Chapter-5

Relationships Among Queers

Current research indicates that our sexual orientation, the ‘imprinting’ that dictates whether we are sexually and affectionately attracted to men, to women, or to both sexes is probably set by the age of 5 or 6. In the ‘imprinting theory’ of John Money, our sexual orientation is irreversibly set once and for all in early childhood, though it may take an individual many years to recognize and accept his or her sexual orientation.¹

Some people feel that their gender is the opposite of their biological sex and are referred to as being transgendered. They may suffer great psychological stress and try to live in a body that is alien to their gender-identity. Because society places much importance on people conforming to the norms regarding gender-roles, “…many transgendered struggle with the realization that they do not fit psychologically with the way their bodies appear physically.”²

Such queer feelings and behaviour have been described in derogatory terms for most of the 20th century. Sociologists, biologists and psychologists have been attempting to determine the origin of deviant sexuality pertaining to gays, lesbians, transgendered and homosexuals.

Rigveda, one of the four sacred texts of Hinduism, says, “Vikruti Evam Prakriti,”³ meaning that what seems unnatural is natural. It is connected to the recognition of homosexual/transsexual dimensions of human sexuality. Thus, the texts of the Hindus refer to homosexual practices, but only as something to be regulated. Homosexuality, as a part of sexual practice, was not always well accepted in Hinduism. Other religions, too, treat such sexual orientations with disapprobation. For example, “…Jewish and Christian churches have also considered this aspect of human sexuality to be abnormal and immoral.”⁴ Homosexuality in Islam is considered a sinful and perverted deviation from the norm. In the Quran verse 7:80-81, it is written that “Do ye commit lewdness such as
no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds."⁵

Thus, all major religions, in general, reject non-procreative sex, and have, in particular, censured homosexual relationships. These religions have historically played a very vital role in determining the socio-cultural behaviour of different societies. Religious myths may be deemed fictitious or erroneous elsewhere, but within the society which created these myths, they are believed to be literally true. Cultures regard myths as containing psychological or archetypal truths. The myths and precepts from religious texts have often been used to explain and validate the social institutions of a particular culture, as well as to educate its members, who include same-sex lovers to correct their attitude and gender constructions.

Psychiatric theories of homosexuality have emphasized that homosexuality is a regression to the earliest stage of development, and that most families of homosexuals are characterized by an overprotective mother and an absent father. It may be an “…expression of non-sexual problems such as fear of adult responsibility or may be triggered by various experiences with members of one’s own sex at an early age that prove to be very satisfying.”⁶

Besides sociologists and psychologists, biologists too have been deeply interested in analyzing the causes of homosexuality. Simon Levay, a biologist, has suggested that homosexuality may be related to brain-functioning, as part of the hypothalamus in homosexual men is about a quarter half the size it is in heterosexual men. He, therefore, concluded that “…gay people have smaller brains than those who are straight.”⁷

Throughout history, people have tried brain surgery, shock treatments and currently ‘conversion therapy’ to change their sexual orientation. It is also “…argued that people who tried to change others’ sexual orientation through the use of conversion therapy are ‘misguided’ and may even harm gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people through psychological stress and pressure to be someone they are not.”⁸
In debating sexual orientation, much still remains illusive to our understanding and knowledge. Charles Darwin seems to be very much to the point when he asserts, “…we do not even in the least know the final cause of sexuality. The whole subject is hidden in darkness.” But this very fact is the source of interest and explorations for scientists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and even men of literature.

Artists since ages have dealt with this theme in very subtle, nuanced and probing manners laying bare not only its varied forms and expressions but also its multiple causes and consequences. For example, Christopher Marlowe’s Edward II (1594) is one of the most radical explorations of homosexual love. It is a great tragedy of a man torn between his hereditary role as a king and his love for another man. Ben Jonson, too, depicting the folly of inordinate desires, deals with this theme in Sejanus (1603) in which the protagonist is accused of homosexual prostitution. The end of this play reflects the fate of sodomites under English law, highlighting the homophobia prevailing during that period. The great poet and playwright, William Shakespeare, in many of his sonnets celebrates the pole star of intense love between the poet speaker and his male friend. His play, Troilus and Cressida (1602), is particularly notable for the explicit sexual relationship between Achilles and Petroclus.

