslim League in Jaipur barely managed to get enough votes in elections to save its security deposit, but the fanaticism of the Bajrang Dal youth is now sought to be matched by the Students’ Islamic Organization of India (SIO), the youth wing of Jamaat-i-Islami which has gained a foothold in places like Topikhana Huzuri. The master narrative, if one ignores its community-specific contents and focuses on its demonology, is finding new adherents among the Muslims, too. (Nandy et al 148)

These adherents, from their very childhood, are exposed to so much violence directed at their communities that they imbibe rather early the seemingly unavoidable necessity of violence as a means of ensuring survival. This is evident from the report of Nandy and others from the riot-torn ruins of Ayodhya

A group of small boys, roughly eight to ten years old, are equally determined to stay on. Said one of them, who saw the destruction of his mohalla from a nearby garden where he was hidden, ‘We will learn how to use guns and fight like the Palestinians.’ What did he know of them, we asked. ‘I know that many powerful people have been trying to wipe out all traces of the Palestinians for many years but have failed. Because they answered back bravely with gun. We shall do the same.’ The other children nodded in agreement. (Nandy et al 204)

**Dattani’s Representation of Muslims’ Subalternization**

Such responses could well be seen in terms of subaltern militancy, however misdirected it may be, which may eventually result in fundamentalist indoctrination validating violence and thus pave the path for terrorist activities that, ironically, in stead of serving the community in any way, only intensifies a vicious cycle of religious fundamentalism. Dattani’s *Final Solutions*, with its evocative allusion to the Nazi agenda of annihilating Jews, not only highlights that religio-fascist programme of the Sangh Parivar which has subalternized Muslims in many ways, but also explores other factors responsible for their marginalization as well as the ugly consequences of such circumstances through the lives of two central characters, Javed and Bobby, who seek shelter in the house of Ramnik Gandhi after being beaten and chased by a fanatic Hindu mob, baying for their blood.
Considering the fact that Mahatma Gandhi is called the ‘father of the nation’, the domestic space of the Gandhi household in the play becomes symbolic of the nation-space of India itself and the issue of the Muslim boys seeking shelter in the house becomes tied up with the broader framework of creating an inclusive secular nation which can accommodate Muslims and other religious minorities as equal citizens. Such an ideal, however, is rudely shattered at the very beginning as the symbolic representation of the nation-space is fearfully disrupted by divisive religious forces. It is these forces which vehemently assert themselves through the chorus as they collectively assault Javed and Bobby simply for being Muslims after spewing hatred through their frenzied responses and questions:

   Chorus 1, 2, 3: This is our land! How dare they?
   Chorus 1: It is in their blood!
   Chorus 2, 3: It is in their blood to destroy!...
   Chorus 1: (pounding with his stick) Send… them…back. Pause.
   Chorus 4: (questioning) Send them back?
   Chorus 2: (pounding with his stick) Drive…them…out. Pause.
   Chorus 5: (questioning) Drive them out?
   Chorus 3: Kill the sons of swine! (Dattani: 1, 168-69)

Through these comments Dattani foregrounds that communal discourse which identifies Muslims as an inimical, hostile group of people who should have all gone to Pakistan after Partition. M.S. Golwalkar had identified the whole Muslim population of Post-Partition India as “internal threats” who had all supposedly voted for Pakistan and wrote:

   Has their old hostility and murderous mood, which resulted in widespread riots, looting, arson, raping and all sorts of orgies on an unprecedented scale in 1946–47, come to a halt at least now? It would be suicidal to delude ourselves into believing that they have turned patriots overnight after the creation of Pakistan. On the contrary, the Muslim menace has increased a hundredfold by the creation of Pakistan which has become a springboard for all their future aggressive designs on our country. (Golwalkar 178)

These choric voices inevitably register the sense of fear and rage generated by the hateful, vindictive voices of people like Golwalkar who want to ruin India’s secular fabric by making it a ‘Hindurashtra’, following perhaps the same pattern that Hitler’s
Nazi party used to create a supposedly pure and powerful Germany by annihilating the supposedly corrupting presence of the Jews. It is as a result of such ideological mobilization that Javed and Bobby’s identity as Muslims endangers their lives in the same way that so many Muslims across the land have been both victimized and continue to be so. In fact, it is the discovery of a prayer cap from Javed’s pocket which exposes his Muslim identity to the mob that then begins its assaults on both Javed and Bobby. If, according to Bhabha, national identities are forged out of “scraps, patches and rags” (Bhabha 145) endowed with sacred significations, then equally loaded scraps, patches and rags become factors responsible for eliminating citizens from within the fold of the nation-state. This also illustrates how, during times of communal tension, one’s mere identity as a Muslim, irrespective of everything else, becomes a justification for assault and murder which can only be explained by analysing the ideology of hatred that utilises the pathological urges for violence in men for its own vested interests. And it is in this context that the oft-repeated concept of one’s ‘own people’ becomes significant. Instead of operating as an inclusive signifier of all Indians the term becomes fractured into communally polarised opposites of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – an opposition that ruptures the nationalist dream of ‘unity in diversity’ – and places the minority communities in that unnarratable space of pervasive subalterneity where they are identified, in the words of Gyanendra Pandey, as “‘populations’ within nation states” whom the state wishes to “destroy…because they are collectivities with ‘different’ (not to say, abnormal) values, customs and practices” (Pandey 274).

One of the strategies through which this is done is the repeated reference to the trauma of partition, another act of catastrophic colonial cartography, which becomes one of the many available tools of communal polarisation. As Vasanthi Ramani notes:

A macabre way, in which partition has resurfaced in the lives of Indian Muslims, particularly since the 1990s, is in the metaphor of a mini-Pakistan. Partition is almost reenacted every time there is a riot and Muslim areas have been affected…The language and the slogans of the Hindu right wing during the series of riots since 1992, when the Babri Masjid was vandalized, unabashedly recall partition. (Raman 276)

This has already been highlighted through a couple of references and we can add to the list such slogans as ‘Katua ke bas do hi sthan, Pakistan ya Kabristhan’ (The circumcised
Muslim has but two places: Pakistan or Cemetery) (Nandy et al 29). The same process is also highlighted in the play through Hardika, who had herself been victimized by the communal frenzy during Partition, and her diary becomes a window through which those troubled times are poured on to the stage:

He said he was happy that we were rid of the Britishers. He also said something which I did not understand then. He said that before leaving they had let loose the dogs. I hated to think that he was talking about my friends’ fathers…but that night in Husainabad in our ancestral house – when I heard them outside – I knew that they were thinking the same of us. And I knew I was thinking the same, like my father. (Dattani: 1, 167)

Her fears are concretized by the destruction of the Krishna idol which not only represents the antagonism between warring religious communities but also symbolizes the absence of love which is reinforced by the rupturing of the records of love songs: “Lying about like pieces of glass, Shamsad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya. The songs of love that I had learnt to sing with. Those beautiful voices. Cracked…” (Dattani: 1, 167)

Hardika not only adored these Muslim singers but even aspired to be like them in the future. This substantiates that sense of a syncretic culture where so many diverse strands could merge together on the basis of that shared universal human emotion of love which was also the subject of their songs. However, as the records are cracked by the thrown stones we also witness that rupture of our syncretic culture which is also responsible for the ongoing politics of estrangement, hatred and conflict that contributes to the subalternization of different communities. Significantly, the multilayered space of the memory also projects the fluidity of the subaltern subject and explores how experiences of subalternization can give rise to fundamentalist responses and continue a vicious cycle. Hardika, who found herself in a subalternized location during the Partition, goes on to become so prejudiced by those traumatic events that she not only despises the two young boys but even asks Ramnik to shut the door against them so that they may be slaughtered: “How could he let those people into my house? They killed his grandfather.” (Dattani: 1, 179)

Her unfeeling, seemingly inhuman prejudice is born out of that binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’, generated by divisive, fundamentalist discourses and also represents symbolically
those aforementioned exclusionary narratives that identify the Indian Muslims as aliens who belong outside the realm of the “real National life”, specifically Pakistan. As Hardika says “I cannot forget, I just cannot forget” (Dattani: 1, 223), we are confronted with a vision of entrenched ruptures and we realize why Renan said that “Forgetting…is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.” (Renan 11) What she, however, does not understand is that she was not alone in her experience of violence and loss and that during the Partition people belonging to Muslim communities had been traumatized in the same way. As opposed to the formation of “horizontal alliances”, which Guha identifies within subaltern politics (“Aspects” 5) here we see an example of the subaltern’s submission to the dominant discourse. It is only towards the end that she learns that her husband and in-laws had deliberately burnt down the shop belonging to her former friend Zarine’s father as they were emerging as a stiff competitor to the local Hindus. Ramnik’s later attempt to provide Javed with a job at the same shop thus becomes less an example of his avowed secularism and more an expression of his entrenched guilt, a concealed act of contrition and atonement. In the process, the nation is transformed into, what Bhabha calls, “a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourse of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending people, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference” (Bhabha 148).

This is definitely true for India and they are most visibly and terribly foregrounded during the riots, which are often found to be instances of organised violence, instigated chiefly, by various militant Hindu fundamentalist organisations in the past three decades. In fact, ever since independence, India has witnessed a steady rise in the discourse of majoritarian communalism which inevitably developed a sense of fear, humiliation and consequent resentment in the Muslim communities that became all the more acute in the wake of the violent communal politics that gripped India since the 1980s, culminating in such barbaric deeds as the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the consequent riots, as well as the genocide of 2002 in Gujarat. This is corroborated by the report of the Sachar Committee which categorically states:

Communal tension or any untoward incident in any part of the country is enough to make Muslims fear for their safety and security. The lackadaisical attitude of the government and the political mileage sought whenever communal riots occur has been very painful for the Community. The
governmental inaction in bringing to book the perpetrators of communal violence has been a sore point. (Sachar 13)

It is this mentality which is voiced by the Muslim Chorus, which seems to offer the paradigmatic response of a subaltern community:

Chorus 1, 2:
They hunt us down!
They’re afraid of us!
They beat us up!
We are few!
But we are strong!
They beat us up!
They’re afraid of us!
They hunt us down!
They want to throw us out! (Dattani: 1, 179)

The same sentiments are rearticulated again as the chorus perplexedly asks:

Should we be swallowed up? Till they cannot recognize us? Should we meld into anonymity so they cannot hound us? Lose ourselves in a shapeless mass? Should we? Can we? (Dattani: 1, 196)

This is precisely the identity crisis which the report of the Sachar Committee also highlights:

Apparently, the social, cultural and public interactive spaces in India can be very daunting for the Indian Muslims. The general sense of unease among Muslims can be seen on a number of fronts — in the relationships that exist between the Muslims and other Socio-Religious Communities (SRCs), as well as, in the variations in understanding and interpreting them… In general, Muslims complained that they are constantly looked upon with a great degree of suspicion not only by certain sections of society but also by public institutions and governance structures. This has a depressing effect on their psyche. (Sachar 11)

Such depressing effects generate conducive circumstances for the growth of fundamentalism. Suppression of religious identities because of majoritarian fundamentalist activities breeds an opposed fundamentalism that can only drag us into an endless cycle of vitiating violence. Therefore, like the children of Ayodhya who wish to emulate Palestinians or the youngsters of Jaipur who are joining Muslim hardliners, many
Muslims across the country are resorting to a violent fundamentalist ideology to assuage their own vulnerability and sense of victimisation. This is precisely what happens in case of Javed who becomes part of a riot-rousing group with its own fundamentalist agenda as a result of that ambience of unbelongingness which a subalternized Muslim often has to face and which is exemplified in the text through the episode involving the delivery of a letter. As Javed opens the gate to deliver the letter, a man comes out and orders him to go back after leaving the letter on the wall. And he only picks up the letter after cleaning and wiping both the letter and the place on the wall where it was kept. Such an incident offers just one glimpse of the kind of prejudice an Indian Muslim has to confront at times and the loudly jingling devotional bells become in this context, much like the Church bells in Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, aural symbols of a sickening orthodoxy.

The prejudiced nature of this orthodoxy is re-emphasised by Aruna’s own reluctance to offer them water or milk and the way in which she delicately separates the glasses touched by the Muslim youths as she considers their touches to be as contaminating as the touch of a lizard. Later, she even expresses her absolute reluctance to even offer those distressed boys any food, simply because they are Muslims. It would be interesting to juxtapose such attitudes, which no doubt reflect entrenched prejudices in Indian society, with the response of lower caste Kolis in Jaipur who were engaged in gemstone business and worked for Muslim clients: “If we don’t go to their [Muslims’] weddings and festivals, they send us food…It’s the Baman-Banias [Brahmins and Banias] who practice chchua-chchut against us” (Nandy et al 155). The same upper-caste prejudice regarding untouchability which once oppressed and still continues to oppress dalits or lower-castes becomes integrated within the discourse of Hindutva to alienate the Muslims as the ‘other’ and becomes embroiled in self-defeating contradictions and complexities. Even Ramnik himself cannot escape these as, despite his apparent liberalism, he nurses within him that same binary division of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which identifies the Muslims as the ‘other’ and this becomes evident when during a heated exchange with Javed, Ramnik suddenly exclaims: “You have violence in your mind, your life is based on violence, your faith is based on…” (Dattani: 1, 198) Not only does this indicate the pervasive nature of communal fundamentalism but also highlights the incriminating involvement of the educated urban Indian middle classes.
in the consolidation of communal ideologies and attendant subalternization. This is precisely why Asghar Ali Engineer defines communalism as a modern urban phenomenon whose roots may be traced back to middle and lower classes – a fact that can be statistically corroborated if one looks at the general pattern of communal violence taking place in cities and villages across India. (Nandy et al 10)

Furthermore, the reactions of the members of the Gandhi household also refer to those abiding software of communalism which continue to alienate members of minority communities, especially Muslims, even if there is no actual outburst of communal violence. Since the domestic space of the Gandhi household operates as the microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic space of the nation-state, these actions may be seen as allegorical representations of other modes of discrimination because of which Muslims remain deprived of various essential services and educational and financial facilities which continue to perpetuate those material disadvantages which have kept the community subalternized as a whole. As the report of the Sachar Committee argues, not only are Muslims often forced to live in ghettos on account of various security concerns, but those areas often lack in minimum Municipal services such as water supply, electricity, roads, sewerage and sanitation etc as well as other necessary avenues of social upliftment such as schools, colleges, and banks, even though there is often no dearth of police officials who are ready to search Muslim households at the slightest pretexts. There are also mounting allegations of Muslims not being allowed to rent/buy apartments in non-Muslim localities, parents refusing to send their children to schools with Muslims teachers, Muslim teachers being transferred to distant locations as well as discrimination in the admission of Muslims students to preferred educational institutions. As one footnote from the report states:

Muslim parents often face overt discrimination from school authorities when trying to get admission or availing of scholarship schemes for their children. Small acts such as lack of civility in behavior, rude questioning, and an atmosphere which treats them and their children as 'second class' citizens - all these combine to create a powerful deterrent, distancing the Muslim community from the school system. (Sachar 12n)

Such enforced dissociation from education either renders Muslim children unable to acquire education and therefore significant employment or it forces them to be enrolled in
Madrasas which often do not provide the kind of modern education necessary for securing jobs in a heavily competitive economic world. Lack of education, as the Sachar Report explains, is also directly linked with the acute poverty of Muslim communities which often lead to dropouts. Furthermore, many families also seem to undervalue secular education on account of the “low representation of Muslims in public or private sector employment and the perception of discrimination in securing salaried jobs” (Sachar 15). This contributes to the growth of a large section of frustrated Muslim youths, seething with multiple grievances against both the majority community and the state which is seen as discriminatory and victimizing.

It is these embittered members of subalternized minority communities who find respite through the seductive rhetoric of an oppositional fundamentalism which virtually drugs them into an amoral trance that renders possible the perpetration of immoral acts, including those terrorist strikes which continue to lacerate our times. Himself a dropout, Javed is indeed a representative of this particular group of militant subalterns and their particular predicament. And it is this predicament which had once made him fall prey to the rhetoric of Jihad which is utilised by various Muslim fundamentalist organisations like Indian Mujahideen or Students’ Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) to recruit their foot soldiers. As Javed anxiously recalls this phase he reproduces a rhetoric that was also used by the likes of Uma Bharati or Vinay Katiyar, only for inverted purposes:

I was swayed by what now appears to me as cheap sentiment. They always talked about motherland and fighting to save our faith and how we should get four of theirs for every one of ours... ‘The time has come’, somebody would say. ‘This is jehad – the holy war! It is written!’ ‘Yes’, I would say. ‘I am ready, I am prepared!’ (Dattani: 1, 205)

However, as the tense of Javed’s statement itself indicates, he ‘is’ not any more what he once ‘was’. As one who has peered into the abyss and come back, Javed indeed emerges as a heroic character whose very rejection of the fundamentalist indoctrination opens the space for that world beyond communal polarisation which is sheltered alike from the ingrained prejudices that govern Aruna as well as those wounds of the past which continue to traumatisethe likes of Hardika. One individual who helps him during

---

64 Both organizations have been involved in several terrorist attacks across India.
this crisis is his friend Bobby who had changed his name from ‘Babban’ to ‘Bobby’ to evade that identity crisis which Muslims often face and in this way he too reflects an aspect of subalternization of Muslims in India. What Babban also illustrates is that access to education and such other forms of cultural capital cannot prevent one from subalternization as the hierarchies of class are disregarded by the forces of communal politics and attendant discourses of ethnic cleansing which target a community as a whole and not just the destitute underclass. Therefore, just as women, despite their varied class positions can be subalternized by the entrenched patriarchy of society, Muslims too often find their identity under erasure in spite of the differences in class, educational qualifications and so on and so forth. This not only leads to the death of several educated and well-off Muslim individuals, who did not belong to a subaltern location in terms of their class-identity, during various riots, as several available reports exemplify, but also the systematic victimization of individuals like Ishrat Jahan. Ishrat was a second year student of Mumbai’s Guru Nanak Khalsa College where she was pursuing her Bachelor of Science degree, before being shot in a false encounter orchestrated by the currently jailed IPS officer D.G. Vanzara. The encounter was initially passed off as a successful police operation against Pakistani Lashkar e Toiba members planning to assassinate the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi. However, it may also be argued that it is precisely Bobby’s access to education which enables him to see through that rhetoric of jihad, fundamentalism and destined struggle which manages to sway Javed.

But, the fact that Javed does not remain entangled within the fold of the fundamentalist organisation is indicative of those hopes of amity and conviviality which Dattani manages to nurse, even amidst fear and hatred and it is through the friendship and bonding of Javed, Smita and Bobby that this hope is realised on stage. This also indicates Dattani’s belief that it is perhaps through the youth that India can dream of a future of tolerance and forgiveness, unfettered by the shadow lines that keep us apart. This is emphatically articulated by Bobby who deliberately places the idol of Krishna on his palm, disregarding Aruna’s prejudices, and states:

---

65 The name of a notorious terrorist organization responsible for several bombings in India.
He doesn’t cringe from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And he welcomes it!...You can bathe Him day and night, you can splash holy water on Him but you cannot remove my touch from His form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world! (Dattani: 1, 224-25)

We must not think that such sentiments are mere authorial platitudes without any authentic ink with the lived experience of ordinary citizens who remain, in one way or another, entangled within perceptions of irreconcilable communal differences. On the contrary, away from the loud and hateful proclamations of fanatic leaders and their brazen subordinates, ordinary citizens everywhere in India often seem to retain that shared humanity, born out of everyday interactions, which enable them to not only move away from the politics of hate but to also actively resist such hateful violence by extending their utmost support to those in need. For example, as the reports of Ashis Nandy and his colleagues illustrate, a young Muslim named Jamil, was saved from the rioting mob by his Hindu neighbours like Pappu, his father Chatar Singh and Babulal Bijwala. Pappu’s mother Premadevi even put a tilak on his forehead and a kalava or sacred thread on his wrist to make him look Hindu. Premadevi said:

I follow all Hindu devatas and I also believe in Muslim gods. I believe in Ajmer’s Khwaja sahib and Sayyed baba. You find his sthans everywhere; he fulfils all desires and brings peace of mind. I even follow the Isai devatas [Christian gods] like Ishamasi and Guru Nanak. The gods tell us to do one’s karma. They were men but great men and we must fold our hands. All people who do good work must be worshipped. There are fanatics in all communities, whether Hindu or Muslim. Compassion is within all individuals. (Nandy et al 152)

There is hardly any basic difference between Premadevi’s statements and that of Bobby as both articulate that humanist faith, which refuses to be drawn into religious conflicts and foregrounds an ethic of compassion that should be part of ordinary human goodness. This is further illustrated by the statements of Gangadevi, Babulal Bijwala’s wife, who recalls her friendly relations with the Jamil’s Muslim family:

We had very good relations with them, no sense of being Hindu or Muslim. We came here in 1973 and lived together after that. There was affection between us. When I faced a problem – for instance, when my child had an accident on Muharram – Munna [their eldest son] rushed her to the big hospital. She had come under a truck when she was going with her grandfather to see the
Following Amitav Ghosh, we too may argue that such sensibilities need to be represented again and again, through whatever form available, for “it is the incantation that redeems our sanity” (Antique Land 171) by making us aware of the fact that in every riot more people were saved than killed because others too, both Hindus and Muslims, had shared such sensibilities and had acted on that basis. As the examples themselves illustrate, this fabric of compassion and tolerance is also an aspect of subaltern consciousness and may refer to that “healthy nucleus” of common sense (Gramsci, Selections 328) which remains free from the dictates of dominant ideologies. And it is this sensibility which also unites Bobby, Javed and Smita. Together they represent that sense of “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 8) which is supposed to be the foundation of any nation and which can counter those processes of postcolonial subalternization, generated by vertical hierarchies of power, which give rise to various divisive forces. Through their playful splashing of water we are taken to those ‘in-between spaces’ which, according to Homi Bhabha “provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity” (Bhabha 1) away from the binariness of communal conflict. Through his young characters Dattani perhaps seeks to foreground the possibility of a new India, not directly scarred by the trauma of Partition and its aftereffects, which is willing to move beyond engraved barriers in search of better times. And the location of the young characters, as the harbingers of such change also perhaps indicates the responsibility that the youth must shoulder to move beyond the morass of communal hatred.

