CHAPTER - V

SUMMING UP

This chapter is an attempt to present a holistic analysis of the five plays discussed in the earlier chapters and summarize the salient features of the present study. This thesis has critiqued the psycho-sexual dimensions in select plays of Mahesh Dattani using the theoretical framework provided by queer theory.

Drama is a much-ignored genre in the domain of Indian writing in English. Indian English drama is a relatively recent phenomenon and a gradually developing literary form. Indian English drama dates back to 1831 when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote the first Indian English play *The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*. But Indian English drama has never reached the high status of the other genres mainly because the English language is not the natural and authentic medium of communication in India. Fortunately in the last twenty five years Indian English drama has witnessed a steady growth and this augurs well for its future.

Dattani is one of the most interesting and important playwrights writing in India today and his work demonstrate a wide range of styles and philosophies, and discuss socially relevant themes and issues. Fringe issues that remain latent and suppressed occupy the centre stage of his plays. His characters are usually contemporary urban Indians and he usually takes the complex dynamics of the urban family as his subject.
“Night Queen" is a play about two homosexual characters who meet up for a “one night stand” of sorts. In the middle of the play, it is revealed that their lives criss cross at a volatile and unexpected point. Homosexuals are usually trapped in a heterosexual matrix where they are unable to take a decision on whether to continue with their homosexual relationship or change their sexual preferences. Butler uses the term “heterosexual matrix” to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized.

The central characters in "Night Queen" are Ash and Raghu, and they are trapped in a heterosexual matrix where they have to act according to the heterosexual pattern constructed by the society in which they live. Their homosexual desires are kept a secret. They are afraid to reveal their real sexual orientation in public because they fear that they will be rejected by the society. This apprehension forces Ash to agree for a heterosexual marriage with Gayatri. He, in fact, wants to change his sexual orientation from being a homosexual to a heterosexual. This usually happens with most of the homosexuals in India because of the fear of social ostracism. At the end of the play Ash and Raghu decide to continue with their homosexual relationship keeping Ash’s married life with Gayatri as a mask.

Queer communities choose to create a space for themselves where the focus is on their presence thereby creating a secure space away from the visibility of the society. Instead of trying to blend with the society they create for themselves security through invisibility. The room where the action takes place in "Night Queen" represents the clearest materialization of queer space.
which is away from the visibility of the society. When it comes to homosexuality, there is a need for a secret space. The repressed sexual desires of the homosexuals get liberated in the queer space or the closet.

Queer theorists argue that labelled speech acts are the proof of the nature of one’s sexuality. Words like “gay” and “gay bashing” are considered negative words in the predominantly heteronormative Indian society. But Dattani uses the word “gay” with a different connotation—as a form of sexual orientation and a reality.

In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani highlights the way the contemporary urban Indian works against the existing social order. In this play, a whole range of homosexual characters are presented and their experiences throw light on various aspects of the struggle of the homosexuals in the traditional Indian society. This play opens with an informal gathering of a group of homosexuals: Kamlesh, Sharad, Bunny Singh, Ranjit and Deepali. They all are invited by Kamlesh to discuss his sister Kiran’s love life with Ed/Prakash.

Kamlesh is disillusioned because his sexual relationship with his first partner has broken down and he seeks in vain to overcome this trauma in the companionship of Sharad. Sharad’s relentless efforts to erase memories of Kamlesh’s early life take him away from Kamlesh. Kamlesh requests his friends to find a solution to his problem and pleads with them to co-operate with him in sorting out his sister’s love life.
In the brawl, secret is disclosed: that Kiran is in love with Ed/Prakash, the person with whom Kamlesh shared his first love life. Humiliated, Ed/Prakash attempts to commit suicide but is rescued by Kamlesh and he leaves with the sense of a debacle. He is a typical Indian homosexual who is not ready to accept his sexual identity openly and plans to marry Kiran to both mask and continue his clandestine relation with Kamlesh.

In this play, Dattani targets not just a single mind but three individual psyches which divulge their inner self to the audience/reader. They are: Kamlesh, Kiran and Ed/Prakash. All three characters are caught in a social and psychological web. Their persistent combat with the society and self in establishing themselves as independent individuals is highlighted in this play. Upfront and unambiguous, the play journeys into the world of gays through a love triangle.