In modern literature, this theme has received a more extensive, frank and free treatment at the hands of such writers as Dorothy Miller Richardson (1873-1956) and Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978). Dawn’s Left Hand by D.M. Richardson is one of the most notable lesbian writings of that period. In Dawn’s Left Hand, we can see intense female friendship and homoerotic passion between the novel’s heroine, Miriam, and her socialist friend, Amabel. Warner, in her novel, Mr. Fortune’s Maggot, which appeared in 1927, shows a missionary, Mr. Timothy Fortune, in the south Pacific who loses his religion because of an erotic attachment to Lueli, a male islander.

Indian writers, too, have dealt with this theme of homosexuality at length in a highly analytical and interesting manner in their works. Ismat Chughtai’s short story, “The Quilt,” published in 1942, was the subject of an obscenity trial in the 1940s, for her delicate evocation of relationship between two women. From the late 1980s
onward, openly gay and bisexual writers like Suniti Namjoshi, Firdaus Kanaga, Hanif Kureishi and R. Raj Rao drew world-wide attention. Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) deals with the gay romance between Omar, a young British-born Pakistani, and Johnny, a working-class Englishman. Later in 2001, *A Friend’s Story* by Vijay Tendulkar was considered a revolutionary writing because it had a lesbian protagonist, Mitra, and the whole story is about her struggle to cope with her sexual orientation and in the end she commits suicide out of despair. Recently, the famous LGBT writer and activist, R. Raj Rao, published his novel, *The Boyfriend*, in which the invisible gay culture in Mumbai is highlighted. This book somehow familiarizes the reader with the closets and gays. The story can be treated as a love story between Yudi who is a Brahmin by caste and Millind, a Dalit boy.

All this indicates that Indian writers – novelists and dramatists both – have ventured into territories often forbidden by custodians of conventional morality. Mahesh Dattani is one of the playwrights who exemplify this tendency of exploring frankly the hitherto tabooed issues and concerns of human relationships. It appears that he is drawn to probe deep into the life and experiences of queers in Indian society, revealing their desires and fears, tensions and conflicts, struggles and tribulations from inside out. His plays depict the plight of the gay people living in a homophobic environment which forces them to live a spurious life and conceal their sexuality for fear of hostile reactions and consequences. He provides insight into a rule-based society where people have been brought up with the feeling that homosexuality is wrong, thereby causing in the transgender strong feelings of shame and self-loathing leading to low self-esteem. Furthermore, his plays show that suppressing one’s sexuality involves denial of an important part of one’s identity and that it can have serious impact on one’s life and relationships. Dattani’s plays aim at tearing the veneer of such filthy realities and expose the gruesome truth which lies concealed in a hypocritical Indian society. Sangeeta Das remarks: “…Mahesh Dattani makes himself conspicuous by picking up such sensational issues of the society which we know and read now and then but refuse to acknowledge their existence amidst us.” His plays become the outcry of the queers, sexual minorities such as gays and hijras, the marginalized members of society, the excluded and subalterns, who in their
futile efforts to be connected with society are reduced to pathetic creatures with their
guilt-ridden, tortured psyche and opposing socio-ethical background. John McRae in
his note on the play On a Muggy Night in Mumbai expresses similar ideas: “It is not
simply the first play in Indian Theatre to handle openly gay-themes of love,
partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of
behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victims to the expectations society
creates” (p. 45).

The play can be studied and examined in the light of these lines while focusing
mainly on the theme of relationship among queers. In this play, we meet a group of
gays belonging to the urban society who assemble in the flat of Kamlesh, a fashion
designer, who throws a party to them to announce the engagement of his dear sister,
Kiran. They freely discuss the problems here and while they talk, their pains, turmoil
and travails are unfolded. The atmosphere inside the flat and outside is muggy and
full of suffocation. The noise outside, the music and the din indicate lack of peace
symbolic of their inner turmoil. The gays are forced to meet in darkness of a closed
area. They are unable to cope with their situation in open society where they are a butt
of laughter and ridicule.

The play opens with a scene showing Kamlesh having sex with the middle-
aged guard whom he pays for it. This behaviour may shock the traditional sensibility
but in the modern context, the situation of Kamlesh needs to be explored more
liberally and sympathetically. Dattani, in this play, has tried to force the audience to
give their thinking a new approach.