Yet, as Derrida has shown, all textual strategies of thematic cohesiveness are disrupted by gaps, silences or spectral figures, banished to the peripheries, which haunt our apparently unified structures (Derrida 46). The figure of the dead pujari exercises a similarly ‘hauntological’ (Derrida 63) presence in this particular play and produces that unbalancing moment which “exposes the grammatological structure of the text” (Spivak, ‘Preface’ xlix). Where does his corpse lie within this ethic of tolerance and forgiveness? How will his family members respond to either Javed or that acquaintance of his who committed the murder? Will they be able to forgive or remain entrapped in that same
cycle of sterile hate? This particular textual ghost thus lays bare a series of unquiet debates about public posture and private response, between forgetfulness and forgiveness, between love and justice which are integral to the future of subalternized communities and the hope of emergence from such subaltern spaces. Dattani, as ever, does not provide us with final solutions and faithfully holds a mirror up to the complexities that confront us.

It is as an illustration of these complexities that in the final scene Hardika, after she learns from her son how her family members had burned Zarine’s father’s shop, is able to ask her son:

Hardika: Do you think…do you think those boys will ever come back?
Ramnik: If you call them, they will come. But then again – if it’s too late – they may not. (Dattani: 1, 226)

Ramnik’s reply is characterized by a cautious balance that enunciates at once both the possibility of an inclusive future based on forgiveness, tolerance and compassion as well as the difficulties that lie in the way; difficulties that have been further intensified owing to the unprecedented, televised, state-sponsored carnage in Gujarat, the rise of international Islamic terrorism as well as the emergence of Hindu terrorist groups in India. Ashis Nandy, in a seminar after the Gujarat carnage worryingly observed:

The forces the Gujarat violence might have released are a different kettle of fish. They seem to have done what the Partition riots did. Also, given that they have been arguably the first video riots in India – riots taking place in front of TV cameras – their impact will be pan-Indian and international. The minorities all over the country have seen the experiments in ethnic cleansing and the attempts to break the economic backbone of the Muslim community. The sense of desperation brewing among the Gujarati Muslims is likely to be contagious. (Nandy para 25)

Considering the number of terrorist attacks which have taken place in India since 2001, it is quite evident that such fears are not entirely misplaced as these terrorist attacks are not just the handiwork of terrorists from neighbouring countries, but are also the consequences of subalternized Indian Muslims whose disillusionment with Indian democracy finds expression through despairing acts of devastating violence. The report
of the Sachar Committee offers key insights into the constitution of such despair and the committee clearly states

In a society characterized by considerable socio-cultural complexity, such as the one we have in India, democratic processes founded on universal adult franchise often fail to provide opportunities to ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities from getting elected and becoming part of the governance structure because of their low population shares. Over the last sixty years minorities have scarcely occupied adequate public spaces. The participation of Muslims in nearly all political spaces is low which can have an adverse impact on the Indian society and polity in the long run. The marginalized either have inadequate numbers that comes in the way of making their presence felt in the normal course of governance or they are not politically empowered. Given the power of numbers in a democratic polity, based on universal franchise, minorities in India lack effective agency and political importance. (Sachar 241)

Terrorist activities operate as a distorted, undemocratic expression of such political self-assertion which claims to offer resistance against sustained injustice and discrimination on multiple levels. What complicates the situation even further is that terrorist atrocities are no longer confined to Islamic groups utilizing discontent among subalternized Muslim youths – Hindu terrorist groups have also come to the forefront as part of another endless cycle of revenge which can only contribute to a greater calculation of corpses. What this also effects, is, according to Parita Mukta, an “attrition of memories” that destroys “memories of hope, of conjoint living, of life, experience and memories being made and remade side by side” ((Mukta 64). In the process, the issue of communal subalternization only becomes mired in an ever-widening spiral of violence and counter-violence without any feasible solutions.

However, despite the admitted bleakness of the scenario, we should perhaps recall for our benefit the spirit of the words of Martin Luther King Jr, while accepting the Nobel Peace Prize.: "I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him (King)". Despite the ambiguities raised by the figure of the dead pujari or the ceaseless spiral of violence that entangles us, we can still hold on to the image of Bobby, Javed and Smita playing and splashing water among each other as the symbol of that ‘oughtness’,
away from the frictions of our current ‘isness’. It can operate as that icon of what Paul Ricoeur calls ‘appeased memory’ (Ricoeur 11) born out of the recognition of mutual loss and the willingness to move beyond recrimination and prejudice which enables the logic of forgiveness to penetrate the logic of justice on the level of “matters that can only be symbolical” (Ricoeur 9). Such symbolic enactments could even be witnessed in Gujarat as hundreds and thousands of people across the country poured into the ‘Gujarat Pradesh of Hindu Rashtra’ to protest against those inhuman atrocities – atrocities beyond any language – which were committed in the name of Hindus and Hinduism. Nivedita Menon records the response of a Kashmiri Pandit, who had himself been part of those refugees forcibly eradicated from Kashmir:

“I as a Kashmiri was a victim yesterday. Today if it happens to be a poor Gujarati.Muslim, tomorrow it may be the turn of anybody - a poor Hindu, Muslim, secularist or a pseudo-secularist. I, and a friend of mine have found something definite that can be done. Something on a small scale...In the heart of Amdavad, in Behrampura, there is a small Muslim ‘basti’... Some residents are now gradually and very reluctantly wending their way back from the relief camp to their burnt and looted houses... We would like to help them rebuild their lives, to get them back on their feet again, bring them to a safe home...in a city where they were born, which they must not stop loving...We want to be with these people with our hearts and minds and we want to participate with them in the rebuilding of their lives.” (Menon 2678)

The experience of being a subaltern on account of one’s religious identity, instead of creating permanent animosity towards members of the other religious community can also contribute thus to a sense of solidarity which may be pitted against the hegemony of hatred that fundamentalist organisations of all colour and creed are so adept at spreading. This is further amplified by the way in which a woman named Zubieda, languishing in the relief camp at Vatwa, shared with Nivedia Menon her thoughts regarding Vrindavan, the sacred land of Hindu god Krishna, which she also called home:

Zubeida had a bangle business, destroyed now, of course. In the shade of the neem tree protecting the dargah, she chats to me about Delhi, where she has relatives. But she is not from Gujarat originally. "Bindravan gayi ho?” she asks. (Have you been to Brindavan?). No, I reply. “Tirath karne nahin gayi? Hum wahin se hain. Wahi hamara vatan hai.” (You have never been there on pilgrimage? We are from there. That is our land.) (Menon 2678)
Figuratively speaking, the Vrindavan which Zubeida identifies as her ‘watan’ is the same space where Bobby Javed and Smita can splash water and play without fear or hatred and this is what Dattani upholds against the engineered “attrition of memory” (Mukta 64). The relevance of *Final Solutions* lies in the fact that it remains hauntingly relevant for us on account of its poignant exploration of fundamental issues in communal polarisation as well as the indispensable sketches of hope it so indelibly provides. It is these glimmerings of hope which have also ensured that the Hindutva forces lost two successive Parliamentary elections after the genocide of Gujarat in 200266. The subaltern can vote (Medovoi, Raman and Johnson 65-88) and every vote against the forces of such communal subalternization translates as one more step towards that icon of ‘appeased memory’, which Dattani foregrounds. Despite the obvious inadequacy of the existing democratic system which even serves to consolidate other modes of subalternization, it is only the democratic demise of communal forces which may ensure the distant strengthening of those forces through which the perils of postcolonial subalternization may be successfully countered. Herein lies the significance of *Final Solutions* which continues to resonate beyond the confines of the text.

**Dattani and Homosexuality**

This section focuses on the positioning of homosexuals and persons of alternate sexualities as subalterns in Indian society owing to the existence of Article 377 which meant the criminalization of homosexuality, which still prevails. Such legal provisions, along with religious strictures, social ostracisation, medical practices and the pervasive discourse of compulsory heterosexuality have led to the subjugation of various homosexuals across the country, belonging to different strata of society. This chapter explores the nature of such subalternization with various examples and relates that to Dattani’s representation of homosexuality in his plays and attendant complexities of signification.

---

66 As this thesis goes to print, the former Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, has been sworn in as the Prime Minister of India on the back of a landslide victory. However the causes and consequences of such a victory are beyond the scope of this discussion.
One of the remarkable features of Dattani’s plays, as evident from *Final Solutions*, is his ability to probe the boundaries of subalterneity by repeatedly exploring the intersection of multiple determinants of identity and the attendant fluidity. Ranajit Guha’s own definition of subalterneity foregrounds this fluidity which is also associated with the diverse modes of subalternization prevalent in Indian and South Asian societies. However, even Guha does not mention the issue of sexuality and the consequent production of what Suparna Bhaskaran defines as ‘sexual subalterns’ (Bhaskaran 8) who are subjected to, on account of the pervasive dominance of the discourse of patriarchal heteronormativity, both social ostracisation and institutional discriminations, which are themselves conditioned by the differences of class, sex, race, nationality, region and such other determinants. What Dattani manages to do is to expand the horizons of postcolonial subalterneity itself by drawing our attention to the plural and diversified problems confronting these sexual minorities who are subjected to an emotionally and at times physically traumatic crisis of identity which compels them to lead double lives. Dattani’s exploration of such lives transforms his theatre into a space from where their unheard voices of anguish, agony and resentment may be articulated against the discriminatory gaze of a society which either alienates them with a revolting ‘politics of disgust’ or seeks to exclude them from the national imaginary or merely tolerates their presence as commodified entities which serve to ensure illicit sexual gratification of ‘normal’ Indian males. While the tradition of protest against social problems and injustices has been ingrained in modern Indian theatre from its very inception, Dattani, true to his flamboyant iconoclasm, manages to queer the stage with his exploration of Indian homosexuality which is all the more remarkable when we take into account the fact that unlike now, when the proposed amendment of IPC 377 and associated movements and cinematic representations have made homosexuality a much more visible presence, during some of Dattani’s earliest forays into the topic, back in the 1990s, homosexuality was one of those ‘invisible issues’ that refused to come to light. The chapter would first explore the context which is responsible for the subalternization of homosexuals in India and would then go on to analyse Dattani’s representations of homosexuality in that light.
The State of Sexual Minorities in India: Law, Medical Intervention, Religion and Society

As in case of many forms of prevalent subalternization, the origins of persecution of sexual minorities in India can be traced back to the colonial past which continued to affect post-independence contexts in many ways. However, what distinguished this problem from many other social issues, is that unlike dowry or sati or polygamy or casteist violence, discrimination against homosexuals/homosexuality had never attained, until very recently, any legal redress as independent India continued to treat homosexuality as an unnatural crime following the IPC 377, instituted by the Indian Law Commission, presided over by Lord Macaulay during the British Raj and retained by the constitution of sovereign India. The law stated:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished 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.

Explanation. Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.

Comment. This section is intended to punish the offense of sodomy, buggery, and bestiality. The offense consists in a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by a person with a man, or in the same unnatural manner with a woman, or by a man or woman in any manner with an animal. (qtd. in Bhaskaran 86)

The law itself oozes with all the force of Victorian patriarchal heteronormativity and was conditioned not only by the colonial authorities’ disgust with the immoral nature of their supposedly vulgar Oriental subjects but also by the need to ensure the health and hygiene of the British army stationed in India as many soldiers were contracting venereal diseases which, the authorities believed, were caused by their desperate attempt to fulfill sexual urges through homosexual intercourses in the absence of British women, and at times even the absence of Indian prostitutes. As Bhasakaran reports, Lord Elgin believed that while the absence of wives could turn the army into “replicas of Sodom and Gomorrah” and forced the soldiers to pick up “special Oriental vices”, he further dreaded the prospect of no prostitutes as “[N]o prostitutes meant even more deplorable evils . . . there
is already an increase in unnatural crimes” (Bhaskaran 81). It is this politics of disgust, with its material and martial considerations, which made it imperative for the British Government in India to prohibit homosexuality by all means. Such projects were also seen as the civilized West’s attempt to reform a supposedly ‘deviant’ or ‘aberrant’ East which neatly fitted in with the already prevalent castigation of native men as being effeminate, as opposed to the manly Englishmen who had come as conquerors. However, as Mrinalini Sinha explains, by analysing various examples of nationalist assertion during the second half of the nineteenth century, attempts to refashion nationalist masculinity often meant a steady collaboration with colonial assumptions. Sinha therefore asserts that “the intersection of the imperial and national not only frames the politics of race, class, gender and sexuality, but it is also constitutive of their very meaning” (Sinha 172).

It is this intersection of the imperial and the national which also led to the suppression of various queer cultures associated with different strata of Indian society, where sexual identities had often been rather fluid as explained by either the homoerotic tropes utilized in Sufi culture or the tradition of a male disciple worshipping Krishna by imagining himself as Radha. As the findings of Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (Vanita and Kidwai, 2008), amply illustrate, pre-colonial Indian culture had a wealth of cultural representations, cutting across religious differences, that foregrounded non-heterosexual affective bonds. However, these cultural traditions were rudely repressed following the enactment of heteronormative colonial laws that also induced in the public sphere a virulent homophobia that has since expanded its roots, as exemplified by such examples as Madhavacharya’s explicitly homophobic Introduction to Vatsayan’s Kamasutra (Vanita and Kidwai 269-74) or the entire debate involving Pandey Bechan Sharma’s series of stories on homosexuality entitled ‘Chocolate’ (Vanita and Kidwai 280-287). It is in this context that Leela Gandhi remarks

In these terms, then, the oft-cited anticolonial/nationalist endeavour to self-reform in the image of the aggressor, by recuperating a ‘lost’ native masculinity can be said to herald the onset of a postcolonial heteronormativity – tragically collaborationist and fraught by the pressures of a newly internalized homophobia, or fear, in other words, of effeminacy. Thus, Swami Vivekananda’s claim that the salvation of Hindus depended on the three B’s, beef, biceps and Bhagwad-Gita (in a sharp departure from the easy eclecticism and aspirational androgyny of his guru Sri Ramkrishna)
and Nathuram Godse’s assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in the name of a ‘remasculated’ Hindu polity, each bespeak Indian nationalism’s capitulation to the culture of colonial heteronormativity. (Gandhi 89-90)

It is to stress these ironic intersections, operating in so many different spheres of India’s post-independence existence that Ranajit Guha had remarked that “A good part of the current difficulties besetting India on so many fronts are a direct legacy of the Raj” (Guha, “Introduction”xi). This form of postcolonial subalternization becomes further evident when we look into the history of legal battles for gay rights in India which continues even today over the proposed amendment of Article 377 and contradictory verdicts from different levels of the judiciary. In 2001, Naz Foundation India Trust, a Non-Governmental Organization, working for the welfare of AIDS patients, filed a petition in the Delhi High Court challenging this particular law and pleaded in their petition for amending the section in order to decriminalize homosexuality, though not to abolish it completely, since Section 377 is the only law that protects the boy child from sexual abuse. However, not only did the Delhi High Court initially refuse the petition, even when it was forced to examine the case on its merit, following the directive of the Supreme Court, the government uncannily echoed colonial sensibilities and distorted claims about Indian social and cultural context in order to argue that “…deletion of the said section can well open flood gates of delinquent behaviour and be misconstrued as providing unbridled licence for the same.” Furthermore, it went on to claim that

…law does not run separately from society. It only reflects the perception of the society. Public tolerance of different activities changes and legal categories get influenced by those changes. The public notably in the United Kingdom and the United States of America have shown tolerance of a new sexual behaviour or sexual preference but it is not the universally accepted behaviour… In fact, the purpose of this section 377 IPC is to provide a healthy environment in the society by criminalizing unnatural sexual activities against the order of nature. (A. Bandyopadhyay, 2004)

The governmental stance, in imitation of its colonial counterpart, thus reflects that entrenched homophobia within the post-independence Indian nation-state which seems to subject homosexuals or anyone belonging to the sphere of alternate sexuality to pervasive subalternization. As a result whether it is the administration, especially the police, or the
institution of the family or even the medical profession – all conspire together to render homosexuals as invisible as possible from the public sphere by subjecting them to both material and existential crises.

Material crisis of course refers to various kinds of harassments to which homosexuals are subjected by the state machinery i.e. the police. Extortion, blackmail, humiliation, torture and arrest on rare occasions constitute the ways through which police officials or constables abuse and humiliate the homosexuals who are neither able to take legal action nor expect any external help as they desperately seek to maintain the secrecy of their sexual orientation. Such actions from the police also render them vulnerable against local hoodlums who too frequent the gay cruising areas to rob or blackmail the gay men as the victims cannot report the crime without disclosing their sexual identity which would rather make them vulnerable to legal proceedings than those who would rob or assault them. The PUCL-K report on violation of human rights against sexual minorities in Bangalore (Dattani’s city, interestingly) in 2000, discovered numerous reports of such instances during their interaction with various groups of sexual minorities. Similar events have been happening elsewhere as well. On 4th January 2006, four men were arrested in Lucknow for operating an alleged “gay racket” on the Internet and engaging in unnatural sex. The Lucknow police claimed to have seized the four men while they were having a picnic in a public place. But Human Rights Watch received reports which indicate that “undercover police, posing as gay on the website, entrapped one man, then forced him to call others and arrange a meeting where they were arrested” (Unhcr.org). Incidentally, one of the arrested men happened to be an outreach member of the Bharosa Trust, a NGO working with the gay community in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention. This was followed by raids in the offices of Bharosa and Naz Foundation, seizure of materials from there, and arrest of nine people in all. The arrested persons were remanded to judicial custody on 8 July 2001 and were charged with section 377 after they had been allegedly beaten up and had their offices sealed.

Surprisingly, such miscarriage of justice is easily justified by high-ranking police officials, as exemplified by the remarks of the erstwhile Joint Commissioner of Police Dr.
Ajai Kumar Singh, who when asked about what the police’s view was on the subject of gay rights, said:

Homosexuality is an offence under Section 377 of The Indian Penal Code and it is the duty of the police to prevent any kind of offence from happening. If the cop on duty questions or prevents any form of crime, he is only doing his job. Where is the question of harassment or atrocity? These are not cases of human rights violation because these groups are not legally recognized. Let them repeal the IPC Act, which bans homosexuality. Even if the Act were changed, people would still be penalized if they continued to attract or encourage obscenity in public places (PUCL-K, 2001).