The setting of Dattani’s plays is embedded within the system of the middles class Indian family and the playwright operates from this context. Talking about the context of his works in his preface to the Collected Plays, he asserts:

I am practicing theatre in an extremely imperfect world where the politics of doing theatre in English looms large over anything else one does. Where writing about the middle class is seen as un fashionable ... I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for
me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally, (xiv-v)

Dattani takes the position of a non-judgmental observer and never intrudes into the plays he writes and directs. Nor does he try to preach. Most of his plays are constructed around significant social issues. Often the issues are veiled or masked, but they are examined within a stimulating social context. In an interview with Elizabeth Roy, Dattani observes that theatre is a reflection of what you observe. He states: “The function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly, but funny” (“Freak Mirrors and Grotesque Images”).

In the course of an interview with Aditi De titled “Out of the closet, on the screen”, he asserts:

I'm not looking for something sensational, which audiences have never seen before. Some subjects, which are under-explored, deserve their space. It's no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalised, including the gays. Each of us have a sense of isolation within given contexts. That's what makes us individual. Whether it’s directly sexuality or gender, I feel these are expressions of one's true self.

_Do the Needful_ is a romantic comedy set around the theme of the Indian system of arranged marriages. The Indian society’s emphasis with heterosexual
marriages, mostly in the form of arranged marriages, is well known. People have to identify themselves with the heteronormative life narrative to be socially recognised. Queer culture, on the contrary, promotes a different understanding of intimacy.

Queer theorists have produced a remarkable analysis of heteronormativity and suggested ways to problematise, denaturalize and denormatise heterosexuality, and change or dissolve heteronormativity. The normative status of heterosexuality links intimacy with the institutions of personal life making sex a personal matter in the public world which makes heterosexual relations the privileged institution of social reproduction. This heteronormative understanding of intimacy blocks the construction of non-normative sexual orientations and cultures.

*Do The Needful* challenges the deep-rooted heterosexual gender order and formulates strategies to undo both binary gender categories and heteronormativity. The heterosexual order recognises marriage between a man and a woman to be the norm but in this play we have a homosexual who declines to marry any woman. So the homosexual male and the heterosexual female who is in another relationship come together to devise a strategy to dismantle heteronormativity.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* is a play that concerns itself with alternate sexuality. This play talks about homosexual relationships in the Indian family context. Nitin, a gay, is presented in multiple roles—a husband to Alka, a son to Baa and a brother to Jiten, all part of a heteronormative social order.
Through this play, Dattani shows how we are caught up in the world of heteronormativity,

Nitin is the first significant homosexual character in any modern Indian play. In the conventional Indian social order, almost all gays get married to gain social recognition and acceptance. The play ends with Nitin finally revealing his relationship with Praful, his brother-in-law. The delinking of sexual and gender identity is reiterated in the character of Nitin when he plays the role of a husband as well as a homosexual partner.

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* offers insights into the lives of the hijras, their beliefs and customs. Hijras are believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on newlyweds or newborn children. This is the reason why they are allowed to sing and dance at weddings and births. The title of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* gains significance because of the fact that hijras are denied the right to get married though they are present at all marriage ceremonies. In this play, Kamla, the hijra who walked the seven rounds around the fire, was brutally murdered by the homophobic society.

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* is one of Dattani’s explorations of fringe issues that are usually swept aside by the mainstream culture. Transgender does not come under the standard notions of male or female gender role but combines or moves between these. Since hijras do not have any specific sexual orientation they may identify themselves as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or asexual. They may have the characteristics that are usually related to a particular gender but are classified differently.
Highlighting the Indian scenario Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai write in *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*:

Indian cultures tend to be more of the type anthropologists call shame cultures than guilt cultures . . . Having a child outside marriage is heavily disapproved of, unmarried parenthood is almost unknown, and premarital pregnancies almost always end in abortion and giving away the child in adoption. In this social context, same-sex friendships and spaces are generally more approved by parents than cross-sex friendships and mixed-gender spaces ... However this invisibility also has a down side. A same-sex friendship is tolerated and approved only as long as it masquerades a nonsexual friendship and does not conflict with marriage and parenthood. (198)

The Indian society has progressed from closed, traditional settings to open, forward-looking environments, marked by movements, collective action, awareness of exclusions, the need for alternative codes and the interrelation between the personal and the public. Dattani initiates his audience into the politics of lack in the area of identity. He would have his audience believe that the politics of lack is also the politics of being the sexual minority in India. His plays provide the spatial and temporal parameters within which problematizations may be reviewed.

Dattani’s plays emerged as a ‘fresh arrival’ in the domain of Indian English drama in the last decade of the twentieth century. His plays deal with
contemporary issues that have a universal appeal. He examines the struggles of contemporary urban Indian in familial, social and cultural spheres to fashion their identity. This struggle is the subject of almost all his plays. He moulds his subject in such a way that it is topical as well as appealing, and his plays speak across linguistic and cultural barriers.