Kamlesh’s friends start gathering for the party and the readers witness his
intense and passionate desire for Prakash, his homosexual partner, who has become an
obsession for him. Kamlesh is in utter pain as Prakash has betrayed him and, after
staying with Kamlesh for sometime, has deserted him. Prakash believe that he can’t
be happy with his state and starts nurturing a guilt complex. To get rid of the whole
unusual situation and his obsession with Kamlesh, he plans to marry Kiran who is
none other than Kamlesh’s sister. Kamlesh feels totally broken at his betrayal and is
doubly hurt with the behaviour of Prakash (who has changed himself to Ed):
I would have understood it if he had left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship. It would have worked between us, but he was ashamed. I was very angry. I left my parents and my sister to come here, all because of him…. (p. 68-69)

He feels so much tortured and unhappy at his own being gay that his agony bursts out: “…for the first time in my life I wished I wasn’t a gay” (p. 69). To come out of his loneliness, fears and anxiety, he also seeks the help of a psychiatrist but it proves futile: “I tried explaining to him that I needed his help to overcome my anxiety and fears, not to be something I am not. Could he help me cope with my loneliness and fear the same way he would help a heterosexual cope with his?” (p. 69). Kamlesh’s words and the doctor’s attitude to his problem is a testimony to the viewpoint that a doctor or society never accepts homosexuality as natural. Kamlesh’s predicament is that he cannot resist his sexual orientation as it is deeply rooted in his body and psyche.

After having been ditched and deserted by Prakash, Kamlesh starts living with Sharad who is also a gay, but of a different kind – daring, enthusiastic and flaunting. His relations with Kamlesh are very complex. He is angered at Kamlesh’s love for Prakash even after being deserted by him. He also feels humiliated that while living with him, Prakash occupies a large space in Kamlesh’s mind. He wants Kamlesh to come out of his obsessions and lies: “Oh spare the lies! You could not love anyone because you are still in love with Prakash” (p. 56).

It is a complex love situation as Sharad, in his love and commitment to Kamlesh, wants the same intensity and passion from him, while Kamlesh in his helplessness finds himself unable to come out of his obsession for Prakash. Kamlesh acknowledges the fact that he has hurt Sharad: “…I did cruel thing by loving Sharad to forget Prakash. I have not succeeded. And I have hurt someone as wonderful as Sharad. I made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that I was trying to get over” (p. 68).

Sharad and other friends make efforts to bring Kamlesh out of his loneliness. They even burn his photos with Prakash, but he manages to keep one that is most reflective of their intimacy: “…cheek to cheek, pelvis to pelvis, Naked” (p. 72). The
picture brings denouement in the end when Kamlesh’s sister sees it. She is almost frozen, disillusioned and broken: “I don’t…know what to do …I …I …have lost the two people whom I love” (p. 106).

In the group of gays, Ed is a victim of his own duality of character and uncertainties. It is he who brings havoc in Kamlesh’s and Kiran’s lives. His relations with Kamlesh cannot continue because of his own weakness. He is a gay but has no courage to accept it. After deserting Kamlesh and taking help from the priest and the psychiatrist, Ed thinks himself to be balanced enough to marry Kiran. But he cannot win over his attraction for Kamlesh. Even when involved with Kiran and planning to marry her, he confides in Kamlesh his inner desire to continue his sexual relations with him: “Once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any…suspicion” (p. 22).

He even goes to the extent of regarding his marriage as a convenient agreement to facilitate his homosexual desires: “I’ll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me” (p. 23). The hypocrisy of Ed and the psycho-pathetic condition of Kamlesh and their miseries force the reader to explore the causes of their unhappy state. The two human beings are greatly in love with each other. In no way do they harm or threaten society, but are forced to lead a life of guilt and self-torture. Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* opines that it is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime – a cruelty. The burden of social heterosexual hegemony is so much that the gays like Kamlesh and Ed become neurotic. Kamlesh is nervous, full of broken sentences, self-pitying and Ed becomes a victim of guilt, duality and hypocrisy. The remarks of Bijay Kumar Das are significant in this context: “There is a binary opposition between their nature and the culture of their society. This dichotomy between nature and culture obstructs their love and poisons their minds.”

The play emerges as an outcry of these people who are suffering for something which is innate to their nature and therefore to resist or change their sexual orientation is not in their control. It underlines the necessity of trying to understand sympathetically the predicament of the class of the queers. In the play, there is “…a passionately spun but essentially sane and rational argument that no human being
should suffer from inhuman social attitudes, just because the nature of his sexuality is
different from that of the majority of mankind.”