Similar sentiments were echoed by Alok Sinha, former principal Home Secretary of Uttar Pradesh, who responded to the Lucknow arrests by stating “The law of the land is against homosexuality, so the action taken by our police was absolutely valid” (Unhcr.org). This is why Aditya Bandyopadhyay of Naz Foundation referred to the Article 377 as a kind of ‘Damocles Sword’ (A. Bandyopadhyay, 2002) that hangs over the Indian homosexuals all the time and the Naz Foundation in their official response to the law stated

In other words a police officer if is apprehensive that the criminal act as described by section 377 or its expanded scope as given by the courts is likely to take place, can take all necessary actions to stop the crime. This effectively means that the privacy of a person who is identified/suspected as gay or is openly gay can be violated by a police officer at any time without any warrant, and his house, possessions etc can be searched in order to either establish the crime or to ‘prevent’ the crime from taking place. (Unhcr.org)

However, it is not just the Repressive Ideological State Apparatuses which are responsible for the subalternization of homosexuals in India. As in case of all such forms of marginalisation, the processes of subjugation attain their maximum effectiveness through the functioning of Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser 127-193) which affect various disciplines and institutions that serve to inflict a damaging psychological split and self-revulsion within homosexual individuals and drive them toward acute silent suffering which even culminates in suicide or such other destructive actions. This ideological structure also includes the medical community which earlier refused to acknowledge even the presence of gays in India and even when it did, homosexuality was either defined as a disease or as a western import, requiring psychiatric intervention. It is important to note in this context Alfred Adler’s following comment:
The problem of homosexuality hovers over our society like a ghost or a scarecrow. In spite of all the condemnation, the number of perverts seems to be on the increase...neither the harshest penalties nor the most conciliatory attitudes and most lenient sentences have any effect on the development of this abnormality. (qtd. in Weeks 693)

Adler’s statement is a remarkable example of how psychiatry was used to foster institutional subjugation of homosexuality by classifying it as an ‘abnormality’ and its practitioners as ‘perverts’, resulting in the transformation of, in the words of Jeffrey Weeks, “barbarous intolerance into civilized intolerance” (Weeks 693). Such intolerance obviously 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 the ‘imagined community’ of the nation (Anderson, 25 and 8). The experiences of former medical student Ravichandran Balaji offer important insights regarding this scenario. He reports how, while teaching medical students on the effects of HIV/AIDS on the health of Indians, one of his professors declared that, “In Western countries, it primarily spreads among homosexuals. Of course, in our country, we don’t have homosexuals” (Balaji, 2005). Balaji heard similar responses from the other professors as well and therefore states,

Generations of doctors in India grow up believing that any alternative to strict heterosexual vaginal intercourse is abnormal. Although attitudes do seem to be changing (a psychiatrist told one close friend that homosexuality was normal), it is disturbing that medical education does little to alleviate such social stigma. (Balaji, 2005).

Furthermore, according to the U.S. Department of State, homosexuals in India have even been detained in clinics against their will and subjected to treatment including shock therapy aimed at curing them (Unhcr.org). The Naz Foundation filed a petition with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on behalf of a man who was subjected to shock therapy. The case was declined as gay and lesbian rights were not under the purview of the National Human Rights Commission (Unhcr.org). The confessions of one
such victim amply illustrates the nature of victimization that one may face due to one’s sexual orientation:

Being gay and growing up in Bangalore in the late seventies was a curse…I approached a psychiatrist, assuming he would help me…He prescribed Orap and Serenace which are powerful neuroleptic medications. The nightmare began in earnest, lasting fifteen years, ravaging body and soul, rendering every living moment an excruciating torment, a journey through hell. I failed my courses and I took an overdose of Orap, hoping to die. I was rescued and given shock therapy, which played havoc with my memory for two years. I had to discontinue college…When all else failed, the shrink suggested I get married. To prepare me for marriage my shrink had more (mis)prescriptions. Out went Orap and Semap and in came an anti-epileptic medication, to ‘enhance sexual performance’! (Narrain and Chandran 49)

Such an example itself hints at oppression carried out by family members including parents or siblings who reinforce the sense of isolation experienced by a homosexual individual who not only fails to find comfort and solidarity from his family members but rather manages to become a pariah at home as well. The following excerpt from Sagnik Dutta’s article on problems faced by gay men in the city refers to the experiences of Sumit Basu, a counsellor for gay men in Delhi, with Naz Foundation, which foregrounds the difficulties involving parents and family members:

People still have many prejudices about homosexuality. “Sometimes when a guy comes out to his family, they react with hostility,” explains Basu… Basu remembers how once when a 19-year-old college student from a well-to-do family told his brother about his sexuality only to be accused of bringing ‘shame’ on the family. “The boy was weeping inconsolably when he called up the helpline and was feeling terribly guilty,” says Basu who had to organise several counselling sessions to purge this sense of guilt. “You have to be assured that there is nothing wrong with you to be able to fight a prejudiced world,” he says. (Dutta, ‘Straight Lines’, 2009)

But such assurances are often unavailable from family members who find it impossible to believe that someone from their family could ever turn out to be a ‘homosexual’ - a fact that almost seems to be a source of paralysing shame to the whole family, especially since they are bound to become ostracised and objects of ridicule in their own community. Such social and familial pressures even force individuals into suicidal depression. The PUCL-K report itself mentions that “The most tragic case pertains to a newly married gay man who could not bear the vicious verbal abuse of his domineering
brother and he and his wife are rumored to have committed suicide” (PUCL-K, 2001). This is how sexual orientations and the problems associated with societal response to alternate sexualities become, literally, matters of life and death and thus become as vital determinants of existence as class, caste or gender.

Such examples also illustrate the pervasive heterosexism entrenched in Indian societies which is largely fostered by the religious sanctions against homosexuality as articulated in different the religious texts. Uncannily enough, both the Bible and the Koran, despite all the talk of conflict of civilizations, are exactly alike in their shared homophobia as evident from identical responses to Sodom and Gomorrah and the sexual practices associated with those places. Furthermore, as Ali Potia mentions, the Hadiths of Prophet Mohammad also include severe castigation of homosexuality: “When a man mounts another man, the throne of God shakes. Kill the one that is doing it and also kill the one that is being done to.”(Potia 252) The vociferous opposition against the proposed amendment of Article 377 also foregrounded the religious intolerance prevalent in society regarding alternate sexualities. While the Hindu Janjagruti Sangh blatantly claims that “According to Hindu Dharma, Homosexuality is improper” and therefore opposes the repealing of article 377 (hindujanjagruti.org), others like Maulana Khalid Rashid Firangi Mahli claimed that there was no need to decriminalise an “unnatural act” (Dutta, ‘Not Giving In’, 2009). In the process, the nation-space of India becomes constructed exclusively as a heterosexist space and homosexuals either find themselves forced into a life of secrecy, alienation and persecution or escape from the crisis altogether by settling in some other country, if they can afford it.

The unfortunate victimisation of Prof. Ramchandra Siras of AMU as well as the recent attack against homosexual painter Balbir Kishan’s exhibition\(^\text{67}\), further illustrates the extent of prevalent heteronormativity, which cannot be combated only through legal remedies. It would be entirely misleading, however, to suppose that there can be a homogeneous category of Indian homosexuals as the queer community is fractured along

the lines of class which have a significant bearing on various social, legal or medical issues pertaining to the entire gay community. In fact, the entire queer movement began with the formation of different elite, middle-class organisations, in the early 1990s, in Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata. Not only does this indicate the exclusively urban, metropolitan origin of the entire queer movement in India, but as Alok Gupta informs us: “These were also exclusively gay male spaces with little or no discussions of kothis, hijras and lesbians or even bisexuals” (Gupta 126). These exclusions were as much determined by gender and sexual differences as by economic reasons. This is most obvious in case of ‘kothis’ who are also gay men but much more effeminate and generally belong to the lower classes. Even though these groups began to be incorporated within broadening queer networks, especially because of HIV related work, their inclusion was often unwelcome to original middle-class members, just as the kothis often failed to identify with their elite counterparts. Gupta remarks, “The kothi goups continue to see ‘gay’ as an exclusive and unwelcoming space of upper-class and English-speaking homosexual men” (Gupta 128). Interestingly, these kothis face much more severe challenges than their elite counterparts and despite the greater risk, as Gupta reports, they are always willing to join a march or distribute condoms at railways toilets, which English-educated middle-class gays would often refrain from. This is what Sagnik Dutta identifies as “straight lines of exclusion” (Dutta, ‘Straight Lines’, 2009) within the queer community.

All these facts are important to understand Dattani’s exploration of sexual subalterns and the crises that they faced or still continue to face in a predominantly homophobic, heteronormative Indian society, reeling under the effects of compulsory heterosexuality. As the following examination of Dattani’s plays would reveal, even though he focuses chiefly on middle-class gay experiences, those discussions are repeatedly supplemented by intriguing references to generally unexplored lower-class characters which problematise elite assumptions and reveal a more composite picture of sexual subalterns in India. What is equally noteworthy is the fact that the plays refuse to essentialise gays simply as victims but rather attempt a holistic and multi-dimensional representation that does not succumb to easy solutions.
Staging Homosexuality

These material circumstances are essential for us to fathom the kind of material and existential crises in which the homosexuals found themselves entangled in India and it is these contexts which determine their location as sexual subalterns in India. Significantly as Ranajit Guha’s own formulation explains, the study of subalternity involves both an exploration of material determinants as well as the analysis of cultural manifestations through which may emerge a kind of ‘subaltern consciousness’. Dattani’s representation of homosexuals in India in his plays may be seen as an example of such cultural manifestations through which he manages to represent on stage the voice of a largely silenced community who had been caged into lives of not just systemic marginalisation but also of sustained fear, isolation and even self-loathing. It is important to understand this psychological and existential dimension because this can even push individuals to the brink of suicide. Unlike a dalit who may have been maimed by a group of upper-caste hooligans or a poor Muslim who has been tortured by a fanatic Hindu mob, the subalternization of homosexuals often works in India through less visible, less palpable modes which subterraneously war more on the mind than on the body and create an ambience of terror and disgust which seemingly operates without a specific source and therefore becomes altogether more difficult to resist. It is important to keep these aspects in mind while analysing Dattani’s play as most of the characters are educated, middle-class metropolitan males who do not have to endure the kind of daily struggle for survival in which an unorganised construction worker or a landless agrarian labourer may find himself entangled. That, however, does not or should not obliterate their subalternity, which is always situational and therefore fluid. Guha himself pointed out that “The same class or element which was dominant in one area...could be among the dominated in other” (“Aspects” 8). While these characters cannot be deemed subalterns in terms of class, gender, caste or such other determinants, the situation becomes drastically altered when we take the issue of sexuality into consideration, as the aforementioned examples obviously illustrate, and this is precisely what Dattani’s plays seems to foreground. In the process, along with the claustrophobic and traumatising lives which the heteronormative discourse inflicts upon them, they find themselves pushed outside the national imaginary, in the same way that class, caste, gender and such forces exclude others from the
imagined community of the nation by rupturing those precise bonds of horizontal comradeship that are supposed to be the basis of any nation. At the same time, neither should we consider sexual subalterns to be an entirely homogeneous group nor should we transfix them forever in a subalternized state. Just as women belonging to schedules castes or tribes or even minority communities are even doubly or triply subalternized at times because of exploitative hierarchies within their own families or communities, similarly homosexuals have their own hierarchies as well, and those at the bottom of such divisions are exploited both by elite members of their own communities as well as the generally homophobic societal institutions. Dattani’s pioneering texts foreground these issues and offer a nuanced and holistic representation of homosexual characters as sexual subalterns in Indian society.

What emphasises his uniqueness is the fact that, while the issue of sexuality and various forms of man-woman relationships have been frequently explored by playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh and others, especially the issue of women’s marginalisation in Indian society, none of them have ever sought to portray on stage the lives of sexual minorities. More importantly, even when issues related to sexuality are explored in various literary or artistic representations, such endeavours often revolve exclusively around heterosexual desire as approved by the dominant patriarchal discourse. ‘Compulsory heterosexuality’, as Adrienne Rich defines it (Rich 62-95), is an important tool of patriarchy in maintaining its hegemonic authority and such a view is shared by others like Gayle Rubin who also stress the “obligatory heterosexuality” that is built into male-dominated kinship systems and how homophobia is a necessary corollary of such institutions as the heterosexual marriage. She therefore concludes, “The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is…a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women” (Rubin 548, 547). And such systems or discourses invariably consolidate themselves through various interdisciplinary institutional resources. Just as the Orientalist discourse was consolidated through the involvement of history, economics, philology, sociology, anthropology and much else, the hegemonic authority of heterocentric and homophobic discourses have also been consolidated, as we have seen, through legal, political and even scientific institutions that sought to both vilify and
punish sexualities that deviated from the heteronormative space, producing an ambience of fear bordering on paranoia that silences the voices of those belonging to alternate sexualities. As stated before this silence has also characterised both Indian theatre practice and attendant criticism. Even the recent analyses of Indian theatre often remain uncannily silent about such omissions. Aparna Bhragav Dharwadker’s otherwise exhaustive and incisive survey of post-independence urban Indian theatre is also remarkable for such silence as her brief references to Dattani’s use of stage space and urban-realist traditions remain unaffected by the radicalism of Dattani’s content (Dharwadker 277, 282) which analyses the concepts of home, community and nation, not just in terms of man-woman relationships but also by interrogating normative heterosexuality.

However, formerly silenced voices are now being heard as continued activism by people of alternate sexualities and growing public awareness have broken the despairing silence of the past which only ensured lives of quiet misery and disguise. But even though the voices of these sexually marginalised communities can no longer be silenced as before, the persistence of strongly prejudiced reactions against them only serves to emphasise the sense of un-belonging that they have to confront which indeed ruptures any attempt at forging that horizontal comradeship which can place these people within the national imaginary as fellow Indians. This is precisely why one of the characters in Dattani’s On a Muggy Night in Mumbai says: “I can’t seem to be both Indian and gay” (Dattani: 1, 88). It is within this matrix of prejudice that fosters un-belongingness and a disabling silence that breeds misery that Dattani’s plays must be located. Written and produced more than a decade before the decriminalisation of homosexuality, at a time when the very existence of alternative sexualities was part of what Dattani terms ‘invisible issues’ (Multani 156), the plays testify to Dattani’s unprecedented attempt to make visible and explore on stage the different facets of alternative sexualities without either resorting to the stereotypes that fetter our perceptions or falling into the trap of simplistic solutions that deny disconcerting truths.

Instead, Dattani tackles these disconcerting truths head on as he deftly delves into the lives of a number of homosexual men and women in On a Muggy Night in Mumbai
which traces the complex personal relations of the characters as conditioned by their differing responses to the stifling alienation that a heteronormative society forces them to endure. This problem undoubtedly becomes most crucial in case of Ed whose isolation even forces him onto the brink of suicide.

I sat down and had a couple of large ones. And then I thought to myself, why don’t I simply jump off the balcony? (Looks at [Kamlesh] again.) Are you scared?... I don’t know. I just felt like doing it. I could easily go into my bedroom with my glass of rum, step over the balcony and jump. Nobody would suspect anything. They would think I had a little bit too much booze and must have keeled over. Why would I commit suicide? Nobody would know. Unless they were intelligent like you. (Dattani: 1, 80)

Ed’s suicidal isolation is the product of a homophobic society’s persistent denial of homosexuality and the asphyxiation of such desires in homosexuals themselves through a pervasive network of legal punishment, societal ostracisation and medical intervention. Therefore, although Ed finds temporary bliss by bonding with Kamlesh their relationship soon falls apart as Ed is brainwashed into believing that his innate homosexual desires are actually a result of his perversion, induced by the devil, which needs to be medically cured. The examples cited in the previous section clearly establish how religion and science, despite being so antithetical on other occasions, can come together to condemn homosexuality as both are governed by heteronormative patriarchal discourses. Ed falls victim to these discourses and he forces himself to sever his relationship with Kamlesh by asserting “I am not happy being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest” (Dattani: 1, 92). Th details of his split are further elaborated through the following dialogues:

Deepali: somehow you have to make Ed come out to Kiran.
Kamlesh: Ed will never come out to anyone.
Ramjet: Make him.
Kamlesh: He wont.
Ranjit: How do you know?
Kamlesh: He has changed. He says he is heterosexual now.
Ranjit: That’s a good deal of crap!
Sharad: If anyone of us can be straight, I am Madhubala.
Kamlesh: He goes to Church every week now. They put him on to a psychiatrist. He believes his love for me was the work of the devil. Now the devil has left him…I have lost him forever. All
because of the crap that has been filled in him that he has to love a woman (emphasis mine).
(Dattani: 1, 84-85)

Something similar had happened to Kamlesh as well as he too had visited a “straight homophobic psychiatrist’ as he was too despondent after his break-up with Ed. As Kamlesh states:

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 for you to re-orient yourself. (Dattani: 1, 69)

However, Kamlesh does manage to extricate himself from the situation as he is not ashamed about his sexual identity and has the support of his friends who assure him of his own identity. This does not happen in case of Ed. Interpellated by the ideology of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 62-95) and its consequent homophobia, Ed indeed wrenches his soul away from his body and tries to adopt a deliberately over-assertive identity to consolidate the pose of heterosexuality which even includes angry, disparaging tirades against gays:

Look around you. Look outside. (Goes to the window and flings it open). Look at that wedding crowd! There are real men and women out there! You have to see them to know what I mean. But you don’t want to. You don’t want to look at the world outside this…this den of yours. All of you want to live in your own little bubble. (Dattani: 1, 99)

Such self-delusive outbursts not only stress the extent of his interpellation but also betray the speaker’s own anxiety brought about by the apprehension of public revulsion following the recognition of reality. It is this fear which an agonised Kiran mordantly highlights as she lashes out against him for deceiving her after witnessing Ed’s paranoia regarding the exposure of his intimate picture with Kamlesh:

Just think. Somewhere, sometime, you will meet someone at a party who might say – ‘You look familiar.’ And every time you hear that, your heart will beat a little faster, your feet will grow cold. Has this person seen that picture? Does this person know who I really am? Does he see a side of me I don’t want him to see? (Dattani: 1, 108)
It is this fear which even prompts him later to assault Kamlesh by using those very expletives that homophobics use against gays like Ed or Kamlesh: “Faggot! Pansy! Gandu! Gandu!” And as he breaks down into tears after the collapse of his pose, he haplessly admits “I only wanted to live” (Dattani: 1, 110). His confession unearths on stage that entire vortex of fear, frustration, pretence and identity crisis which a gay Indian man has to cope with when he is trying to hide his homosexuality beneath a veil of heterocentric normality.

The same problem is also faced by Bunny Singh who successfully maintains the persona of a happily married family-man, as projected by the heterosexual discourse, especially through his performance on television. Unlike Sharad, who is both secure and bold regarding his sexuality, Bunny too suffers from the fear of the dreadful prospect of social ostracisation and it is this fear that makes him act as the quintessential closet-homosexual who is always ready to prepare a face to meet the faces that he meets. As Bunny pathetically confesses

He does not exist...the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me – the real me – are present in this room. And you all hate me for being such a hypocrite. The people who know me are the people who hate me. That is not such a nice feeling. I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either…I am a gay man. Every one believes me to be the model middle-class Indian man…I lied – to myself first. And I continue to lie to millions of people every week on Thursday nights. There’s no such person...(Dattani: 1, 103)

Such duplicity obviously implies that gays like him have no hope of settling safely in a society as prejudiced as his which is exactly why Ranjit generally lives abroad with his foreign partner where he can safely express his sexuality without being seen as an outcast. This is why he feels “regretful of being an Indian” (Dattani: 1, 88) and even empathises with Ed as he feels that his misery is emblematic of “the price one pays for living in India” (Dattani: 1, 70). In fact the whole play revolves around problems created exclusively by the different characters’ responses to the pervasive condemnation of homosexuality, as corroborated by the angry reaction of the residents to Kamlesh and Ed’s exposed photograph, and the effect of their decisions on others. It is in this context that the ‘muggy night’ with its oppressive heat becomes significant as it becomes
symbolic of the claustrophobic milieu of fear, pretence and frustration that marks the life of a gay man in India, even now. As Deepali perceptively remarks, “It’s not shame, is it? With us?...It’s fear...Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don’t want to be.” (Dattani: 1, 89) In fact the proposed legal decriminalisation of homosexuality hardly indicates a change in public perception or a slackening of the homophobic discourse. Even something as recent as Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A*, which was later adapted into the internationally acclaimed *Slumdog Millionaire*, strangely equates homosexuality with villainy and criminality through three successive characters and thus testifies to the persistence of homophobic mentalities. Dattani’s success lies in his ability to discard such traps and explore with utmost sincerity the innately humane problems associated with the marginalisation faced by gays and it is through the exploration of these problems that the play becomes a plea for understanding and tolerance based on the author’s perception of the beauty of love that transcends stereotypical gender equations:

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. (Dattani: 1, 81)

Through his characters Dattani sees and makes his audience see as well. What distinguishes this visualisation of otherness is the way in which Dattani exploits the typology of the home and not only disrupts familiar myths of domestic bliss but also displaces the centrality of heterosexual desire. As John McRae notes, Dattani “experiments, with great technical daring, using split sets, ‘hidden’ rooms, interior and exterior: he stretches the space and fills it in every available direction, even out front, playing with the audience and its expectations” (MacRae 7). But such dexterous use of space is not merely a technical innovation for its own sake but a visual representation of that striated fragmentation which his plays expose. This cohesion of theme and setting is

---

68 Vikas Swarup, *Q & A*. (London: Black Swan, 2006). Within the first four chapters of the novel we are confronted with three villainous homosexual characters in the form of the paedophilic filmstar Armaan, the murderous Father John and the tyrannical deputy warden of a juvenile home, Mr Gupta.
beautifully illustrated by Kamlesh’s veiled bedroom in *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* which becomes the site of enacting homosexual desire. Not only does this visual image defamiliarize the idea of heterosexual conjugality associated with the bedroom through centuries of literary and cultural iconography but also highlights the shroud of secrecy that encompasses the presence of such sexual minorities in society. The veiled bedroom thus becomes a semiotic equivalent of the closet. Set against the familiar Mumbai skyline the “secret private space of the bedroom” not only signifies the closeted existence of a homosexual in India but also the urge to create a sheltered world where “he can belong” (Dattani: 1, 49). In the process, Dattani emphasises the twin significance of home – not only does it become, as in the plays of Tendulkar, Elkunchwar and others, a microcosmic space that mirrors the macrocosmic space of the nation, but also operates as a shelter from a hostile external world. His plays thus re-enact, for the purposes of his chosen content, that “incessant dialogue between belonging and exile, home and homelessness” which, according to Una Chaudhuri, characterises the portrayal of home in modern drama in general (Dharwadker 281). Through these diverse theatrical devices Dattani’s plays dared to explore on stage the situation of homosexuals in India at a time when no one else did and not only gave voice to their silent misery but added to Indian theatre a hitherto unexplored realm.