Explicit and implicit references to homoeroticism appear throughout ancient Indian texts. While the majority of the Indians believe that homosexuality is a perversity that was introduced through British colonialism, Vanita and Kidwai in *Same-Sex Love in India* attempt to reclaim this history by presenting homoerotic examples in Indian literature from the ancient times until the present. The authors demonstrate that there is a 2000-year old textual tradition in India discussing and representing same-sex relationships. Their book contains translations and analyses of texts written in fifteen Indian languages.

India now seems poised for a significant change in her attitude to same-sex love and relationships. Now is the time in India when a slew of factors seems to be working in tandem to facilitate the opening of the queer closet and promote alternative understandings of same-sex desires and expressions. The processes of globalisation and liberalisation have brought to the fore issues and identities which were earlier kept under wraps by the traditional Indian society.

A native queer discourse is in the process of being formulated which would adequately frame the nuanced queer identity and representation of same-sex desire and expression in arts and culture in India. The debate about
same-sex love has entered the public domain. Sometime back, NDTV’s popular Talk Show, *We the People*, took up the issue of homosexuality for discussion. A visible change in the attitude of the Indian society was reflected in the audience poll. An overwhelming majority admitted that they were comfortable with the idea of homosexuality. The Public Service Broadcasting Trust organised a festival of award-winning films from around the world on “Gender and Sexuality” from 12-15 May, 2007 in New Delhi. A queer festival was organised by “Nigah” a Queer Forum, from 25 May-3 June 2007. It included films, plays, photographs and performances by queer artists. The recent judgment issued by the Delhi High Court on July 2, 2009 decriminalizing homosexuality is yet another indicator of the changing mindset of the Indians.

A scrutiny of contemporary Indian urban culture reveals an ongoing cultural shift. The harbingers of this cultural change are middle class urban intellectuals. Dattani belongs to this group. He has attempted to create an approach and method that would effectively address same-sex relationships and transgender issues.

Hoshang Merchant in *Yaraana : Gay Writing from India* highlights the situation in India with regard to homosexuality. He writes in his Afterword to *Yaraana*:

> It should be obvious . . . that ‘gay’ in India is not an ethic, not a religion, not a sub-culture, not a profession, not a sub caste. Yet it is all present, all pervasive, ever practised and ever secret. It comes upon you in unexpected places, in unexpected faces. It is
shame, guilt, subversion, for some new fangled ones even their honour and pride. Homosexuals are largely unrecognised and blend with the crowd. Hence homosexuality is unspoken about, unaccepted, a danger to the homosexual and the non-homosexual alike. Unlike ‘hijras’ the gays do not have a local habitation or even a name. No word exists yet for the homosexual in any of India’s languages. No one in any class wants to own up to it. It is a movement with a thousand colours. Yet it is distasteful to many and many consider it tasteless though it has its very pungent odours and colours. (205)

Queer theory's refusal to specify itself has been widely recognized as one of its tactical strengths. Resisting any attempt to define itself in relation to any specific material content, queer theory might be thought of as “a zone of possibilities in which the embodiment of the subject might be experienced otherwise” (Edelman 114). Since queer's opposition to the normative is its one consistent characteristic, it has the potential to invent itself endlessly, reformulating whatever knowledges currently constitute prescribed understandings of sexuality (Edelman 114).

A central concept for many queer theoretical analyses is heteronormativity. The concept draws on feminist theory such as Rubin’s “sex/gender system” and Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality”. Heteronormativity is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that it is the natural way of life. Queer theory attempts to make visible what is oppressed by heteronormativity and explore the heterosexual norm itself and
not continue to take it for granted. This is done by theorizing and clarifying the borders of heterosexuality/heteronormativity and non-heterosexuality/non-heteronormativity.

The core tenets of queer theory are as follows:

1. All categories are falsifications, especially if they are binary and descriptive of sexuality;

2. All assertions about reality are socially constructed;

3. Texts form discourses that are exercises in power/knowledge and which, properly analyzed, reveal relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation; and

4. Deconstruction of all categories of normality and deviance can best be accomplished by queer readings of performative texts ranging from literature to other cultural expressions.