The homosexuals are in constant fear of social rejection. Even the guard, when he
comes with the photo of Kamlesh and Prakash in a passionate pose, which he got
from the people outside, warns Kamlesh: “Society waalo ko sab kal complaint karne
wale hain! …Abhi aap logo ka kya hoga? Aap yeh sab khullam khulla kyo karte
hain?” (p. 105).

The fear of ostracism makes the homosexuals closeted personalities. That is
why, more clever friends like Ranjit and Bunny have to hide their sexuality from
people. Ranjit finds India a wretched country where he cannot live peacefully, as a
result of which he tends to visit Europe frequently where he has been together with
his English lover for a long time. Ranjit’s choice to live in England away from India
suggests difference between the two cultures. People in the West appear to be more
liberal and free regarding their sexual lives.

But in a society like the one in India, people like Bunny have to adopt
camouflage in order to escape the possibilities of social censure and rejection. He is a
T.V. actor and also a gay, but married happily and enjoying a reputation in society
because of his abilities to cover-up his transgression. He is more at peace and
balanced while wearing the façade of a normal straight man. He knows the truth that
he cannot accept those people in public whom he loves in private:

BUNNY. …I deny them in public but I want their love in private. I have never
told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now – I am a gay
man. Everyone believes me to be a model, middle-class man. I was chosen
in the part in serial because I fit into common perceptions of what a family
ought to look like. I believed in it myself. I lied – to myself first. And I
continue to lie to millions. (p. 103)

Thus, Bunny can express his real self only to his friends who are like him. He
opens his heart to them as to how he has denied his ‘self’ to himself and to everyone.
The dilemma of Bunny and his ilk can be summed up in Nadeem’s remarks: “Indian
gays are Indian first and gay second. We value and respect the manners and mores of
our families, our communities, and our various religious heritages. As a result most gays in India remain, in Western terms, deeply closeted.\(^{20}\)

That is why, they are not able to develop fulfilling relationships among themselves. Their pursuit of happiness leads them to confusion and they can not reach any solution till the end. Ed asks in despair: “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?” (p. 111). His friend, Kamlesh, has no answers to his existential question: “I don’t know” (p. 111) is his curt reply.

Sharad, who has lived with Kamlesh as his homosexual partner, is also lost in tumultuous zones of this muggy life of unstable relationships. His search for identity continues: “I ask for myself what I have got and what I am and what I am not” (p. 111).

Thus it is evident that the relations of homosexuals with one another fail to provide them any meaning in life. They remain doomed to be lonely and dissatisfied with their lives till the end. The play suggests that the fault lies with society “…which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity” (p. 46).

Another play by Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, also depicts the plight and woes of a homosexual, Nitin Trivedi. But unlike the bunch of gays in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, who live a closeted life, he has been placed in a joint family. Dattani has dealt with this theme of homosexuality in this play throwing a searching light on the socio-psychological causes which contribute to one’s sexual preferences. Nitin’s sexuality can be studied against the background of his past. He is a victim of abusive childhood, son of a violent father and a possessive mother. His mother, Baa, emotionally and physically abused by her cruel husband, reactionally alienates her son from him. She even instigates Nitin to hate his father:

\[
\text{BAA. Do you like your father?} \\
\text{NITIN (voice changes to a child’s). Yes, Baa. I like him.} \\
\text{BAA. Go away! You are not my son! You are bad, like him! (Again, as if to a child.) Nitin! You don’t like your father, no? He’s not nice!} \\
\text{NITIN (with a heavy stutter). Nnn-nnn-nnn-no, Baa.}
\]
BAA. Good! You are my wonderful baby! You are my prince! (Again, as if to a child.) Nitin. You hate your father. Tell me.
NITIN (in a normal voice). Yes! I hate him! (p. 302)

Baa makes her son an instrument in taking revenge on her husband. This reckless behaviour of a broken mother bleaks the future of her child. He can never come out of the dark image of his father and becomes a victim of weakness, inner insecurities and homosexuality which drive him into the arms of men, whom he tends to see as father-figures – men like Praful and the autorickshaw driver with black, powerful arms.

In this play also, we find that though Nitin maintains homosexual relations with Praful but remains bereft of any happiness. He is rather abused badly by his homosexual partner, Praful, who is his wife’s brother. Nitin admits: “…Oh! But how ashamed he made me feel after! He made me cry each time! That was a game he played! And I – I was caught in… he told me to get married (you)…” (p. 314).