What is also remarkable about Dattani’s treatment of homosexuality is the fact that he does not treat them merely as victims. Despite his obvious sympathy for their suffering he also acknowledges their human frailties and scrupulously explores the ways in which they simultaneously enact the roles of victim and victimiser. This becomes evident from the roles of Kamlesh and Ed in the play as their shared hypocrisies only serve to agonisingly shatter the dreams of Kiran who had hoped to transcend the trauma of domestic abuse suffered during her first marriage through her supposedly imminent marriage with Ed. Both Ed and Kamlesh deliberately conceal the fact of Ed’s homosexuality from her, though for very different reasons. While Ed tries to consolidate his pretended identity as a heterosexual male by securing a marriage which obviously takes advantage of Kiran’s emotional vulnerability, Kamlesh supposedly dissembles to prevent Kiran from facing the shock of a second marital setback. While his argument indeed seems rather lame as such a decision virtually operates as a betrayal, the hypocrisy
of Ed is even more blatantly expressed as he himself tells Kamlesh that the marriage would be a convenient screen to restart their relationship which would actually amount to deliberate infidelity against his would-be wife Kiran. Here, Kiran indeed operates as a scapegoat whose emotions are crushed by the two important male members of her life and thus exposes the ways in which women can suffer at the hands of men, even if they are homosexuals. Despite the production of homophobia by patriarchal discourse, the same discourse can also make homosexuals victimise the women in their lives. The same paradox becomes all the more prominent in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, where too the same triangle of brother and sister and the brother’s lover acting as sister’s husband is employed. Praful, despite having a homosexual relationship with Nitin, arranges his sister Alka’s marriage with him by lying to both. Alka thus becomes deprived of desired marital bliss on account of the deception practiced by her own brother:

> The saint has another sister who is (*slaps her own face*) bad, bad bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. (Dattani: 1, 300)

Considerations of gender thus intrude to make it impossible to categorise gays as essentialised victims which obviously highlights Dattani’s nuanced understanding of reality. While someone like Nitin, despite all his wealth, does operate as subalternized figure, forced into a life of hypocrisy and intrigue, in the context of the heteronormative discourse, when he is interacting with his wife, within the confines of the domestic sphere, he does assume the dominant position on account of his masculinity within the patriarchal discourse of marriage. Being gay, does not render one free from the grips of patriarchal chauvinism or even from similar considerations of class, caste and community which continue to determine our responses to fellow human beings in different ways. As Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan explain:

> Ideally queer spaces would be free from the hierarchies and exclusionary politics of mainstream society. Yet the reality of queer spaces is that they must also struggle against their own biases and hierarchies, particularly along the lines of class and gender. The movement is rightly criticised for still being largely urban-based, and queer spaces often reflect the patriarchal biases of our society, being more easily accessed and safer for men. (Narrain and Bhan 16)
This also becomes evident from the way in which Dattani also foregrounds the vertical hierarchies of class, within queer spaces, populated by homosexual men, which, as we have seen, also play an important role in the dynamics of alternate sexualities and the consequent problems which are explored in all the three plays in which Dattani dramatises homosexual lives. In fact, the protagonists of all the three plays belong to the upper strata of society and the plays only refer tangentially to gays belonging to lower classes such as the auto-driver in Bravely Fought the Queen or the guard in On a Muggy Night in Mumbai or the servant Mali in Do the Needful. Incidentally, they all feature in the texts as the objects of others’ desires – while Nitin uses the auto-driver to satisfy his own repressed homo-erotic urges, Kamlesh uses the guard for similar purposes in order to relieve his own frightful isolation and Mali too is used by Alpesh in the same way. However, Kamlesh’s encounter with the guard is a brazenly commercial one as he literally pays him for his services and thus reduces him, as Sharad points out, to a ‘sex object’ (Dattani: 1, 63). While the Guard does have a few dialogues where he only obliquely acknowledges his own desire, the auto-driver is not even endowed with those. He only operates in the text as the man with the “strong black arm” (Dattani: 1, 281) which serve as eroticised signifiers of disembodied desire. We only learn about him indirectly, though Nitin’s statements about how he would invite the auto-driver to his office, late at night, to satisfy his lust, or how he has asked him to meet him in the outhouse, so that he may fulful his desires without any intrusive interference from colleagues like Sridhar or such other individuals. Although there are no explicit references to money, the dynamics of the encounter is similar to that of Kamlesh’s encounter with the guard as in both cases the focus is entirely on the fulfilment of instinctual desire rather than any emotional bond. The transgression of conventional sexuality thus, rarely arms people to transgress conventional social stratification. The same pattern also repeats itself in case of Alpesh’s encounter with Mali, the servant/ farm hand. Although it seems quite clear, that Mali, like the auto-driver and the guard, voluntarily enters into this kind of a sexual encounter, the playwright does not give them any scope to grow as characters and their emotional responses to these dramatised interactions remain under erasure. The crisis is aggravated by the kind of commodification the lower-class gay characters are forced to tolerate, which again
becomes evident when Alpesh asks if he can have Mali as dowry, after his marriage with Lata. Deprived of agency or voice these lower class gay men become nameless signifiers whose significance is solely constituted in terms of an elite gaze that erases their subjectivity and exposes the ideological imperatives that go into the making of a text. As Pierre Macherey argues, “What is important in the work is what it does not say” and the critical enterprise is that of “measuring silences (emphasis original), whether acknowledged or unacknowledged”, as conditioned by the ideological context. (Macherey 87). The recurrence of the same pattern in all the three plays, as well as the silences that are built into these patterns emphasise the implications of that entanglement into the web of power of which the author himself seems aware which negates all attempts to homogenise gays into a single category of victims or sufferers. Instead, the plays emphasise how even they are enmeshed in the consumerist ideology of money, commodity and market which ruptures gay rights movements along the hierarchies of class (Dutta, ‘Straight Lines’, 2009).

In fact, all these urban, middle-class gay men utilise their lower-class counterparts in the same way that men of upper class, caste or dominant religious groups would often try to satisfy their sexual lust by raping or molesting women belonging to lower-class, caste or minority community. Unlike the love that once bloomed between Kamlesh and Ed or that which could still grow between Kamlesh and Sharad, or that which exists between Ranjit and his foreign partner, those involving lower-class urban or rural characters are entirely governed by the instinctual need for sexual satisfaction without any emotional involvement or commitment of any sort. In the process, these relations and characters, even while foregrounding unacknowledged or silenced desires and voices also end up consolidating heteronormative institutions as such examples reinforce the allegations of promiscuity, sexual perverseness etc. with which homosexuals around the world continue to be pilloried. This is precisely what Michel Foucault had recognised and he therefore stated:

One of the concessions that one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other’s asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have the kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and
for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, and it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and, companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that’s what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’: the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there is the problem. (Ethics 136)

Apart from the relationships between the protagonists of On A Muggy Night in Mumbai, all the other representations of homosexual encounters in the plays are merely class-ridden sexual encounters without there being any emotional investment. In Do the Needful, for example, Alpesh’s longing for Trilok, his gay masseuse, is expressed more in terms of orgasmic cries and less in terms of any possible emotional bond. This is precisely why he has no qualms about finding a replacement in Mali to gratify his needs while he is away from Trilok. Likewise, Nitin, in Bravely Fought the Queen, can only homoerotically fantasize about the powerful black arms of the auto-driver without complementing the image, as Alka does, with “the heartbeat of a warm gentle soul” (Dattani: 1, 262). Such considerations are altogether omitted as these lower-class homosexual men operate as doubly subalternized individuals who are turned into fetishistic commodities of elite gaze which fracture the notions of any idealized queer space where all sexual subalterns are alike.

Dattani’s nuanced portrayal of these complexities substantiates his stature as one of India’s foremost modern dramatists and makes his plays a window through which we are forced to confront our own prejudices and are able to arrive at an adequate understanding of the complications involved. Paraphrasing the words of Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, it may be argued that new words surround queer lives today which are drawn from a new language that speaks of change just as it steps towards it. Dattani’s plays are written in this new language which teaches others to read/watch them and understand queer politics and queer lives. At a time when almost seventy percent Indians, according to a national survey, feel that homosexuality should have been continued to be illegal, or when almost eighty three percent Indians consider homosexuality to be against
Indian culture (ibnlive.in.com, August 2009), such interventions are still very necessary. Despite obstacles, as a result of interventions such as his,

The closet no longer reigns in solitary splendour as the metaphor for the political situation of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals [or transsexuals for that matter]. Its door now opens directly onto the *areopagus*, the forum…onto scenes of rational debate, public deliberation and collective decision making conducted under the aegis of reasonable discourse (Whisman 3).

As readers and viewers of Dattani’s plays we can only look forward to more of such plays which will enrich the stage with powerful explorations of even more uncharted territories and continue with the solemn task of holding a mirror up to society.

**Seven Steps Around the Fire**

Seldom, our society realizes or cares to realize the trauma, agony and pain which the members of Transgender community undergo, nor appreciates the innate feelings of the members of the Transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their biological sex. Our society often ridicules and abuses the Transgender community and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals, they are sidelined and treated as untouchables, forgetting the fact that the moral failure lies in the society’s unwillingness to contain or embrace different gender identities and expressions, a mindset which we have to change.

– Supreme Court of India, 15April, 2014.

The same intersections of class, gender and sexuality which are explored by Dattani in his representation of homosexuality are also evident from his representation of hijras in *Seven Steps around the Fire* which explores the social ostracisation and systemic victimisation meted out to hijras by the dominant patriarchal heteronormative order and the vortex of desire and longing in which their lives are entangled. As in other plays by Dattani, what stands out is the dexterity with which he fuses in his representation both the material and the psychological contours of subalterneity and the way in which all of it finds a place within a dramatic structure that remains full of suspense and excitement. This chapter would seek to map the particular material determinants of hijras’ subalternization, the representation of such crisis in the play, the response of the hijras as well as the efficacy of Dattani’s portrayal.
Seven Steps around the Fire acts as yet another example of Dattani’s penchant for exploring uncharted territories as he analyses the subalternization of hijras or transgender communities in India through a play that is moving and gripping at the same time. In the process, Dattani takes us into the heart of the material and psychological subjugation experienced by individuals belonging to such communities – a subjugation that results from an unholy nexus of colonial legislations, the prevalent heteronormative discourse and the maladies of the postcolonial state. Furthermore, the play also traces the possible modes through which non-subaltern characters may extend a bond of solidarity to subaltern figures and help them emerge out of their subalternity, in view of recent socio-cultural changes.

The Subalternity of Hijras

It is important therefore to locate the play in its proper context by understanding the nature, causes and extent of the subalternization faced by hijras and transgender communities in India. Vinay Lal remarks, in “Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality”,

As is well known to students and observers of Indian society, there has been in existence for some time in India (or since "time immemorial" in the language of the Orientalist) a community of people known as the hijras, described variously in scholarly and popular literature alike as eunuchs, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, and gynemimetics; and as if this multiplicity of terms were not enough, they are also referred to as a people who are intersexed, emasculated, impotent, transgendered, castrated, effeminate, or somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional. (Lal 119)

Whatever terms we chose to apply to this particular community of individuals, there is no doubt about the fact that they do not fall within the rigid binaries of sexual and gender identities which are generally advocated by the patriarchal heteronormative discourse. The plethora of definitions suggests that irrepressible heterogeneity which is inherent in the hijra community which invariably eludes the neat taxonomic discussions we are generally comfortable with. However, that which we do not know often evokes our fear and that in turn often generates irrational prejudices and feelings of revulsion and disgust. Quite naturally people of such communities are invariably subjected to both social
marginalisation and institutional discrimination of various kinds and much like homosexuals the hijras too are subjected to a plethora of abuses that are conditioned by legal provisions, administrative apathy, familial ostracisation, unavailability of education, employment and other necessary facilities, poverty, subjection to various sexual offences and many other related problems. The issue of poverty and consequent unavailability of resources is especially critical as unlike metropolitan homosexuals, whom Dattani often portrays in his plays, who at least do not have to undergo daily struggles for survival, the hijras are forced to endure wretched living conditions and therefore become even more vulnerable to various processes of subalternization to which sexual minorities are generally subjected.

Such subjection however seems rather unwarranted in India since the country has had a long tradition of hijra communities, endowed with specific roles and responsibilities associated with crucial rituals of ordinary existence. Just as various Indian customs, conventions and rituals find their sanction through various stories narrated in the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Hijras too trace their origin to a supposed episode in *Ramayana*. As Vinay Lal reports,

As Rama prepared to go into exile with Sita and Lakshmana at the behest of his father, he was followed to the banks of the river at the edge of the forest by his adoring subjects. According to the hijras, he turned to his people and while imploring them to wipe away their tears added the following words: "Men and women, please go back and perform your duties." When Rama returned to Ayodhya fourteen years later after his victory over Ravana, he found a cluster of people still gathered at the same spot, and was told that, since they were neither men nor women, they had felt themselves exempt from Rama's injunction. For this act of exemplary devotion they received the blessing of Rama. (Lal 123)

Lal himself however is uncertain about the authenticity of this particular claim and the associated quest for mythological validation regarding the supposedly auspicious origin of the hijra community, which could well be an attempted fabrication born out of the desire to cleanse the stigma which heteronormative discourse often inflicts on hijras. What remains indisputable however is the fact that ancient Indian literature, belonging to Brahmanical, Buddhist or Jain communities do mention, acknowledge and explain the presence and nature of persons belonging to a third sex, beyond the conventional
male/female binary, depending on the presence or absence of genital organs, the actual ability or inability to procreate and the associated behavioural and psychological attributes. As Gayatri Reddy explains, drawing on the insights of several scholars in the field, in ancient India there existed three predominant views on the third sex: the Brahminical view identified the third sex or the napungsaka on the basis of presence/absence and utilization of genital organs, the second one, endorsed by Buddhists stressed the presence/absence of procreative ability and not just the presence/absence of genital organs and the third one, espoused by Jains which referred to bipartite assessment depending upon both ‘biological sex’ or dravyalinga and ‘psychological gender’ or bhavalinga (Reddy 18-22). All such textual evidences testify to the fact that ancient Indian society either recognized or at least engaged in debates about gender and sexuality which went beyond the categorizations of orthodox heteronormativity.

We must however remember that the word hijra itself is not of any classical origin at all but is rather supposed to be an Urdu word, which gained wide currency in the country only after the arrival of the Mughals in the sixteenth century. This may largely be due to the fact that persons of the third sex or eunuchs played significant roles both within Islam and within various Islamic regimes all across Asia. While on the one hand there have been secret societies of eunuchs who have served as custodians of Prophet Mohammad’s tomb, on the other hand, within the courtly world eunuchs have often played the roles of political advisors, administrators, trusted generals and guardians of the harem or women’s quarters. In a world full of intrigue, ambition, nepotism and dynastic politics, these emasculated men, unable to father heirs, often served as loyal and trusted allies whose presence was more assuring than disrupting to the authorities, as opposed to the shock, amazement or dismay of European chroniclers, who could not move beyond the grid of conventional structures of gender and sexuality. Such practices continued in India even during the beginning of the twentieth century and in places like Hyderabad, ruled by the Nizams and a flourishing centre of aristocratic Islamic culture, the hijras were even given the opportunity to continue with their traditional vocations of performing on festive occasions with generous royal patronage. As Gayatri Reddy informs us, one of the most celebrated of such rulers was the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad,
…Mir Mahbub Ali Khan Asaf Jah VI, or Mahbub Ali Pasha, as he is more affectionately called, during whose reign at the turn of the twentieth century hijras claim they attained their greatest glory…During Mahbub Pasha’s reign, hijras were granted a tract of land close to Charminar at the center of what is now the old city of Hyderabad. This area – between Madina hotel and Mahbub ki Mehndi – is the site of the largest hijra residences, or hijron ka allawahs. (Reddy 9)

Such instances of royal/aristocratic patronage as well as elaborate discussions in ancient religious texts, collectively point to a typically Indian tolerance of diversities, even in the realm of gender and sexuality, which is starkly contradicted by both the attitude of colonial authorities as well as the ground reality of postcolonial India, which is much more starkly heteronormative than the pre-colonial eras probably were.

The marginalization of hijras thus becomes another classic example of postcolonial subalternization which can be seen as the result of a complex response to the administrative and discursive impact of colonial rule which not only bolstered the discourse of aggressive, heterosexual masculinity but also sought to legally penalize and abolish many practices which the colonial authorities considered to be ‘deviant’ or ‘aberrant’ or simply ‘unnatural’ – a stance that accorded well with the declared project of civilizing the decadent Orient. One of the crucial measures, in this context, was the enactment of The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. This act categorically ordered the “registration, surveillance and control of certain tribes and eunuchs” and thus instantaneously criminalized eunuchs with many other communities and thus rendered them dangerous outlaws who became deprived of basic rights as legal subjects. As Gayatri Reddy explains,

Under this act, the term eunuch was “deemed to include all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear to be impotent”, a classification that then allowed for the registration, surveillance and ability to arrest all such individuals. This category included individuals who are (a) “are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or of committing offenses under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, or of abetting the commission of any of the said offenses”; (b) “appear, dressed or ornamented like a woman in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place or (c) “dance or play music or take part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house.” (Reddy 26-27)
Such a colonial law not only deprived the hijras of their basic rights but virtually sought to destroy the very prospects of their survival by rendering all their traditional vocations illegal and their very existence as being a criminal offense. Much like Article 377, here too we see the predominance of a prudish and parochial Victorian mentality which inculcated into such statutes the Eurocentric moral repugnance regarding such issues and individuals which was then supposed to percolate to the rest of the society. This is precisely why a British officer of colonial India vented his disgust at the hijras and stated that “they are absolutely the scum, the flotsam and the jetsam of Indian life, of no more regard than the beasts of the field” (PUCL-K: 2004). While this particular act no longer exists in India it has had a lasting impact on the way in which the administration functions regarding the hijras who continue to be subjected to police harassment and atrocities in several ways. As a report prepared by People’s Union of Civil Liberties - Karnataka (PUCL-K) explains,

What is important about this historical background is that the contemporary perception of hijras as thieves as well as the brutal violence which is inflicted against them can be traced back to this colonial legislation which stands repealed today in theory but continues to exist as part of the living culture of law. (PUCL-K, 2004)

Manifestations of Subalterneity – Reports and Autobiographical Narratives

This reference to the ‘living culture of law’ is an extremely important one as hijra communities around the country continue to be subalternized by the police administration which has been accused of several human rights violations by various NGOs and activists working for the welfare of the hijra communities. The following example, taken from the PUCL-K report offers explicit illustration of the kind of degrading dehumanization which police officials often inflict on hijras:

Smita for the past three years has been living with her husband Tejasvi. On the night of 18 March 2002, at around 9 p.m she and her husband were standing in front of a commercial complex on St. Marks Road (opposite Bishop Cotton Girls’ High School gate, in front of “Richie Rich” Ice Cream Parlour). Four policemen in a Hoysala van (no. 1) dragged her by her hair and pushed her into the van by force, snatching away her mobile phone…
In the police station, she was pushed into a room with her husband. 15-20 policemen stripped her naked in the presence of a senior police officer (Circle Inspector Munirathnam Naidu) who was in the Police Station at that time… All the 15-20 police men stood around her, sexually abusing her by touching all over her naked body (PUCL-K, 2004). 69

Such gruesome and repugnant realities emphasize what Upendra Baxi refers to as the “absolute human rightlessness of transgender communities” because of “the microfascism of the local police state” (Baxi, 2004)

What enables the local police officials to persistently perform such atrocities and also get away with them is the presence of two particular laws which enable them to threaten the hijras with dire legal consequences if they dare to protest against such injustice through any official, judicial procedure: Article 377 and the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act of 1956 (amended in 1986) 70. As has already been in a previous chapter, Article 377 ensured the victimization of all queer people, including hijras, as the phrase “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” has always been used to legally invalidate all non-heterosexual forms of sexual relations and endow heterosexuality with both legal and cultural hegemony. The prevalence of such laws in fact emphasizes the entrenched hypocrisy of the legal system a whole. Such contradictions are also evident from the implementation of the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act of 1986 which is used less to eradicate prostitution in general but more to target the sex-worker on the street, who is obviously the last and weakest step of a complex, multilayered institution. Since hijras are often left with no other option but sex-work, on account of their social stigma and ostracisation, they often fall prey to this particular law which is used against them on many occasions simply under false assumptions and without any tenable evidence. The very fact that a lot of hijras have to perform sex-work makes all hijras prey to atrocities by police officials who are less concerned about eradicating prostitution, which serves a male need, and more about utilizing the existing laws for their own pathological urges for violence and sexual

69 Names changed for preservation of privacy.
70 As the PUCL report mentions, the original law of 1956 was only applicable to girls and women as the act concentrated on “a female offering her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire whether in money or kind”. The act was later amended to include within its ambit “the sexual exploitation or abuse of persons” which obviously broadened its scope to become applicable to hijras.
gratification. Colonial and post-independence laws, thus, serve together to ensure prolonged postcolonial subalternization of transgender communities.