Praful enters into homosexual relations with Nitin and forces him to marry his sister, Alka. Nitin marries Alka, but he is not able to satisfy her sexual needs. His life remains unconsummated, leaving his wife barren and sexually starved. Nitin feels that he has been abused and tricked by Praful. He begs his mother: “…don’t let him ruin my life! …get him out of my life” (p. 305).

Thus, Nitin’s relations with his homosexual partner result in terrible anguish and suffering. Nitin is to be condemned not because of his homosexuality, but because of his lack of courage, dishonesty and cowardice, failing to come out in open with his sexual preferences. His dishonesty destroys Alka’s life whose childlessness and alcoholism are direct results of her husband’s sexual propensity. His hypocrisy not only ruins the life of his wife but also mars his own happiness, leaving him dissatisfied.

This “dissatisfaction is not only reflective of society’s disapproval, it is also based on an awareness of basic lack of fulfillment….” Asha Kuthari Choudhary’s remarks are also pertinent in this context. She observes, “Interestingly gay literature seems to have been beleaguered by unhappy endings. Homosexuality invariably
moves towards death, isolation or a sham heterosexual marriage.” This reminds one of Tennessee Williams’ play, *A Street Car Named Desire,* wherein Blanche’s husband commits suicide, unhappy and ashamed of his homosexuality.

The last confessional speech of Nitin to his drunken and huddled wife exposes his inner reality when he lays bare his conscience: “…He tricked you too, didn’t he? How can you love your brother … Don’t answer, just asleep…. And I would go back to Praful’s room…. I, I am sorry. It was not my fault. Don’t wake up. Stay drunk. You mustn’t watch…” (p. 315). The confession of Nitin evokes a great sympathy for his helplessness, dilemma and a life of self-denial.

In this way, the relations between Nitin and Praful are abusive and treacherous, as Praful cheats Nitin and blackmails him for his sexual proclivities. Thus, the homosexuals lead a suffocated life and cannot openly admit their true selves; and in these plays, we find that their predicament can be traced to their subterfuge.

While *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* are the plays highly serious in tone, *Do the Needful* is a comic play where gay relationship has been dealt with differently. Many issues related to the relevance, validity and sanctity of the institution of marriage have been raised in the modern context. Sally Avens, a producer and director in B.B.C., in her note on the play, says: “Like all the best love stories, the hero and the heroine end up in getting married but the road to marital bliss is full of unexpected twists and turns” (p. 115).

The denouement of the play is startling, giving certain messages about marriage and adjustments in marital life. The ingenuity of Lata and Alpesh is both amusing and astonishing to the reader. It shocks the traditional sensibility which holds marriages in great esteem. The play shows that after getting married, Alpesh goes to his gay partner, Trilok, and Lata, the wife, goes to her lover, Salim.

The play highlights how a gay man is forced to live a life alien to his nature by the tremendous hegemony of mainstream patriarchal society. Alpesh’s parents are desperate to see him married because marriage will confer on him a social identity
and the gay will pass for a ‘straight’. Lata’s parents are also considering for a hasty marriage as she has brought ignominy to her family by indulging in an affair with a Muslim terrorist, Salim. While planning to run away from her home to Salim, Lata comes to know that Alpesh is a homosexual, as she hears the groaning sounds from the room where Alpesh is engaged with the Mali in sodomy. This knowledge about her would-be husband encourages Lata to marry him because she would be free to continue her relations with Salim while allowing Alpesh to pursue his gay-ways. They follow the Mantra: “teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup…” (p. 155). This line is highly reflective as it makes clear that homosexuality and sex outside marriage, tabooed in Indian society, can be exercised in silence and private only. They are seen as matters of shame, hush-hush affairs, not accepted by traditional Indian people in general.

Alpesh suffers a lot due to his sexual orientation. He is never allowed to speak about himself in the presence of his parents. The play also highlights the honesty and frankness of Alpesh and juxtaposes them with the hypocrisy of their parents, who decide to do the needful desperately to find a suitable way to get rid of their subversive children. The burden of patriarchal hegemony is so much that Alpesh feels nervous all the time. His thought represents his true self. He hates all the lies told by his parents to the Gowdas while arranging his marriage – the lies of which he has to become a part. Alpesh’s lack of courage doesn’t allow him to come out openly about his sexual orientation before his family members. This only substantiates the argument of Arpa Ghosh when she observes, “Furtive homosexuality is a typical Indian problem that is brought up repeatedly by Dattani for examination in the current scenario of Indian family life.”

Patriarchal discourse stifles Alpesh’s authentic self-expression and he leads a life full of lies against his wishes: “…I hate lying and liars. I have to do it so often. I feel everytime I speak, I am lying…” (p. 136). He has been divorced earlier by his first wife due to his homosexuality. So he feels quite indifferent and disinterested to get involved in a marriage once again. But his parents are unmovd and they are bent on settling the matrimonial alliance. His obsession with his homosexual partner, Trilok, is so intense that even in Lata’s company he remains lost in fantasies about him: “Love me Trilok! Yes! Kiss me. Oh! Oh! Oh! Ooooh!” (p. 143).
When Lata discloses her future plans regarding their married life, Alpesh feels free to live a life according to his own wishes and, behind the facade of marriage, the incorrigible gay seeks to construct an acceptable identity for himself in society, which thus compels him to be a hypocrite. As the play is a comedy, the choices made by Alpesh and Lata bring them a sense of liberation, not guilt.

Thus, the study of relationships between/among the homosexuals reveals that they do not feel like liberated men and are forced to live a life of sham within the norms of heterosexual society. They feel, realize and express the desire to lead a normal life like others but are compelled to hide their reality and lead a secluded life in their claustrophobic spaces. They seem to be making an appeal to society to embrace the diversity of different sexualities in the changing scenario: “Humans originally put a taboo on homosexuality because they needed every bit of energy to produce and raise children – survival of the species was a priority. With over population and technological change, that taboo is absurd and continues only to exploit us and enslave us.”

Most homosexuals are unhappy and suffering people. They suffer from a deep sense of dissatisfaction. It is also seen that this dissatisfaction is not only reflective of social disapproval, but is based on an acute awareness of the gays that they are transgressing social customs by entering into anti-normative activities. For this reason, they become over-sensitive to antagonistic situations under which they accept the facade of relationships. All these pressures create discord between homosexual partners and lessen the possibility of harmonious and successful relationships.

Abnormal sexual orientation, seen as contrary to the normative expectation, receives strong disapproval from society. This also happens in the case of non-normative marginalized section of society – the eunuchs – popularly called ‘hijras’. The term, ‘hijra’, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning neither male nor female. In Indian society, the word ‘hijra’ itself has connotation of someone unnatural, unethical and obnoxious. The widespread unwillingness of the society to allow them to mix with people prohibits the hijras to express their concerns and desire for human relationships. This forces them to survive
in isolation. A thick and impenetrable wall of incomprehensible myths has been raised around them.

Uma Rao, the researcher in sociology in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, explains the term hijra by going to the origin of the myth in *The Ramayana*. The legend has it that Lord Rama was going to cross the river to go in exile. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He asked them to go back: “Men and women turn back.” His followers sacrificed their identity and followed Rama to exile. So, they were blessed by Rama.

Trans-sexuals are present all over the world. They are either born as hermaphrodites, a deviation caused by mal-development of genitals or they get themselves castrated and acquire the stigma of asexuality and lead a life identical to that of deviant individuals.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Mahesh Dattani provides valuable insights into the life of the hijras. The play is a poignant portrayal of the travails of Indian eunuchs. Representing the hijras in the play adds to the large spectrum of queer characters created by Dattani and his interests in non-normative marginalized people in society. Generally, people don’t discuss about them as they find them disgusting and scary.

The play reveals their pathetic conditions caused by their rejection by society which hardly allows them to develop bonds of relationships. But like other human beings, hijras too are social beings and have irresistible yearnings for various types of relationships. The playwright investigates the kind of bonding they too develop amongst themselves and thus sheds light on their essential human self.

Uma Rao, the central character in the play, and the wife of the Superintendent of Police, Suresh Rao, is doing her doctoral research on ‘Class and Gender-related violence.’ Therefore, she wants to meet some hijras to collect information about their community. She meets Anarkali in jail who has been implicated falsely by the police in Kamla murder case. Kamla, a beautiful eunuch, is brutally murdered at the behest of a powerful and wealthy minister, Mr. Sharma, whose son secretly married Kamla.
Anarkali knows the reality of the murder, but she is afraid of telling the truth as she knows that “They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don’t tell the truth, I will die in jail” (p. 14). She also knows that the society which nurtures hatred for her community is never concerned about “one hijra less in the world…” (p. 35).