The personal narratives of most hijras regularly documents such atrocities as they narrate how they developed ‘effeminate’ tendencies from an early age, how they were subjected to sexual abuse during childhood/adolescence which contributed to their effeminacy, how such features inflicted on them familial humiliation and an absence of ordinary means of earning their livelihood and how sex-work was chosen by them as the last resort for survival owing to the absence of other alternatives. What marks such narratives is the ubiquitousness of violence and trauma in the lives of these individuals which has been amply substantiated by Gayatri Reddy’s survey:

As Suresh… told me quite calmly and matter-of-factly, “I entered this line first when I was ‘raped’ by my teacher in school. I was nine or ten years old, and my teacher told me he wanted to talk to me after class. Then he ‘raped’ me … Kajal told me in a somewhat embarrassed tone. “First this neighborhood goonda spoiled me, first. Then when he told other people, then they also spoiled me and slowly my body had no more strength.” (Reddy 203)

As the quoted excerpt indicates, ‘spoiled’ and ‘raped’ are used synonymously by the hijras to connote similar experiences of forced sexual encounters which they believe have been responsible for their eventual emergence as hijras as well as their vocation of sex-work. While such experiences explicitly highlight the undeniable and dehumanizing violence meted out to hijra, what we also need to take into account is the absence of either the usual familial framework of support or a similarly helpful network of trusted individuals, who would have been able to shoulder responsibilities and extend their cooperation in times of distress.

Most families are, in fact, extremely reluctant to accept a hijra as their family member and initial discoveries of such identities have often led to both ruthless beating and consequent attempts at suicide. This is amply illustrated by the narrative of Revathi, who writes:

My older brother began beating me without a care whether he hurt my head or my limbs. I screamed in unbearable pain. My mother urged him on: break his legs, she said. Prevent him from
going with hijras again. I began to bleed from the head. I wept uncontrollably; my body was covered entirely with swelling bruises…They took me to the temple next day and shaved my head. They had struck me several times, but their blows did not much hurt as much as losing my hair did. (Revathi 226-27)

Such instances of violence and intolerance emphasize the extent of the social stigma and attendant humiliation associated with the hijra identity as a whole and when one’s own family members are so inconsiderate one can well imagine the probable response of others, including those employers who either deny them or exploit them on account of their sexual identity. The following excerpt from Sachin’s story clearly highlights the pervasive abuse faced by hijras which forces them to engage in sex-work:

From Tirupathi I moved to Bangalore where I made friends with some hijras. They helped me get a job at Bangalore Dairy in Hosur Road …In the Dairy I had just one friend, who I was very close to but it was nothing sexual. During the night shift most people would go up and sleep on the terrace. This friend of mine called me to sleep next to him on the terrace one night. As I went to sleep, some one just took my hands and cupped them on the floor and four guys, one after the other, had anal sex with me. I realised later that this friend of mine was making money out of it. Next day the inspector of the dairy knew all about what had happened on the terrace. Instead of helping me, he screamed at me and fired me from the job (PUCL-K, 2004).

Revathi’s life-story also maps a similar cartography of rejection, ostracisation and abuse, based on the dominant discourse of heteronormativity:

My relatives and acquaintances visited me as they would visit somebody who was ill. They began to look at me in a strange way. Everyone began gossiping about me…

When I traveled by bus, women would not sit next to me if they guessed I was a hijra. People in the bus would tease me mercilessly. Some men would try to grope me or try funny business with their feet. My life went on in this way every day, fearing society, goondas and police (Revathi 228)

In the process hijras are forced to exist on the peripheries of the society as a constantly vilified and targeted community of individuals who have no other option but to remain closely bonded together as they have very few opportunities of realising those dreams of having husbands and families which are generally available to ordinary women. These hijras, though endowed with biologically male identities, identify
themselves as women and therefore have both sexual desires for men as well as dreams of setting up family with them even though they are not endowed with the opportunity of giving birth to children. While the kinship systems within various hijra-houses partly acknowledge the need for such relations by adopting new recruits to the communities as daughters to the senior ones, nothing can fulfil the longing for husband and families which characterise the lives of such individuals. Gayatri Reddy’s documentation amply illustrates how hijra lives are regularly conditioned by such desires and various complications, yearnings and crises arising out of them. For example, one of the hijras, named Surekha was married to a man named Rajesh who not only beat her from time to time but even proved to be an infidel. Her plaintive remarks to Reddy operate as a sombre reminder of that sense of pervasive loss which characterises the lives of such individuals:

I try and understand everybody Gayatri but there is no one who tries to understand me. I give my fifty rupees [to my guru], get up, wash my clothes, I mind my own business. [I also want] things from life, [even] I want a child, I want a husband. I want to make a life for myself …Everywhere it is the same life though. Also I go away somewhere, it is as if I were afraid isn’t it? [But] what is this life worth, if it is the same as death? (Reddy 195)

Such speeches may be seen as examples of subaltern speech which makes us aware of both the invalidity of those imagined differences on the basis of which the dominant discourses vilify or marginalise them as well as the undeniable material presence of those exclusionary and victimising forces which generate such lamentful utterances in the first place. What becomes necessary therefore is the organisation of sexual minorities for their effective mobilisation in the attempts to ensure their rights as Indian citizens and the simultaneous attempts to render visible the multifaceted reality of hijra lives in order to dispel prevalent misconceptions about them, sustained for decades through heteronormative discourses. It is to achieve these objectives in the future that PUCL recommends a broad union of various radical organisations who must jointly protest against the human rights violations that such sexual minorities are subjected to and create public awareness to prevent their further vilification in the public imaginary. Mahesh Dattani’s *Seven Steps around the Fire*, written in 1999 as a radio play and then staged in 2004, may be seen as a precursor of such attempts as it seeks to utilize the space
of the theatre as one of those sites from where the misconceptions about hijras and the various injustices they suffer from may be contested. The play seeks to voice the helplessness of subalternized hijra subjects as well as the possible endeavours of non-subaltern allies and thus contribute to a more tolerant and sensitized counter-discourse.

**Dattani’s Representation of Hijras’ Subalterneity**

The play revolves around the tenacious investigations of Uma Rao, a teacher of sociology in Bangalore University who is engaged in writing a thesis on class and gender based violence in society, which takes her to an intriguing case involving the murder of a hijra named Kamla for which another hijra named Anarkali was arrested. As the play reveals, Anarkali was arrested without any proof for the murder which was committed according to the orders of a minister, Mr. Sharma, whose son Subbu had actually married the murdered hijra Kamla. Uma Rao’s position in this context is quite similar to Gayatri Reddy or Vinay Lal or such other researchers. The play itself seems to be a hybrid between a detective thriller and an ethnographic survey as it not only takes the readers/audience through layers of mystery and obscurity to the heart of the truth but also exposes in the process the entire panorama of administrative discrimination, poverty, violence, social scorn, unfulfilled yearnings, kinship structures and cultural practices which constitute the ordinary existence of hijras in various cities of India. And this panoramic vision only becomes possible through the persistent probing of Uma Rao, reluctantly aided by the constable Munswamy, who also highlights the possibilities of unexpected bonds of solidarity, through which we may both listen and speak to the subalterns and make their voices heard in order to ensure that they no longer remain confined to the peripheries. As always, like other plays by Dattani, here too, the text is complemented by an array of aural and visual images as well as appropriate set designs to create that multifaceted performative framework which speaks to us through many tongues and transforms the stage to a truly polyphonic space where multiple discourses jostle together and cry out for our attention. Such dexterity seems all the more relevant for this particular performance as hijra-lives and the general response to them from ordinary heterosexual citizens is as much governed by perceived misinformation as by actual and imagined visual experiences. Dattani obviously realizes this and therefore his
dramaturgy deliberately incorporates drastic visual images through which he not only seeks to contest both the dominant heteronormative discourse and its usual vilification of hijras but also attempts to sensitize the audience/readers by foregrounding those images of hijra-lives which emphasize their fundamental humanity and makes us interrogate the validity of all those stereotypes about them that we have grown up with and, at times, come to believe.

Significantly the opening scene is set inside a police station and as the previous section itself explains, the police station has often been the site of severe atrocities against hijras and other queer people who are subjected to both physical and sexual abuse within the confines of the police station. As previously quoted examples suggest, police officials of various hierarchies also threaten the victims with dire legal consequences if they dare to protest or resist and thus subject them to rampant administrative discrimination. At the heart of such abuse is a pathological fear and consequent revulsion of the hijras, because of which they are often denied their minimum human rights. This is evident from the very beginning as we see that Munswamy only refers to the arrested hijra as ‘it’, as opposed to ‘he’ or ‘she’ and most of such utterances are juxtaposed with threats of violence:

Munswamy: You may see the hijra now, if you wish, Madam.
Uma: Will she talk to me?
Munswamy: (chuckling) She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn’t.
(Emphasis mine; Dattani: 2, 233)

This is complemented by similar such statements as well as a heap of popular misconceptions such as that hijras are habitual liars. Interestingly, such stereotypical notions are so pervasive that both the ordinary constable Munswamy and his superior, Suresh, the Superintendent, are unanimous in their shared repugnance towards hijras as a community. Therefore, just as Munswamy tells Uma that “It will only tell you lies” (Dattani: 2, 234), Suresh also states decisively “Don’t believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars” and he even refers to the arrested hijra as a ‘creature’ (Dattani: 2, 237) as opposed to a human being. Such instances are illustrative of the pervasive dominance of the discourse of patriarchal heteronormativity within the administrative structures and
it is quite obvious that when the keepers of the law are themselves infused with dehumanizing tendencies, the criminals would not think twice about victimizing hijras, as also exemplified by the various personal narratives which repeatedly refer to assault and abuse at the hands of local ruffians. Dattani offers us a brief but stark glimpse into this sordid world of violence at the very beginning as we see how Anarkali, the arrested hijra is subjected to both sexual and physical abuse at the hands of the other inmates:

A prison cell. A whole group of inmates are banging plates. Some are pulling down one person whom we don’t see. Another stands in front and begins to undo his pants to get a blow job from the one who is down. He yells in pain.

Inmate 1: Owwww! It bit me…I will teach you! Down!

He begins to hit the person...

Munswamy: Ai, Anarkali! Come here…
Anarkali: Go away. After servicing all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk…
Munswamy: (hitting the bars with his stick) Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!

The other inmates begin to beat Anarkali up.

Anarkali: (hitting back at first) Ai! Don’t touch me!

The other inmates scream with pleasure as they beat up Anarkali.

Aaagh! Aaagh! (Dattani: 2, 234-36)

The visual representation of such violence foregrounds on stage that trauma which is the daily experience of many hijras who have very few sources of assistance, if any, outside their own community as they are subjected to bouts of dehumanizing violence from all corners. It is important to distinguish the plight of such hijras from peasants or labourers or even minority communities. The hijras generally lack either the numbers that make them electorally significant or the constitutional privileges or the organizational modalities through which they may attempt to secure their rights and resist the kind of deprivation they suffer from. In fact, members of the other generally subalternized sections of the society may also harbour collective hatred against hijras since they too are likely to be interpellated by heteronormative discourses. Their condition is even more miserable than homosexuals as, though both groups suffer from
the wrath of the heteronormative discourse, a number of urban homosexuals have enough access to knowledge, wealth and modes of power through which they can at least speak out against the injustice meted out to them in their own voice, which hijras often fail to do because of their poverty, lack of education and such other inadequate opportunities. Therefore such abuses generally go unreported and silent endurance is the only option that they are mostly left with.

Herein lies the significance of intervention or mediation from those who do not belong to subalternized sections themselves. While it is indeed important to ensure that the subaltern finds the opportunity to speak on his/her own, it is also imperative to usher into being those conditions which would enable others to listen to their voice: be it documentation or translation of life-histories, formation of organizations that look into the welfare of these communities including the extension of legal assistance or even the publication of newspaper reports that highlight various forms of injustice. This is precisely what Uma Rao, a teacher of the Bangalore University, engaged in her sociological thesis, seems to be doing within the context of this particular play as her academic enterprise seeks to locate the plight of the hijras within the dominant discursive order. As the wife of the Superintendent and the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and the daughter of the Vice Chancellor, Uma Rao has all the privileges that one may require for embarking on such an attempt and despite all her initial awkwardness and hesitations as well as the warnings issued to her by her husband and others, it is her tenacious investigation into the lives of hijras like Anarkali and Kamla, through her interactions with Anarkali, Champa and others, that manages to foreground the layered structures of oppression that surround such lives and also emphasizes in the process all those longings, aspirations and forms of kinship or cultural expression that regulate the lives of such hijras. The most significant aspect of such interaction is the seemingly free articulation of differing perspectives without there being any attempt to impose any specific code of articulation on the hijras by the non-subaltern mediator whose actions may well be seen, following Spivak, as a kind of “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak, “Subaltern Studies” 342) without there being any “clandestine restoration of subjective essentialism” (Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ 74). It is important to bring in Spivak’s insights here
as the head hijra Champa’s statement may well be seen as the paradigmatic representation of that unspeakability of the subaltern which Spivak seeks to highlight: “We cannot speak… When we want to speak, nobody listens.” (Dattani: 2, 259) This is precisely what makes the role of Uma Rao so significant as she manages to create the circumstances through which the subaltern may speak and be listened to, whatever the effectiveness of the performance.

This is evident from her very first interaction with Anarkali in the police station where she attentively observes and notes the actions and statements of Anarkali without ever attempting to either privilege her own position or pretending to tell her what she is and is not supposed to do. The following excerpt offers a vivid illustration:

Anarkali:…(To Munswamy) Oh brother, give me a cigarette, na.
Munswamy: Shut up. And don’t call me brother.
Anarkali: Just one, na. (Very sexual, going to him and lifting her sari) I will do anything for you, brother. Give, na.
Munswamy: Chee! Who would want to… (Flustered, he looks to Uma for help who is busy observing and taking notes.) I-I don't smoke.
Anarkali: If you had a beautiful sister, you will give her a cigarette for a fuck, no?
Munswamy: Just because Madam is here…
Anarkali: You are not a sister-fucker? (Dattani: 2, 240)

Throughout the entire episode, Uma makes no attempt to correct, alter or modify the words and deeds of the hijra and thus performs that specific abandonment of missionary rhetoric that Spivak insists on. Instead, following her demand, she hands over the entire packet of cigarette that was kept in her husband’s drawer to Anarkali to win her confidence. Such gestures are as much a part of her strategy for eliciting information from her as a result of her genuine sympathy and concern for individuals like Anarkali, especially after witnessing first hand the kind of brutalities she was exposed to. It is this attempt at solidarity, without adopting a holier-than-thou attitude, which emerges from her conversation with Anarkali regarding being ‘sisters’:

Anarkali: If you were a hijra I would have made you my sister
Uma: Oh. Thank you.

*Anarkali studies her while she is busy writing.*
Anarkali: But you are not a hijra, no?
Uma: No.
Anarkali: So you will not be my sister.

Pause.

Uma: *(Looking up at Anarkali)* Of course we can be sisters!
Anarkali: Where are you and where am I?
Uma: But...I wish you could understand...This is just what I am trying to do with my paper!
Anarkali: What paper?
Uma: One day you will understand. Anarkali, I would love to be your sister, if you will be mine…
Anarkali: Look at me.

Pause.

Oh! My sister! You are my sister, no?

*Uma looks at Anarkali for a while and then puts her and on her arm.*

Uma: Yes. *(Dattani: 2, 242)*

The conversation deserves to be quoted at length to illustrate how Dattani represents on stage the tentative attempts at formation of solidarity among the two individuals whose differences, in terms of class and gender, are not enough to segregate them. While on the one hand it is true that hijras, because they identify with female sexuality, are inclined to be more frank and warm to women, it is also true that they are bound to retain misgivings of their own, on account of the ostracisation and victimisation they so regularly face. Similarly, women are often rather apprehensive and suspicious of hijras, even though they are both, often, victims of the same patriarchal forces and heteronormative discourses. The singular gesture of holding each other’s hands is a significant mark of solidarity precisely because it is able to overcome entrenched fears and prejudices and when Uma states “This is just what I am trying to do with my paper” *(Dattani: 2, 242)*, she declares her intent to understand the plight of the hijras and transcend those obstacles which prevent any united organised attempt to align women’s problems with those of the hijras. Her academic enterprise thus serves as an attempt at the excavation of entrenched silences through which the subaltern subject may be endowed with a history and a context that renders her visible and audible, even if only partially. Theoretically speaking,
such attempts are similar to both Mahashweta Devi’s attempts to represent in her stories the gendered subaltern and Spivak’s attempt to read the silenced lives of various subalterns through her critique.

This does not, however, mean that Uma Rao is able to arrive at this role from the very beginning. Dattani is always realistic and nuanced enough to show the various moods of hesitation and misgiving that she has to overcome. What makes the situation all the more problematic is that Anarkali’s despair seeks in her a powerful ally which she is unable to be because of her own lack of power and agency regarding the particular legal crisis in which Anarkali finds herself. Therefore, she either states “I-I don’t think I want to get involved” (Dattani: 2, 243) or wonders “Are they just extortionists?” (Dattani: 2, 246) or confesses to her supervisor, “But there is no way I can win their trust...And I don’t trust them either. (Dattani: 2, 262)” And yet, despite such misgivings, she does not give up and persistently follows all the clues that are provided to her by the hijras who obviously trust her to an extent. It is as part of this process that Anarkali gives her two vital pieces of information: she tells her to go to Shivajinagar and meet with Champa, the head hijra, and further informs her that she had scarred Kamla’s face with a butcher’s knife only for her own safety and that Salim’s wife had “put fire to her beautiful skin and burnt her to the other world” (Dattani: 2, 245). As we later learn, the last piece of information was a deliberate lie from Anarkali because she was well aware of the risks involved in accusing a minister of ordering a murder. She neither sought to jeopardise her own position nor did she wish to jeopardise Uma. Instead she cleverly mentions Salim, the minister’s bodyguard, to point Uma to the right direction so that she can discover the rest, if she wishes to. It is as part of this attempt that Uma, despite the reluctance and objections of Munswamy, pays a visit to the hijra quarters of Shivajinagar to meet Champa which not only operates as a turning point in the investigation but reveals to us a number of glimpses of hijras’ lives which either remain invisible to the society at large or is shrouded in a series of misconceptions and prejudices.

One such misconception revolves around the recruitment of hijras and it is often alleged that hijras kidnap young children in order to raise them as hijras. Champa’s opening statement to Uma itself illustrates the way in which such misconceptions operate
As she tells her “We did not kidnap your son. Ramu came to us of his own free will. If you want you can take your son away.” (Dattani: 2, 254) As the earlier references to various life-histories of hijras would substantiate, individuals join hijra communities precisely because their biological and psychological sexualities are at odds with each other and one cannot forcibly be turned into a hijra. This is further illustrated by the picture of young Kamla as a handsome man which Champa shows to Uma. While one of the photographs shows her with her birthparents, the other is a picture of Kamla and Champa after she became a hijra and Kamla states “Afterwards, I am her father and mother…This one we took together after she became my daughter” (Dattani: 2, 260).

This is not just a casual reference to an intimate relation, but actually points to the way in which kinship-relations operate in the hijra world, as a whole. As Gayatri Reddy’s study reveals, hijra communities are strongly centred around guru-chela relationships or mother-daughter bonds which generally revolve around the issue of seniority and serve to subvert the patriarchal and heteronormative kinship structures prevalent in society in general. Champa’s relations with Kamla and Anarkali seem to operate as a conflation of these two central kinship structures in hijra communities which serve to organise their lives and also provide them with a community of their ‘own people’ which is essential for them to compensate that exclusion from the imagined community of the nation which they persistently experience. The significance of such relations is attested by almost all hijras who repeatedly confessed to Reddy “These are our people now. It is only hijras who will look after us, if anything happens” (Reddy 151). This is further reinforced by one particular instance of initiation into a hijra house which Reddy witnessed where the initiate, Kaushal, was told by another senior hijra “And your guru Saroja, you should serve her well because she is now everything to you – mother, father, husband, sister everything” (Reddy 156). Dattani’s dialogues emulate the same rhetoric and despite the petty jealousies and grievances that also exist, Champa indeed functions as a caring protector who not only bails Anarkali out but even looks after her while she languishes in the hijra quarters with severe injuries all over her body, on account of the brutalities she had to endure in police custody:

Anarkali: Aah!
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: My mother used to sing me when I had fever.
Champa: You shut up. I am your mother. Understand?
Anarkali: Then sing.
Champa: Say that, you bitch!…Now close your eyes. Close.

*Anarkali closes her eyes. Champa sings a lullaby from a film. La lalla lori, doodh ki katori…Champa has tears in her eyes as she continues to sing. (Dattani: 2, 273-74)*

Such visual sequences need to be foregrounded in order to dispel the common misconceptions about hijras prevalent in society which often vilifies them without there being any rational justification whatsoever. This is evident in the play itself where Suresh snubs Uma when she identifies Kamla as Anarkali’s sister and sharply retorts: “There’s no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day” (Dattani: 2, 238). However, as research shows, hijras everywhere have intricate kinship networks through which they seek to build intimate ties with more of their ‘own people’ and such relationships are as much based on practical requirements and hierarchical orders as on affective bonds as exemplified by mother-daughter relationships or those between sisters. In fact, as Reddy informs, there are special rites and rituals through which a senior hijra would adopt a younger one as her daughter or ‘dudh beti’ and earlier or future ‘daughters’ would become the sister or ‘dudh behan’ of that younger hijra:
As Munira states, “Like a mother’s milk that is given to her daughter and shared by all her children, who are the sisters”, the individuals who are to become dudh behans enact this nursing ritual. The dudh ma (mother) sits cross-legged and pulls up her blouse while holding her beti (daughter) in her lap, as any nursing mother would. She then pours some milk, using a cup held over her breast, into the mouth of the prospective betis, thereby sealing this relationship with ‘her’ milk. To further seal the bond thus forged, each of the prospective dudh behans pricks her finger and lets a few drops of blood flow into the cup of milk which is then shared by all of them, mother and sister. (Reddy 165)

Such rituals foreground the affective bonds that exist between hijras as well as their yearning for both providing and receiving maternal love and care. They identify such relations as ‘pyar ki riste’ and as Reddy states,

*Dudh betis* are cared for by hijras like actual daughters. They are taken care of when ill, helped out of crises, given gifts for festivals, and may even be provided with *kattanam* or dowry, as happened, for instance, when Munira’s daughter had her nirvana operation. (Reddy 166)

Champa’s relationship with Kamla and Anarkali is not only that of a head hijra and her chelas, but also a maternal one and this is precisely why she cannot tolerate Uma’s suspicion that she may have been responsible for Kamla’s murder and especially the way in which Uma dismisses all possibilities of there being any affective bond between her and Kamla: “Oh don’t give me all that rubbish! Daughter indeed!” (Dattani: 2, 262). Such a statement seems to place at stake all those fundamental bonds through which hijra identity is framed and rightly provokes Champa into an impassioned outburst:

Take your money and get out of my house. Go! This is my house! In my house you respect me!

*Pause*

You don’t know! You don’t know!

*Pause*

You don’t know how much we all loved her! You will not understand. I loved her more than you can love your daughter!

You don’t know! (Dattani: 2, 262)
Such unknowability is to an extent built into the condition of subalterneity and it is often difficult, even for sincere critics, to go beyond the shroud of dominant discourses and accept as truth what seems altogether incredible to them even if the evidence points indisputably to that. Uma herself concedes the possibility of such an impasse as she muses “May be they tried to tell me the truth but I wasn’t listening” (Dattani: 2, 264). This again offers a paradigmatic illustration of that intellectual aporia regarding subaltern speech which Spivak has been emphasising. However, the acknowledgment of this aporia should not lead to inaction. What is required instead is an even more thorough and painstaking disentangling of knotted discursive screens that serve to keep the subaltern either invisible or visible only as the effect of dominant discourses. Therefore Uma Rao, despite her initial failure at communication with the hijras, follows the clues she had been provided with and indeed visits the house of the Deputy Chief Minister in order to interrogate Salim, his bodyguard whom she actually suspects of being Kamla’s murderer as it was he who had come to search for a particular photograph at Champa’s house and the news-cutting that Champa tore apart also had a picture of him. However, her suspicions are again misplaced. Although Salim initially offers a false confession he knows quite well that the minister himself will “get [him] out of this mess” (Dattani: 2, 266) as he was only following orders in order to prevent eliminate all trace of Subbu’s relationship with Kamla and thus save his employer from facing a public scandal. The minister’s promise to look into the matter and ensure Salim’s arrest after the end of the wedding ceremonies both serves to delay the process and also ensures Salim’s safety and the consequent concealment of the truth regarding Kamla’s murder. Uma herself realises this and therefore states: “I have a feeling he [Salim] is not going to confess. Mr Sharma wouldn’t want to lose a trusted bodyguard and will use all his influence. There is no real proof” (Dattani: 2, 271). Such reactions manifest, what Spivak defines as “the tragic emotions of the political activist, springing not of superficial utopianism, but out of the depths of what Bimal Krishna Matilal has called ‘moral love’” (Spivak, Critique 310). This is why Uma Rao despairingly pleads “Help me in having the murderer of Kamla arrested…I feel I owe it to you and Anarkali and…and…all of you!” (Dattani: 2, 271) – only to find her legitimate attempts being strangled by the lack of means and resources. She thus faces the quandary that haunts every investigator of subalterneity as they are
forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of all those trusted modes of acquiring knowledge which had served them so well on other occasions. Even to read against the grain one requires a text which can be read so. But since the subalterns are generally deprived from all those institutions of knowledge and representation through which they can voice themselves, it is either imperative for them to orchestrate on their own those moments of crisis which force the hegemonic order to record their presence, however distortingly, or to initiate new modes of representation which altogether challenge our established definitions to emerge as pathbreaking texts of resistance, capable of constituting an anti-hegemonic discourse, however fledgling and ruptured.

This is precisely how Spivak sought to read, as I understand, the suicide of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri. As a menstruating maiden, she could neither be accused of attempting to conceal an illicit pregnancy nor could the suicide be seen as being scripturally pure as in case of sati, the widow could only be allowed to immolate herself after “the cleansing bath of the fourth day, when she is no longer menstruating” (Spivak, Critique 307). Spivak therefore reads the suicide as “a reversal of the interdict against a menstruating widow’s right to immolate herself” and identifies it as “an unemphatic, ad-hoc subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide” (Spivak, Critique 307). And although the immediate response to her suicide was an entirely misplaced one, the truth was recognised after the discovery of a letter where she had clarified her stance and the very fact that Spivak was able to read her act indicates that such actions do not entirely fail, even if they seem to do so within the immediate context. A similarly ad-hoc subaltern rewriting of the social text of hijra performances at weddings takes place in Dattani’s play, as it is their unexpected arrival and performance at Subbu’s wedding which leads to the final catastrophe and the consequent disclosure of the truth. Badhai hijras’ song and dance sequences at weddings or after childbirth are supposed to be auspicious for the newly wed bride and groom and the parents generally provide money to the hijras in order to secure their blessings. These performances are not only an indisputable marker of hijras’ gendered identity but they also operate as simultaneous mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. While these occasions are one of those rare moments when hijras are sanctioned inclusion within the national imaginary, these performances are also implicit indicators of their exclusion from all those envisioned joys
of marriage and motherhood from which they are both socially and biologically deprived.

As Uma Rao observes:

The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable – marriage and birth – ironically are the same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the Fire God, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of ‘May you be the mother of a hundred sons’. (Dattani: 239-40)

It is this particular discursive construct, along with the stereotypes they engender, which are momentarily subverted by the unexpected arrival and performance of the hijras. Although the security guards and the Superintendent were initially hastening to drive them away, Uma Rao intervenes by pleading on behalf of the hijras and arguing that it is traditionally expected that the hijras should perform in front of the newlywed couple and that it is an ill-omen to turn a hijra away during a wedding ceremony or a birthday. Mr. Sharma, the minister, accepts this traditional logic and allows the hijras to perform which then leads to the theatrical resurrection of Kamla on stage as part of Subbu’s psyche and initiates a psychological collapse that not only leads to his suicide but also unearths the truth behind Kamla’s murder. This not only problematises the orthodox heterosexist nature of marriage but foregrounds the unacknowledged marital desires of the sexual subaltern who comes back to haunt the heteronormative discourse by disrupting one of the sacramental sites through which heteronormativity perpetuates itself – the marriage ceremony. What enables this hauntological return is the fusion of the hijras’ own performance, which triggers the psychological breakdown in Subbu and thus revives Kamla rhetorically from the dead, with that elusive photograph which Uma Rao had been searching for so long. The photograph contains a picture of Subbu with the newly married, bejewelled Kamla which operates as one of those manifestations of queer desire in action that the minister could not afford to circulate anywhere. As Uma Rao explains:

The photograph was what Mr. Sharma was after. A Polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamla had taken soon after their private wedding at some remote temple. A picture of Kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him. The poojari probably didn’t know that Kamla was not a woman. Of course Mr. Sharma couldn’t have it, totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have Kamla burned to death. Bu Salim had to tell him about the picture. Mr. Sharma
simply had to have the picture. He sent Salim to threaten Anarkali and Champa...He did get the picture eventually...after losing his son. What a price to pay! (Dattani: 2, 280-281)

The discovery of this truth seemingly rehabilitates the silenced subaltern and that only becomes possible through the daring intervention of the hijras and the assistance they receive from Uma Rao. As Spivak explained, “...subaltern insurgency... is an effort to involve oneself in representation, not according to the lines laid down by the official institutional strictures of representation” (emphasis original; Landry and Maclean 306). The hijras deliberately go beyond such strictures, unlike Uma Rao herself, and are thus able to bring their subalterneity to crisis, as exemplified superbly by the minister falling at Champa’s feet and begging for his son’s life. Furthermore, the subsequent representation of Subbu and Kamla’s passionate embrace and kiss on stage serves to shock the expectations of the audience as well which is drawn into the circle of response and not allowed to stay outside as passive observers of other’s dilemmas. By forcing the audience to witness what the minister and others like him experienced, Dattani forces the audience to interrogate its own responses so that there is less room for self-deluding charades in the name of being ‘liberal’, ‘progressive’ or ‘tolerant’. In attempting to hold a mirror up to nature, Dattani forces the audience to examine embedded prejudices which serve to perpetuate different modes of subalternization and this becomes his attempt to include the subaltern on the long and tortuous road to hegemony which must begin with the acknowledgment of the rights of citizenship – rights which the hijras have been perennially denied.

Dattani knows that and that is why he cannot end his play, despite the disclosure of the truth behind the crime, on a note of undiluted optimism. Instead, the conclusion becomes resonant with that anguish which Spivak had experienced while analysing the unspeakability of the subaltern whose persistent attempts to bring subalterneity into crisis have often been met with refusal, repression and erasure. As already explained, the two things which ensured the moments of subaltern insurgency, in a rhetorical sense, in the play were brought about by the performance of the hijras and the picture of Kamla and Subbu. Towards the end of the play when Uma Rao ponders over the imminent arrest and conviction of the minister who had publicly confessed his crime, her husband Suresh takes the photograph and tears it apart and thus erases the one remaining archival record
that attested to Kamla’s existence and her attempted annulment of those constrictions which barb hijra existence in India. As Uma Rao laments:

They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers.

Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu’s suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people… (Dattani: 2, 282)

And as the play ends, the spotlight remains fixed on Uma at the centre of the stage, while the hijras “move into shadows on the periphery” (Dattani: 2, 282), signifying the prolongation of their subalternized existence, bereft of the means of self-representation. Explaining the intended significance of her famously controversial remark – ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ – Spivak states: “So ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act”(Landry and Maclean 292). Despite repeated warnings from her hijra sisters, who told her that “There is no world for the hijra other than the one we make for ourselves” (Dattani: 2, 261), Kamla defied the strictures of prevailing heteronormative discourse and sought to create a space for herself which erases the divisive lines that we keep drawing to privilege some and marginalise others and paid for her endeavour with her life – a life that would only be remembered by other hijras and perhaps find a place in Uma Rao’s academic thesis, if her supervisor allows her to document it without the corroborating legal or judicial evidences which are of course non-existent.

Yet, such corporeal and epistemic violence does not entirely have the last word as the viewers also witness the surreal reunion of Subbu and Kamla in death which helps to imagine, quoting Spivak’s words on Mahesweta Devi, “an impossible, undivided world, without which no literature should be possible” (Landry and Maclean 273). And one of the preconditions of such a world would be the solidarity between different subaltern and non-subaltern sections of the society – a solidarity which is exemplified by the relationship that evolves between Uma Rao and Anarkali. Despite all her initial fears, mistrust and hesitations, she does eventually arrive at an improved understanding of the hijras by accepting the limitations of her own attempts and her sincerity paves the way
for a consolidated solidarity between herself and Anarkali who again embrace as sisters in the last scene of the play and Anarkali even gifts her a supposedly magical amulet to ensure that she is blessed with children.

Such representations both indicate the responsibility of non-subaltern activists/intellectuals and also perhaps serve as a pointer towards the formation of some such fledgling solidarities, as exemplified by the activities of organisations like Sangama in Bangalore. Sangama is an organisation that seeks legal and administrative redress for various injustices that are meted out to people belonging to queer communities, including hijras. As the PUCL report indicates, it has successfully taken various cases of reported exploitation of queer individuals, especially those belonging to low-income groups and has managed to create greater administrative awareness. One of the significant steps which it had taken, and which is of direct relevance to our discussion, is the organisation of a rally, on 9th December, 2012, protesting against the administrative mishandling of the investigation into the death of a hijra named Chandni and the consequent vilification of Chandni in particular and hijras in general in different newspapers. As the report states, “It was the first time that more than 150 queers came out publicly on the streets of Bangalore” (PUCL-K, 2004). While such protests did not yield the desired results, they obviously mark steps on the right path as such collective action and organised politicisation is imperative for the important task of the subaltern entering into “the circuit of parliamentary democracy” since, as Spivak reminds us “working for the subaltern means the subaltern’s entry into citizenship, whatever that might mean, and thus the undoing of subaltern space” (Landry and Maclean 307). The legal and judicial structures of India have recently extended this process even further. While the Election Commission has given citizens the option to enlist themselves as persons belonging to the ‘third gender’, the Supreme Court has not only ratified the status but by acknowledging their plight has even identified them as OBC or Other Backward Community so that they may be included in various governmental social welfare schemes. Dattani’s play not only explores the various aspects of hijras’ subalternized existence, but also traces the path along which a non-subaltern associate may engage with it and thus secure those legal and judicial provisions through which the entry into “the circuit of parliamentary democracy” may be successfully ensured.
Dattani’s Representation of Subalternized Female Characters

This section will begin with a look into the collusion of patriarchy and Indian nationalism during the colonial rule and its subsequent impact on the post-independence Indian state which continues to subalternize women in several different ways. It will then relate this to Dattani’s plays which explore various aspects of such subalternization by exploring the lives of several middle class subalternized female characters who collectively represent both the subjugation that such women face and the resistance and negotiation they continue to offer to cope with their adverse circumstances.

Much like Girish Karnad, one of the major areas of Dattani’s oeuvre also remains the exploration of women and their roles in society. However, unlike Karnad, Dattani remains focused on his familiar middle-class society and unearths and explores the several struggles and subjugations, physical, social and psychological, such characters have to face. Indian society has long been haunted by this problem and post-independence Indian theatre continues to grapple with the evolving role of women in a patriarchal society and the various tensions and consequences generated by such forces. Whether it is the diverse vernacular versions of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, the assertive sexuality of women like Padmini or Visakha in Karnad’s plays or the volatile conflicts in Vijay Tendulkar’s Kanyadan or the feminist theatre of Shaoli Mitra and Anuradha Kapoor, representation of women and their roles in society have continued to persist in the development of Indian theatre. Mahesh Dattani’s plays fall within this tradition and are remarkable for their sustained focus on the way in which women of all generations suffer differently under patriarchy and the various strategies of resistance and negotiation that they develop to cope with their adversities. In the process the plays help to interrogate the masculinist imagining of the nation where women often serve as subalternized subjects located on the peripheries, who, however, strive to create an alternative space, beyond the material and psychological barriers entrenched by centuries of patriarchal discourse.
Women’s Subjugation and the Nationalist Discourse

One of the cardinal features of this discursive framework is the confinement of the women within the domestic sphere which was reinforced as a specific consequence of colonialism and the subsequent development of anti-colonial nationalism. From the very early stages of Indian nationalism, the nation was imagined in terms of a distressed mother-figure urging her sons to ensure her emancipation as exemplified either by Bankimchandra’s invocation of the mother-figure in Vande-Mataram or by Abanindranath’s ‘Bharatmata’. This was complemented by the associated image of goddess Durga, not just as a demon-slaying saviour but more importantly as a daughter returning after marriage to her father’s house with her children. It is these associations which were stressed in nationalist interpretation as evident from the following explanation by Bepin Chandra Pal:

This is nothing but a mother's beauty... My mother is not a sanyasini but is hungry for affection, tirelessly serving others... This is the way Bengalis have seen their mother every morning in the kitchen. The hair piled on top of the head does not denote the state of a yogini but that of the busy cook going about her business. The heavy breasts indicate a plenitude of milk awaiting the infant. The parted lips denote the ecstasy experienced at the moment of suckling the child (qtd. in Tanika Sarkar 2012).

This in itself was part of the strategy of Indian nationalism of identifying women as the repository of uncontaminated cultural heritage, located within the realms of the home (as opposed to the external male world of political struggle) which remained outside the purview of colonial authority and thus operated as the sanctified but vulnerable space where the imagined national community was sovereign already.71

In the process, the new patriarchy, even though it was different from its traditional counterpart, stressed the need to confine women to their domestic roles. Thus, while it acknowledged the need for women’s education and opposed other scriptural strictures, it was also opposed to the comparative freedom women enjoyed in Western societies. The

---

71 These ideas have been amply explored by both Tanika Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee, to whom I am indebted for the utilization of these ideas for the purposes of this essay.
following remark from one of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay’s essays clearly reveals this stance,

Because of the hankering for the external glitter and ostentation of the English way of life...an upheaval is under way within our homes...In households which manage an income of a hundred rupees, the women no longer cook, sweep or make the bed...everything is done by servants and maids; [the women] only read books, sew carpets and play cards. What is the result? The house and the furniture get untidy, the meals poor, the health of every member of family is ruined; children are born weak and rickety, constantly plagued by illness – they die early.

Many reform movements are being organised today; the education of women in particular, is continuously talked about. But we rarely hear of those great arts in which women were once trained – a training which if it had been in vogue would have enabled us to tide over this crisis caused by injudicious imitation. (Mukhopadhyay 480; translation mine)

The training of perfect cleaning, cooking, sweeping and such household chores is thus privileged over women’s education and this domesticity is then glorified, in a different essay, with a kind of spiritual richness, unknown in Europe:

In a society where men and women meet together, converse together, eat and drink together, travel together, the manners of women are likely to be somewhat coarse, bereft of spiritual qualities and relatively prominent in animal traits...Those who laid down our religious codes discovered the inner spiritual quality which resides within even the most animal pursuits which humans must perform and thus removed the animal qualities from those actions. This has not happened in Europe...In the Arya system there is a predominance of spiritualism, in the European system a predominance of material pleasure. In the Arya system the wife is a goddess, in the European system she is a partner and companion. (Mukhopadhyay 446; translation mine)

It is because of these concerns and anxieties that Motilal Ray went on to assert

If our womanhood is made to lose direction, then the nation’s defeat would be complete. If, like the so-called enlightened, westernised Indian man, the Indian woman also takes its western education and changes her own nature and religion then our subjection would be extended from outside to our innermost core!” (qtd. in Sarkar 2014)

That this ‘goddess’ was denied a voice and could be willfully insulted or beaten because of non-payment of dowry or subjected to sexual abuse after forced marriage when she was not even a teenager certainly did not figure within such nationalist arguments.
Therefore, as Partha Chatterjee states, “The nationalist discourse…is a discourse about women; women do not speak here” (Chatterjee 133).