Suresh and his subordinate, Munswamy, with other inmates of the jail treat Anarkali in an inhuman manner. She is kept with male prisoners who beat and ridicule her. It reflects the contempt and misconceptions of Indian society which mainly recognizes two sexes – male and female – without considering the concept of the third sex. Even the guardians of law and public servants become the perpetrators of crime against the hijras and fail to place them in a recognized sexual category. This contributes to their seclusion in society. Dattani has drawn attention to this issue and “…he portrays them sympathetically hoping for their inclusion in society.”

Uma Rao appears to be the mouthpiece of the playwright and fights to establish the identity of the eunuchs and unveils the murder-mystery. She coaxes and cajoles Anarkali to bring the truth out. It is Uma’s sincere kindness and tender love for the innocent victim, Anarkali, which wins her trust and she tells Uma that she has not killed Kamla and that in reality she was her sister.

Uma acknowledges the bonds of humanity with the eunuchs and thus appears to be at the higher level of consciousness than other characters in the play. Her kindness moves Anarkali, as the latter is not used to a kind behaviour: “Oh! You are only being kind. Don’t hurt my head” (p. 13). Uma reaches the area where the head hijra, Champa, lives. Amidst the traffic, Uma’s voice is heard: “The invisible minority. Behind Russel Market, everyone knew where to find them, although I couldn’t see any hijras on the streets. They only come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand clap” (pp. 21-22).

They inhabit tiny pockets of cities in India, areas that are generally brushed aside to fringes, the margins of society. They have formulated a distinctive identity adopting peculiar ways they speak, walk, dance or clap. These strong identity-marks, assumed by them, set them apart from mainstream people. They are forced to live in a
separate world, on the distant fringes of the society, away from society but they share strong loving relationships amongst themselves. Sexual difference, abnormality or queerness is not a barrier in the bond of human relationships amongst these people. The hijras are denied the support of their biological families, who derive them away when their non-conformity with socially accepted sexual behavioural rules becomes embarrassingly apparent. Victims of social ostracism, they develop their own organizational set up and develop deep emotional ties amongst themselves. Becker’s remarks are significant in this context. According to him, “It gives them a sense of common fate, of being in the same boat. From a sense of common fate, from having to face same problems, grows a deviant sub-culture: a set of perspectives and understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it, and a set of routine activities based on those perspectives.”

They are mothers, sisters and friends to one another. Champa’s love for Anarkali and Kamla is no less than that of a mother. She cares and looks after them in a very loving manner. She stops Kamla from going to the outside world as she knows that it is hostile to them and therefore she can not be happy there. She even does not accept the money offered by Uma when the latter accuses her of murdering Kamla: “She was my only daughter! Take your money and get out of my house! Go! ...You don’t know how much we all loved her” (p. 28). It is clear from the dialogue that the eunuchs too share a strong bond of relationship among themselves. Smita Sahay observes, “As outcasts, who have suffered the ultimate rejection at the hands of their families, eunuchs are united in that they share a common destiny of misfortune.”

Through the characters of Champa and Anarkali, the play also throws light on the Guru-Chela tradition of the hijra community. Chelas play the role of earning members of the community and the guru takes care of them as his children. Once the guru becomes older, he is replaced by the main chela. For a hijra, who has left all his/her biological relations behind, this structure is emotionally satisfying as it provides a sense of family and belongingness. But it seems that this community is still groping in the dark for any ray of hope for a better or satisfying future. The contemporary relevance of this issue dealt with by Dattani is underlined by a recent incident of the tragic deaths of over a dozen eunuchs at a ceremony in East Delhi,
proving that they are still denied any relationship social or legal. A leading newspaper reported, “Having announced Rs. 2 Lakh as compensation for relatives of the deceased, the Delhi government suddenly discovered that law does not recognize the eunuchs’ unique family structure based on a guru-chela relationship.”

Thus, in the play, by bringing the plight of the hijras to the centre-stage, the playwright seems to draw attention to the voice of the community “…perceived as the lowest of the low” (p. 16), seeking to signal the dawning of a new social and legal awareness.

The study of the relationship between and amongst queers underlines that sexual minorities continue to suffer various forms of physical and mental abuse, prejudice and discrimination at the hands of state and society. The harrowing plight of this marginalized section remains unknown to the larger normative society which remains, by and large, not only indifferent but even unrelentingly hostile to them. What is implied here also is “that it is not merely the biological state of an individual which makes him different from others but there is also the public response to such a state” which determines his or her status in society.
Notes


26 Bijay Kumar Das, *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays*, p.90.