One of the events that foregrounded this particular truth was the debate regarding the legally sanctioned age of marriage for girls, especially in the context of the death of a girl named Phulmoni, a girl of 10 or 11, who died after being raped by her husband Hari Maiti, a man of 35. Though Hari Maiti was discharged, as the existing laws were not adequate enough to convict him of any wrongdoing, this led to a consolidation of pre-existing reformist demand for the raising of the age of marriage for girls from 10 to 12 which was then implemented through The Criminal Law Amendment Act 10 that revised Section 375 of the Penal Code of 1860, and raised the minimum age of consent for married and unmarried girls from 10 to 12. However, the legislation met with shrill opposition from orthodox Hindu nationalists who represented such legislation as an invasion of both the sacred domestic space as well as religion to foster anti-colonial opposition:

No, no, a hundred battles like that of Plassey, Assay, Multan could not in terribleness of effect compare with the step Lord Landsdowne has taken…The day has at length arrived when dogs and jackals, hares and goats will have it all their way. India is going to be converted into a most unholy hell, swarming with hell worms and hell insects. ...The Hindu family is ruined. (qtd. in Sarkar 1876)

Such fusion of anti-colonial anger with the reactionary resentment of the orthodox Hindu patriarchy exposes the patriarchal set-up within which Indian nationalism often functioned and despite utilizing the presence of women for strategic purposes during different stages of nationalist movement, women remained subalternized in the nationalist discourse and the domestic space of the home remained the foundation of such subalternization. Spivak’s own analysis of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri’s suicide is a case in point. As Spivak explains:

A young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father’s modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhubaneshwari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to
The fact that Bhubaneshwari had to wait for the onset of menstruation before committing the suicide indicates that burden of patriarchal discourse which would have otherwise construed her death as an evasion of illegal pregnancy as the female body could only be looked at as a site for male sexual desire and the female psyche was generally deemed unworthy of the kind of political consciousness Bhubaneshwari has so painstakingly shown. Furthermore, the fact that even the female relatives within her own family generally accepted the logic of illicit love or melancholia induced by spinsterhood amplifies the hegemonic authority of patriarchal discourses that interpellate even those women who were supposed to have comprehended her rationale. It is this situation which prompted Spivak’s anguished and frustrated exclamation regarding the subaltern’s silence. While such silence may not be pervasive, the prevalent social condition also verifies the difficulty of dislodging entrenched patriarchal ideologies that continue to package and proliferate themselves in various ways.

Women’s Subjugation in Postcolonial India

It is important to understand this collusion in order to examine the way in which post-independent Indian society has continued to reel under the effects of such patriarchal discourses as evident from various forms of domestic violence, growing imbalance in the ratio of men and women in various areas and other forms of discrimination and violence. For example, population data in India, from 1901 to 1991 shows that the sex ratio between men and women has been on a steady decline – while in 1901 there were 972 females in India per 1000 males, the number had dropped to 927 in 1991 (Census 2001, Chap. 6, 3). Such imbalance confirms the entrenched marginalization of women in India and their deprivation from various life-sustaining resources as well as the persistence of such acts as foeticide and infanticide. While the ratio has improved in the past two decades it has also dropped alarmingly in certain regions like Punjab, Haryana, union territories like Delhi and Chandigarh, where chauvinistic and misogynist practices continue to dominate. The gravity of the obstacles faced by women is also confirmed by other available data regarding growing violence against women, in the form of rape,
domestic violence as well as acts of political vendetta. The most shocking of these trends is obviously related to the alarming rise of incidents of rape in India. According to the reports of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there has been a staggering eightfold increase in incidents of rape since 1971 and the rate of increase outpaces any other cognizable crime (Varma, 2011). As Yudhishtar Kahol remarks

Ironically, in a country where womanhood has been put on a pedestal for worship, incidents of wife-battering, molestations of women in various forms like rape, eve-teasing, abduction and bride-burning keep on increasing every year. Women find no security, be it home, where they are ill-treated by husbands and in-laws, or the streets and work places where they are vulnerable and fall prey to anti-socials, money-lenders and men-colleagues, bosses and are subjected to innumerable indignities, perhaps in higher frequency that in most of the civilized countries world over. (Kahol 9)

What is most relevant for our own study is the vulnerability of women within the domestic sphere which, far from being comparatively safer, has continued to remain a site of persistent violence as evident from various surveys. The third National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) of 2005-2006 reveals that “More than a third (34 percent) of women age 15-49 have experienced physical violence, and 9 percent have experienced sexual violence. In all, 35 percent of women age 15-49 in India have experienced physical or sexual violence” (NFHS-3, xlvi). This figure translates into millions of women who have suffered, and continue to suffer, at the hands of husbands and other family members. Furthermore, focusing on domestic violence against wives by husbands, the report goes on to declare:

Overall, in India 35 percent of women age 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence; this proportion is 40 percent for ever-married women and 17 percent for never married women… Even among women who belong to the highest wealth quintile or women whose husbands have higher education, one in five women have experienced physical or sexual violence. (NFHS-3, 503, 513)

It is important to understand that such subjugation does not merely affect women belonging to the lower strata of society. In fact, women belonging to middle classes not only suffer from similar subjugation, but do so in a claustrophobic silence brought about by social taboos and a cultural context that not only propagates a notion of husband as
god (‘Pati Parmeshwar’) but suspects any action against the husband by the wife as being immodest or arrogant or simply vile. As Yudhishtar Kahol explicitly clarifies:

The first myth is that middle class women do not undergo wife battering. In reality such women come from all sections of society, belonging to different regions, educational levels and from all socio-economic classes...The middle and upper class women are battered behind closed doors. They live in total isolation and keep up the pretence of a successful marriage. (Kahol 102)

What makes it all the more difficult for women to seek redress against such violence is the pervasive notion that any problem between married couples is exclusively their personal problem in which others, even if they are in the know, should not intervene. Such notions are so entrenched in society that even when women take up the courage to report such abuse, police officials, especially those belonging to lower ranks, often refuse to register such cases. As Ashine Roy states,

It is a strange situation in which the women approach the police and the police in turn normally discourage them. The fact remains that after reporting the matter to the police, the woman concerned knows that she has to back to the same house, with a cruel husband obviously waiting for her, and if the man knows that a complaint has been made, he may get even more violent. (Roy 107)

However, as always, it is not just force that ensures the continuation of violence and subjugation. There are deep embedded ideological structures which both sanction such violence and facilitate its perpetuation. This is why the NFHS survey also points out how 54 percent of the women and 51 percent of the men included in the survey responded that wife-beating by husbands was somehow justified (NFHS-3, xlvi). Under these circumstances, it is quite natural that reported cases of domestic violence against women, by husbands and in-laws, as per the reports of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), have jumped from 81344 in 2008 to 94041 in 2010 (NCRB Report: 2008, 387; NCRB Report: 2010, 387)). Such consistent growth in domestic violence against women further highlights the vulnerable, subjugated position of many women across the country, who continue to operate as subalternized entities in different ways and forms.
Dattani’s Representation of Women

What such statistics and reports highlight is that the collusion between patriarchy and nationalism which pre-Independent India had witnessed, created such a deeply patriarchal paradigm for the nation that as before, the domestic space continues to operate as a site of numerous brutalities and atrocities, spawned by an entrenched male chauvinism which thwarts the attempts of creating a nation-state where women are no longer treated as subalterns. This understanding is imperative for examining Dattani’s oeuvre which explicitly highlights this problem through such plays as Dance Like a Man where Amritlal Parekh, the elder patriarch, who is also a nationalist freedom fighter and a social reformer, embodies this particular collusion that leads to a disastrous impact in the lives of Jairaj, his son and his wife Ratna, both of whom wish to become professional dancers, against his wishes. Despite all his claims of being a reformer, he never actually discards the entrenched gendered binaries of patriarchy and therefore even if he can accept Ratna’s dance as part of the national project of rediscovering one’s culture he is adamantly opposed to his son’s decision to be a dancer as in his view such a choice conjoins the supposedly separate worlds of men and women. Therefore, as far as he is concerned, “a man in a woman’s world is pathetic” (Dattani: 1, 427). In fact, it is his domineering connivance which leads to a gradual termination of Jairaj’s career as a dancer since Ratna acquiesces to Amritlal’s manipulations to retain her own career which could well have been curbed by her father-in-law as they were financially dependent on him during their early years. And despite Jairaj’s initial rebellion, he has no other option but to humbly return to his father as Ratna’s uncle, with whom they had decided to stay, had actually desired to sleep with Ratna as in his mind, a dancer was an entertainer and gratification of his own lust supposedly fell within the realms of such ‘entertainment’.

This conjunction of dance and sexual gratification, in Dance Like a Man also stems from the general perception of devadasis as prostitutes because of which the very practice of dedicating one as a devadasi is prohibited. While it is true that devadasis were subjected to sexual exploitation, the fact is that these women had very little choice in such decisions which were often influenced by the patrons who wished to enjoy their sexual favours. After independence, although India sought to rediscover its cultural
identity by popularizing the particular dances which the devadasis practiced, the women themselves continued to be ostracized and discriminated against as prostitutes, which again reveals the basic hypocrisy of a chauvinistic society that victimizes the victim instead of offering redress and also prohibits her from legally and professionally utilizing the training and knowledge received as part of the devadasi heritage, by blackening the individuals with systematic social stigma. This is why Amritlal not only forbids Ratna from meeting Chenni Amma, a seventy five year old former devadasi who is the only surviving virtuoso exponent of the Mysore School of performance, but also rants against people like Chenni Amma by claiming that he will never tolerate “temples turned into brothels” (Dattani: 1, 416). Such statements again hypocritically elide over the role of the men who exploit such temple dancers and ignore the sincere devotion they dedicate to their art. Amritlal thus becomes a representative figure of the new patriarchy of postcolonial India whose nationalist zeal did not include the prospect of a non-patriarchal future and thus ensured that subalternized women like Chenni Amma, with no one to look after them in their agony, remain shackled to the periphery.

The continuation of such patriarchal fetters is further highlighted in Final Solutions where Hardika’s memories, preserved in her diary, regarding her childhood and youth unearth a vortex of subversive sneer and rage against both her husband and the in-laws on account of their severe patriarchal authoritarianism that even leads to physical abuse and incarceration. In fact, the name Hardika itself is a signifier of the crisis she faces as it is not her original name but one which has been given to her after marriage to match with her husband Hari. Struggling from the beginning, thus, with an identity under erasure, she finds herself all the more threatened as she is deprived of her favourite mode of self-expression – singing film songs – by her in-laws who resent such tendencies:

All my dreams have been shattered…I can never be a singer, like Noor Jehan. Hari’s family is against singing film songs. His parents heard me humming a love song to Hari last night. And this morning they told him to tell me… (Dattani: 1, 166)

We can easily imagine the unsaid which obviously implies a sharp condemnation that only intensifies the claustrophobia of a young bride whose cherished dreams are corroded within the supposedly sanctified domestic space and this illustrates the processes of
“postcolonial subalternization” (Nayar 99-113) inflicted on women in various different ways including the institution of marriage. It is in reaction against such marginalization that Daksha in her diary identifies her broad-bottomed mother-in-law as “Gaju. Short for Gajanand” and adds:

Wagh is my name for my father-in-law. Wagh as in ‘tiger’. In front of Gaju he is like a big pussy cat…And he snores. The first night I heard him snore I thought there was a tiger in our courtyard. (Dattani: 1, 175)

She even thinks her husband has the brains of “a silly goat” and mourns her monotonously depressing future in the following terms:

Once he joins his father, he is going to be brainless and boring. Like Wagh he will come home, demand his food, criticize it before eating it, answer me in grunts and groans and chew tambacoo paan, sit on the big chair with his feet up and stare into space. The only time he will speak intelligently will be when our community people come to collect donations for building temples and celebrating festivals. (Dattani: 1, 196-97)

The problem however is not confined to just this. All of Daksha’s sneers and sarcasm are eventually counterpointed by the severe authoritarianism of her husband and in-laws who not only hurl insults at her or physically abuse her but even confine her in a room like a caged animal, simply because they suspected that she had eaten with the Muslims – a notion that was too intolerable for people who had burnt down the shop of Zarine’s father simply to teach them a lesson in the wake of the communal tension surrounding Partition and Independence. This clearly emphasizes how, for innumerable such women, the acquisition of independence hardly made any difference as they remained shackled within the same patriarchal fetters that subalternized them during pre-independence days. Daksha’s anguish and trauma is vividly portrayed by Dattani through a deft juxtaposition of the two different temporal frames as Hardika recollects young Daksha’s trauma and revisits her own agony:

Daksha (as if to Hari): No. what are you saying, Hari? It is not true! It is just not true! Kanta is lying. She lied to you. I did not touch their food! (Recoils as if she has been hit.) Ah! Don’t hit me! (Angrily.) Don’t do that! I swear I didn’t eat anything! Aah! Stop that! Stop it! All right. I won’t go there again. Please leave me alone. (Crying.) Please! Stop! (Lies on the floor, sobbing)…Hardika: They hurt me so much.
Daksha: Oh God! Why do I have to suffer?...

Daksha: (banging on the door). I promise I won’t do it again!

Hardika: Confined. Never let out of the house. Like a dog that had gone mad! (Dattani: 1, 222-23)

Daksha’s trauma becomes symbolic of the shrunken space with which women have had to cope even in post-independence India as exemplified by female characters like Ammu in Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* or the poetry of Kamala Das. And such literary representations in turn highlight how the nation-space of India remains violently dominated by patriarchal discourse which refuses to grant a woman a room of her own. It is in acknowledgement of this grim reality of female subalternization that Hardika warns her granddaughter:

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: 1, 220)

What is also important to note here is that not only was Hardika’s trauma accentuated by women like Kanta and Hari’s mother but she herself eventually becomes as much a reactionary as her in-laws and can go on to declare to Javed, whose sister’s hostel was supposedly bombed: “What happens to your sister doesn’t concern me!...She deserves it! Your sister deserves it!” (Dattani: 1, 222). Her hysterical response, coupled with the response of her female tormentors, exposes a pattern of sustained interpellation as a result of which women, far from collectively combating the menace of the patriarchal discourse become its unconscious agents. The same pattern re-enacts itself in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, especially through Baa who simultaneously plays the role of both victim and victimizer. Her confused, disjointed recollections evoke a married life as tormented as that of Hardika since Baa too is deprived of the opportunity to continue her singing and also subjected to physical abuse:
He asked me before marrying him if I will sing! He knew I could sing! You want me to sing only for you? (Laughs.) I will sing for everyone! Why are you so angry?...Aah! You slapped me? Never, never slap me. Nobody has hit me. The men in our family are decent. (Dattani: 1, 288)

What emerges through such mutterings is the picture of a dark, powerful chauvinistic husband who, though he had no qualms about using the money brought in by his wife as dowry, not only deprived her wife from singing but would continue to proclaim his authority by repeatedly assaulting her, even in front of her sons:

You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father! (Jerks her face as if she’s been slapped.) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face. I beg you! Hit me but not on...aaaah! (Covers her face weakly as her scream turns silent and the light on her fades out.) (Dattani: 1, 278)

Such scenes become symbolic of the gradual fading of female freedom as the post-independence domestic space is transformed into another site of subjugation and violence where the female characters of Dattani’s plays serve as post-independence successors of the raped and murdered Phulmoni.

Ironically, it is Baa who later presides over this process of subjugation and violence when she assumes the role of the mother-in-law in relation to Dolly and Alka, the two sisters who are married to her two sons – Jiten and Nitin. Incidentally, Dolly and Alka’s mother was herself a victim of patriarchy as it was discovered that the man who pretended to be her husband also had another family, with wife and children in another town which turned her into a mistress. Quite naturally, Praful, Dolly and Alka’s brother, hid this fact from their husbands. But when this fact was later discovered, Baa flew into such a rage that she not only called Dolly and Alka’s mother “a whore” (Dattani: 1, 311), but she even instigated her sons to turn on their wives, especially Dolly, despite the fact that she was pregnant at the time. Baa’s instigations and Jiten’s own abusive chauvinism lead to such violence that Daksha, Dolly’s daughter, was prematurely born as a spastic child – a child whose very existence is inscribed by that patriarchal violence which continues to traumatize women’s lives in India.
A similar tragedy literally cripples the life of Tara in the eponymous play. Though medical opinion suggested that among Chandan and Tara, the conjoined twins with three legs, it was Tara who had a greater chance of possessing two legs, Bharati, the children’s mother, and her grandfather, along with the surgeon, decided to give both legs to the boy. Not only did the leg have to be amputated later but Tara, who had the opportunity to lead a comparatively healthy life, was turned into a cripple. Patriarchal discourse here functions both through Tara’s grandfather and her mother and ruins her life. Considering the fact that Indian society has long suffered from the entrenched impact of barbaric scriptural rulings which have privileged the male child, one can well imagine the ideological interpellation that contributed to Bharati’s insistence and its tragic consequences. Dattani himself highlights this entrenched patriarchy by referring to the abhorrent practice among Gujarati Patels of drowning their daughters in milk so that they would not have to bear the burden of dowry later. And even though such practices themselves have stopped, the orthodox framework still remains dominant as exemplified by the continuation of illegal foeticides because parents are unwilling to accept the birth of a girl-child. It is because of a similar mentality that Tara’s father is reluctant to educate her or to take her to his office even as he plans a grand career for his son Chandan and reproaches him for turning into a ‘sissy’, simply because he had been assisting his mother in knitting. Even their grandfather leaves all his wealth to Chandan without offering anything to Tara. Her sarcastic remarks not only represent her own feisty spirit but also underline the primitive mentalities that underlie our supposed modernity:

Roopa (falsely): Sorry! Hello, uncle. Sorry! Am I disturbing you?
Tara: Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. (Dattani: 1, 328)

Tara represents only one aspect of the kind of subjugation and discrimination that girl-children in India often face on account of the prevalent predominance of patriarchal discourse. A particularly heinous manifestation of this predominance is evident from the issue of sexual abuse which affects almost one out of every two Indian children according to recently conducted surveys and represents a dark and sordid reality that often remains shrouded in a conspiracy of shame, ignorance and silence. As the report prepared in 2007
Parents do not speak to children about sexuality as well as physical and emotional changes that take place during their growing years. As a result of this, all forms of sexual abuse that a child faces do not get reported to anyone. The girl, whose mother has not spoken to her even about a basic issue like menstruation, is unable to tell her mother about the uncle or neighbour who has made sexual advances towards her. This silence encourages the abuser so that he is emboldened to continue the abuse and to press his advantage to subject the child to more severe forms of sexual abuse. (SCA 73)

Most often such abusers are close relative or family acquaintances or persons in positions of authority in various institutions and according to the governmental survey, 53.22% respondents of the total group of 12447 children (SCA vi, 109), were subjected to at least one form of sexual abuse during their childhood. Such a high percentage reflects the acute vulnerability of the children to various forms of sexual abuse and this is precisely what conditions the crux of Dattani’s play where he examines the crisis faced by a character named Mala, who had endured such sexual abuse during her childhood that she has developed a remarkable personality disorder. Set in Delhi, the play once again delves into the dark underbelly that often remains hidden beneath sophisticated veneers of middle and upper class urban lives. In fact, according to a survey conducted by Save the Children and Tulir in 2006 in Chennai, 42% of the school-going children, out of 2211 respondents, were found to be victims of sexual abuse and “The prevalence of sexual abuse in upper and middle class was found to be proportionately higher than in lower or in lower middle class (SCA 74)”. Dattani’s play, commissioned by RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest), highlights this particular problem, through the life of Mala, and unearths a pervasive network of perversion that distorts and cripples women’s existence in numerous ways. Keeping in mind Ranajit Guha’s formulation of subalterneity it is possible to argue that such instances of sexual abuse operate collectively on the basis of the categories of age, sex and gender to inflict maximum misery on young and helpless victims.

Much like any other form of sexual violence, sexual abuse of children generally leads to either the transmission of sexual diseases, or subjects the victim to various
physical ailments or inflicts on them a lifetime of psychological ruptures leading to various forms of personality disorder. This is evident from the very beginning as Mala is shown to be in need of psychological counselling as she grapples with various forms of personality disorder that either lead to an inability to maintain meaningful relationships or an excessively promiscuous behaviour. Both these traits are symptomatic of that post-traumatic stress disorder which often affects survivors of rape or child sexual abuse. As Edward Rowan explains:

The world does not feel like a safe place for the sexually abused child and adult survivor. Basic trust is shattered. This is especially true when the perpetrator is a member of the family. The victim is often isolated from friends and other family members and has to deal with an often unpredictable abuser… When other supposedly caring family members passively ignore—or worse, actively enable the abuse—basic trust is eroded even further. This can be devastating to potential future relationships, especially to sexual relationships. If the abuser was a parent, the conflicting feelings of attachment and hostility must be worked through or else there is great potential for future negative relationships and revictimization. Mature sexual expression gives way to aversion to sexual behaviour, sexual identity confusion, and sexual dysfunction. Promiscuity—the seemingly opposite behaviour—is also common. (Rowan 35-38)

All of these symptoms manifest themselves in different ways through the behaviour and actions of Mala who had to endure sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle from the age of seven to her teenage years. It is this particular experience, which went on, either within her home or during the summer holidays spent at her uncle’s house that resulted in all those emotional and psychological complexities in which her adult life is tangled. Her fumbling, hesitant confessions to the counsellor give us an insight into this warped world:

What I am doing is terribly wrong!...It has to end in a month’s time. In fact I like it best when I can time it so it lasts for thirty days. I even mark it on my calendar. After that, I have to – move on, if you know what I mean…Well it means that it is no longer satisfying to me, and I don’t mean the physical part of it, although that is usually the main attraction for me…not that I actually enjoy it when they are doing it to me…sometimes I do, with the right kind of people…the right kind of people are, let me see…usually older men…I think I like it – I don’t know how to put it…When they – sort of – you know – use me…I can’t explain it. (Dattani: 2, 18)
Such hesitant, inchoate responses reveal to us the extent of the psychological disorder a person can experience on account of sexual abuse during childhood. The unwanted imposition of sexual experience on a young child not only creates an unbearable burden of silence and shame but also corrodes a person’s sexual health. Not only does it become extremely difficult for them to lead normal sexual life but the trauma of those early experiences creates a prison of repetitive anomalous behaviour from which there seems no escape. As Dr. Rowan explains:

Such individuals experience a damaged sense of self, chronic guilt and shame, feelings of ineffectiveness, and a chronic sense of despair and helplessness. They may idealize the perpetrator, have difficulty in establishing and maintaining trusting relationships, and display a tendency to be revictimized or to victimize others.

Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman, M.D., summed this up by noting that such traumatic events may produce profound and lasting changes in physiologic arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory as well as in the integration of all these functions. Survivors are “disconnected from the present” and continue to react to life experiences as if they were anticipating, experiencing, or responding to the earlier trauma. (Rowan 30)

This paradigm almost entirely matches the kind of borderline personality disorder displayed by Mala’s character in the play. As she was repeatedly abused by her uncle, she has a fascination for older men with whom she enters into casual sexual liaisons to masochistically experience that feeling of being ‘used’ which is exactly how she responds to the original trauma by dramatising her own revictimization. What makes this paradigm all the more obvious is how she tries to end these affairs within a month which again matches the duration of the summer holidays during which she was sexually abused by her uncle. This becomes all the more explicit when she is actually in bed with Deepak as she hallucinates about the spectre of her uncle and agonizingly re-lives the entire sequence of abuse she suffered as a child:

Man: Touch me here.

_Mala withdraws her hand sharply, frightened._

Man: You don’t love your uncle?...
Man: Quickly, before someone sees you. Touch…
Man: There! You feel that? It means I love you. Your uncle loves you.
Mala begins to cry...

Man: Hold your frock up. Up over your face! Shut up!...
Man: Think of your school. Be still and put your arms up, come on. Yeees! What did you learn in school today? Hmmm? What? Tell me...
Man: Good. Good. Keep singing…Again, don’t stop until I stop. See, I love you even though you are so ugly. Keep singing…Nobody will tell you how ugly you are. But you are only good for this…Only for this. See how much I love you. See, now go away. Quickly…
Man: (now more moralistic than before, the furtiveness gone) You like it! You enjoy it. After four years, you have become a whore! At thirteen you are a whore! (Dattani: 2, 42-44)

The combination of emotional extortion, promise of love, command, threat and vilification which conditions this entire sequence, along with the severe abuse, is largely responsible for that personality disorder which Mala faces as her adult behaviour is only a manifestation of the trauma she faced during her formative years. What made this trauma all the more critical in case of Mala was the unresolved repression, born out of her inability to communicate the truth to her mother, or when she did, because of her mother’s refusal to accept and respond meaningfully. Along with the actual trauma of the abuse it is this lack of essential support from her mother which made her all the more agonized and miserable, as evident from the following outburst:

Mala: I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when Uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation when we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You were busy in either the puja room or the kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could tell you why I was crying he would tell me to go to you. You always fed me and – and you never said it but I knew what you were saying to me without words. That I should eat well and go to sleep and the pain would go away. (Dattani: 2, 25-26)

This pent up resentment becomes even more explosive when she later asks:

Mala (To Shanta): Where were you when he locked the door to your bedroom while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one or whatever. That’s how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life. (Dattani: 2, 53)

This is precisely what the Study on Child Abuse identifies as a “conspiracy of silence” and adds that
The shame, secrecy and denial associated with familial sexual violence against children foster a pervasive culture of silence, where children cannot speak about sexual violence in the home, and where adults do not know what to do or say if they suspect someone they know is sexually abusing a child. (SCA 74)

The situation becomes all the more complex and horrifying in case of Dattani’s play where, we eventually learn, that Shanta’s silence is less a product of ignorance or prejudice but is more a consequence of her own secret shame of being subjected to the same trauma during her own childhood and that too at the hands of the same perpetrator.

Shanta: …I – I cannot speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off…My tongue was cut off years ago…(To Deepak) Please save her. I did not save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself?...(To Mala) You say I did not help you? I could not help you. Same as you could not help me. Did you ever see the pain in my eyes. No. Nobody saw anything. Nobody said anything. Not my brothers, not my parents. Only (pointing to the Man) he spoke. Only he said, he saw and he did.

The man backs away looking at Shanta with a warning.

Shanta: I was six Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen…and it wasn’t only the summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years! (Dattani: 2, 54-55)

The domestic space thus becomes a site of generational sexual abuse endured alike by mother and daughter and as opposed to the broken picture of the god, the domestic space becomes inscribed by patriarchal perversion signified by the doll with ragged limbs, with its dress lifted and pinned to its forehead. ‘Home’, no longer a site of serenity and sanctity, becomes a doll’s house where women are not just treated as toys in male hands but as rightless objects of illegal male lust, trapped in prisons of silence, shame and unbearable agony. While discussing one cluster of emotional responses associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Dr. Rowan mentions that

Avoidance and numbing are seen as efforts to avoid thinking, feeling, or talking about the trauma, to avoid activities, people, or places associated with the traumatic event, and to be unable to recall certain aspects of that event. The traumatized individual shows decreased interest in significant activities, feels detached from others, and has a restricted range of affective responses and the sense of a foreshortened future. (Rowan 29)
If analysed in the light of Shanta’s climactic revelations we would see that many of Shanta’s own reactions conform to this particular pattern. This is also evident from her inability to confront a cheating supplier of newspapers and magazines who initially exercises uncanny control over her. His authoritative attitude probably triggered in Shanta memories of her childhood trauma and thus rendered her vulnerable to the conniving supplier whose commands she followed. In neurological terms, we can say that for victims of PTSD the nervous system remains in a “rapid response mode and this hypervigilance may produce sustained fear” leading to responses that are “automatic and beyond conscious control.” (Rowan 34) The intensification of such problems creates a situation of even greater vulnerability and as Dr. Rowan explains “Self-identification as a ‘victim’ or ‘damaged goods’ may result in low self-esteem and create a pattern of self-destructive behaviour” (Rowan 37). This is exactly what happens with Shanta, who, unable to cope with her daughter’s revelations and resentment, not only recounts her own trauma but is so overwhelmed by the experience that she even tries to actually cut off her tongue in a paroxysm of agony preceded by gestures of literal dumbness:

I cannot shout for help, I cannot say words of comfort. I cannot even speak about it. No, I cant. I am dumb. (To the Man, speaking like a mute person making unintelligible sounds.) Uh, eh, oo, oo, aa, aa, aaaaaaaaaa. Gesturing with her hands to say that he’ll not tell anyone while making the sounds.) Aaaa, ooo eee oooo aaeereeee, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaeee! (Dattani: 2, 55)

Her gestures and action represent a dramatic embodiment of that silence of the subalternized woman which pushes her doubly or even triply in the shadow and these shadows subvert those narratives of modernity which lie at the heart of middle-class male narratives of urban progress.

It is in this context that the image of the bonsai in Bravely Fought the Queen becomes crucial as a vivid signifier of women’s distorted and stunted lives:

Alka: You said you make bonsai?
Lalitha: Yes, I’ve got a whole collection.
Alka: How do you make them?
Lalitha: You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and…stunt them. (Dattani: 1, 244)
This is precisely what happens to the women in the play as well. Despite the otherwise realistic nature of Dattani’s plays he also manages to integrate these symbolic details which emphasise the stunted, trimmed, wire-bound nature of the women’s lives and what is even more remarkable is that this process is engineered not just by the men but even by women like Baa who failed to even understand how uncannily similar her own married life was to Dolly and Alka’s mother’s as she too could not become a singer because of the same constraints. Any probability of female solidarity against male brutality thus disappears and Dolly and Alka are left with only each other to hold on to. Even the presence of their brother provides no solace as we learn from Alka how Praful once pushed her face against a lit stove, making her hair burn, just to punish her for the fact that the neighbour’s boy had given her a ride home on his scooter. What makes the situation all the more appalling is that Praful arranged Nitin’s marriage to Alka despite being aware of his homosexuality. Similar forces are also conjoined in On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, where Kiran is first victimized by an abusive husband and then discovers how she was almost about to marry Ed/Prakash, his brother’s former homosexual partner, and that too with his brother’s consent. Dolly too is forced to suffer as her husband Jiten is not just as abusive and domineering as his father, but is also a lecherous man who has no scruples about bringing prostitutes into his office to satisfy his lust. If we consider the microcosmic space of the house to be metaphoric of the macrocosmic nation-space of India in general, then the miseries of women within this domestic space serve to represent the national victimization of women in Indian society, as substantiated by ever escalating statistics of crimes against women, all across the country (Jaisingh, 2005).

However, Dattani’s plays are not just about victimization. In fact as the title of Bravely Fought the Queen itself signifies, the plays also focus on women’s resistance against male atrocities and the simultaneous attempt to evolve their own identities beyond the barriers set up by patriarchal discourse. This attempt itself has a long tradition as exemplified by the allusion to the Rani of Jhansi in the title which refers to Subhadra Kumari Chauhan’s popular poem, ‘Jhansi ki Rani’, celebrating the valour and strength of Rani Laxmibai who successfully subverted the patriarchal discourse by adopting the role of a warrior and leading her army in battle against the British, as opposed to the traditionally sanctioned domesticity even queens were supposed to accept. She is coupled
with the figure of Naina Devi, a famous thumri singer, who also strove against prevalent taboos to pursue her art. Since thumris were sung by tawaifs, it was considered extremely demeaning for a member of the royal family, like Naina Devi, to sing thumris. Yet, she defied all such taboos, with the support of her husband, to pursue her desire of becoming a thumri singer and went on to become a national icon who also represented, like Rani Laxmibai, an admirable example of feminine self-assertion. A similar attempt at self-assertion is also made by Dolly and Alka in the course of the play as they try to unfetter themselves from their husbands’ dictates. Whether it is Alka’s jubilant dance in the rain or Dolly’s final imitation of her spastic daughter’s uncoordinated movements to overwhelm Jiten with guilt – the play is marked by a number of such instances that exemplify both assertion and resistance and offer an affirmative answer to Helen Cixous’ rhetorical questions:

What woman has not stolen? Who has not dreamed, savoured, or done the thing that jams sociality? Who has not dropped a few red herrings, mocked her way around the separating bar, inscribed what makes a difference with her body…and with a transgression screwed up whatever is successive, chain linked, the fence of circumfusion? (Easthope and McGowan 166)

Even the alcoholism of Alka can be seen as a subversive attempt to defy that patriarchy which has subjected her to an emotionally barren existence, marked by a husband whose greed for familial property even prompts him to remark, “Alka can stay here or go away or drink herself to death, I don’t care. It doesn’t make a difference to me” (Dattani: 1, 305). Her seething rage becomes evident from such dialogues as the following:

I know I haven’t been an ideal housewife. And you haven’t been a…well, a competent husband. But who’s complaining? Nobody’s perfect! (Laughs!)…Dolly I feel sorry for you. Having a lech for a husband. A saint for a brother and a lech for a husband…Our saint of a brother used to warn us against men like you. (Points to Jiten.) And what does he do? The saint gives his sister to the sinner and disappears! (Makes a motion of wiping her hands.) Finished. Matter over. Or is it? The saint has another sister who is (slaps her own face) bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner’s brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a coincidence. (Dattani: 1, 300)

Such statements are suffused with a corrosive critique that not only dismantles the sophisticated veneer of the Trivedi household but also helps to expose the sordid realities
that continue to stagnate within the supposedly sacred and sanctified institution of marriage. The same action is also performed by Dolly who confronts her lecherous and abusive husband towards the end of the play to crush his domineering vehemence by awakening his suppressed guilt. In a startling example of Dattani’s brilliant dramaturgy, the whole scene rapidly moves on two planes and the synchronized sequence of dialogues poignantly evoke the whole history of humiliation and violence that led to Daksha’s birth as a spastic child which completely disarms Jiten who is reduced to remorseful sobs, that too in front of Lalitha, his employee’s wife:

Dolly: You should have strangled me then, when Baa told you.
Baa: That was the day I got the letter. Praful was lying.
Dolly: I know! He Lied! But what a price to pay!...
Jiten: Baa provoked me. It was her fault.
Baa: I did not want this. I did not know…
Dolly: You did not have to listen to her! She called me a whore and you believed her?
Baa: I was angry with Praful…
Jiten: I was drunk then. I was angry with Praful!
Dolly: You were angry with Praful and you hit me?
Jiten (almost in tears): But that was fifteen years ago! (Dattani: 1, 310)

It is this process that reaches its culmination as she repeatedly mimics her daughter’s uncoordinated movements in a frantic mood of agony and rage and Michael Walling describes this moment of sublime theatrical intensity in the following terms:

…when Dolly reveals the fact that her child was seriously disabled at birth by Jiten’s violence, she begins to dance as Daksha would dance – disjointedly, wildly, with ever increasing frenzy, until at last she breaks down in a gut-wrenching grief. Every night as I watched this extraordinary moment, I was moved by its deep theatrical purity. (qtd. in Dattani: 1, 230)

This extraordinary moment is a fusion of agony and anger, anguish and assertion that captures the essence of the female characters’ predicament through a performance that literally drives away a guilt-ridden Jiten who cannot even dare to remain in the presence of his wife who almost confronts him like the legendary queen. The performance offers a potent illustration of what Cixous defines in the following terms:

…she vitally defends the ‘logic’ of her discourse with her body. She inscribes what she is saying because she does not deny unconscious drives the unmanageable part they play in speech…May
she get out of the booby-trapped silence! And not have the margin or the harem foisted on her as her domain. (Easthope and McGowan 163)

The same desire to defy the silence of harem or margins also operates in the play *Thirty Days of September* where Mala’s confrontation of her uncle and his eventual death finally enables her to come to terms with her reality and thus paves the path for a comparatively improved personal future. What is important to note here is that for victims of sexual abuse, simply the cessation of abuse itself is never enough. While that condition is indeed of paramount significance, there is also an important struggle against memories and entrenched psychological disorders which must be incessantly carried out. It is this struggle which is embodied on stage as Mala literally hits out at the hallucinatory image of her uncle in a violent attempt to undo the violence she was subjected to:

_Mala hits out at him with her fist. The Man doesn’t flinch._

Man: Don’t cry.
Mala: (hitting him hard) Aaah!
Man: I said, don’t cry!

_Mala continues to hit at him each time with more anger as the Man speaks, unaffected by blows._

Man: This is our secret!...Ready for a real birthday present?...What did you learn in school? Come on sing it. Sing!

_Mala grabs him by the throat and tries to strangle him, heaving with the effort._

Man: Thirty days has September. April, June and November. February has twenty-eight. All the rest have thirty-one! Once again. Keep on singing! Stop only when I stop.
Mala: (one last violent shove) You are dead! You deserve to be dead! Die! (Dattani: 2, 57)

However, the task of holding a mirror up to nature entails an exploration of complexities at the cost of simple solutions. While Mala does indeed manage to shake off her personal demons and dreams of a happy life of conjugal togetherness with Deepak, one fact which makes such a dream more credible is her own financial independence – a fact that other female characters of Dattani’s plays do not always share. Therefore, while on the one hand Dolly’s frenzied dance is as much a performance of startling boldness as perhaps was Nora’s banging of the door, on the other hand, the financial dependence of the women on their husbands also empties their rebellious gesture of any substantial
impact as despite all their anger, frustration and agonies, they still have to find refuge within their husbands’ homes, though perhaps with different attitudes and conditions. Therefore their only source of comfort and solace remains that imaginary space off-stage where they are able to surrender themselves to the idealized lover-figure of Kanhaiya which leads them into an imagined world of love, fulfillment and dignity which remains elusive in their real lives. Initially introduced as the substitute cook, the figure of Kanhaiya operates as a fictive embodiment of the unfulfilled longings of the two women as it reworks the religious trope of Krishna fulfilling the yearnings of the Gopis who themselves suffered from marital discontent. In fact, the whole Radha-Krishna affair operates, according to the myths, as an extra-marital affair and Dattani reworks this traditional myth to offer a trenchant critique of the distressing marital lives many women are forced to endure within the patriarchal structures where female desires are rarely recognized. And it is this failure that necessitates the sisters’ sensuous imaginings:

The thumri plays. And it ends. Another one plays. I forget when that ends and a new one begins!
All I’m aware of are two powerful black arms around me and the beautiful sound of the heartbeat of a warm gentle soul. The voice of Naina Devi comes back. It is the most beautiful song I’ve heard in my life. (Dattani: 1, 262)

It is through this wonderful fusion of Naina Devi’s thumri and the idealized love embodied in the imaginary figure of Kanhaiya that Dattani foregrounds the possibility of an alternative space beyond the constraints and atrocities unleashed by patriarchy where women will not only find fulfilment but would be able to independently fashion their identities on the basis of their own desires. It is a space where girls like Tara and Daksha may shine with all their vibrancy, where Hardika and Baa may get to sing all the songs they want and where women like Dolly and Alka may finally find that loving togetherness that they yearn for.

However, Dattani is not so naïve as to succumb to, what Audre Lorde calls “a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (Lorde 631). Like all good authors he too is keenly aware of the fact that all our essentialised categories are actually fractured by undeniable considerations of class, caste, creed etc which repeatedly thwart all generalizing attempts. Even though we may
admire the resistance put up by Dolly and Alka and the way they are able to imagine an alternative feminist space, we still must remain aware of the limitations of their own attitudes as exemplified by the beggar women who roams outside their houses. Not only is she later crushed repeatedly by a hysterical Jiten trying to exorcise his guilt, but even the women themselves do not bother to show any sympathy to her. Not only does Dolly call her a “wretched woman” (Dattani: 1, 250) but they also remain completely indifferent to her plight as she remains asleep outside in rain:

Alka: The old woman is outside. She’d fast asleep! Even in the rain. All she has is that tarpaulin.
Lalitha: She’ll be dry. It’s waterproof.
Alka: Good for her that she found it. (Dattani: 1, 292-93)

Such comments clearly reveal the gross insensitivity of these women to the plight of the beggar-woman who not just represents that other India which lies beyond their urban, upwardly mobile, middle-class milieu, but also the faultlines that lie in the path of any imagined feminist utopia which must reckon with these issues to arrive at a desired destiny. The fact is that even though Dolly and Alka do occupy a subaltern position with respect to their husbands, the silenced beggar woman occupies an even more subalternized position with respect to them. Dattani’s sympathy for the sisters does not obscure this fact and only enriches his nuanced portrayal of reality which keeps reminding us, again in the words of Lorde, that “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressor’s tactics, the oppressor’s relationships” (Lorde 636).

Dattani’s plays thus offer us a complex representation of the manifold subalternization that women have continued to face in post-independence India and at the same time offer us visions of an alternative world that may yet be possible. His sensitivity as an author seems to display what Virginia Woolf, taking a cue from Coleridge, called a “manwomanly mind” (Woolf, chapter 6) as his representations of women are always able to transcend those patriarchal stereotypes that often crowd the literary scene while stressing the material basis of their subalterneity. However, a playwright can only create a consciousness which may go on to illuminate other minds in order to bring about the
necessary material changes. Dattani’s plays certainly succeed in creating such a consciousness and one can only hope for more such plays that would go on to fulfil an intellectual’s responsibility to society.

Works Cited


_____.