In his plays, Dattani takes on the imperceptible and invisible issues in the Indian society. He makes himself conspicuous by writing about such issues which we read about now and then but refuse to acknowledge their existence amidst us. In an interview with Erin Mee, the playwright remarks:

You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian, it doesn't happen here. You can't talk about a middle-class housewife... actually having a sex life, that isn't Indian either—that's confrontational even if it is Indian. (25)
The presentation of homosexuality as a reality and a stable form of sexuality would normally invite a negative response from the Indian audience. But Dattani’s plays are a solid proof that it is possible to represent the anxieties and concerns of the queer communities. In the Indian cultural context Dattani takes a socio-political stand to defend and promote an oppressed sexuality. The social acceptance received by his plays is a sign that the Indian society is gradually coming to terms with homosexuality as a reality.

Homosexuality implies going beyond accepted conventions. As a person begins to discover his/her own urges and desires which go against the world of heteronormativity, he/she faces psychological as well as physical problems. This brings him/her to a state of mental agony where he/she has to satisfy his/her desire but at the same time act in accordance with the heteronormative society.

The purpose of this study is to explore the psychological effects of heterosexual norms on people with a sexual orientation that stands outside heteronormativity. The plays selected for the present study represent the psycho-sexual distress of the homosexuals and transgenders in India. This study has attempted to analyse the psycho-sexual elements in the Indian context, especially the plays of Dattani, with the help of the theoretical parameters of queer theory as validated in the Indian context.

This turns out to be an examination of heteronormativity and queer theory in the context of the perceived systems of domination over homosexuals and transgenders. In the final analysis, a deconstruction of the categories of normality and deviance is accomplished by a queer reading of these five plays.
The thesis titled “A Critique of the Psycho-Sexual Dimensions in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani—A Queer Approach” comprises five chapters. The first chapter is introductory in nature and it gives a brief idea of what the thesis wants to achieve. This chapter states the title of the thesis and presents the thesis statement. It presents a brief survey of the history of Indian English drama and locates Mahesh Dattani within that history. It also presents a brief survey of literature on the work done so far on Mahesh Dattani leading to the identification of the research gap and its potential for a full-fledged thesis on Dattani and queer theory. It also presents the structure of the thesis and the methodology followed.

Chapter two titled “Queer Theory” discusses the theoretical underpinnings of this study. It presents an in-depth study of queer theory, highlighting the development of the theory and the contribution of key queer theorists such as de Lauretis, Sedgwick, Butler, Jagose, Halperin and others. The definition of queer theory and the background concepts associated with it are discussed here. The chapter also enumerates the contribution of major queer theorists and briefly examines their notable works for a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical framework used in the present study.

The third chapter titled “Homosexuality: Out of The Closet—A Study of Night Queen and On a Muggy Night in Mumbaf” presents a detailed interpretation of Dattani’s Night Queen and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai which openly discuss homosexuality. The chapter demonstrates how Dattani has presented the taboo subject of homosexuality in a transparent manner.
Among various socially pertinent themes that Dattani’s plays deal with, the first play which addresses the issue of homosexuality is *Night Queen*. This is perhaps the first play in Indian theatre to handle gay theme raising serious closet issues that remain generally invisible. *Night Queen* is a play about two homosexual characters and their orientations and study. Through this play serious issues which have been kept as secrets and, therefore, closetted have been brought to the forefront thereby challenging established norm of heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

Chapter four titled “Homosexuality in the Indian Family Context—A Study of *Do the Needful*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*” continues the thread of the third chapter and investigates Dattani’s *Do the Needful* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* which present homosexuality in the urban Indian family context. This chapter also discusses *Seven Steps Around the Fire* which deals with transgender issues.

In *Do The Needful*, Dattani has tried to problematise and critique heteronormativity through Alpesh and Lata. The compromise that Lata and Alpesh make in getting married is a clever and conscious choice to suit both their sexual orientations as well as the dictates of the heteronormative social order. Even though the characters are forced by their families to get married they turn this forced harmony to their advantage.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* takes the homosexual milieu and the homosexual way of life in the Indian setting and uses it to present the human experience in a heteronormative social order. This play also problematises,
even as it makes visible, the distress that homosexuals have to undergo in India where homosexuality is a forbidden subject. Nitin, a homosexual character in this play, offers a new visibility of the queer community present in the Indian society.

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* revolves around the third gender—the community of eunuchs who exist on the fringes of the Indian society. This play dealing with transgenders has been included in this study because it lends itself for a queer analysis.

The concluding chapter presents a synoptic analysis of the five plays selected for the study. It brings together the common elements found in all the five plays of Dattani examined in the preceding chapters within the framework of queer theory. This chapter sums up the main arguments and major findings of this exploration.

The key objective of this study is to highlight Dattani’s strategy for challenging and countering the heteronormative society’s efforts to repress the homosexual culture. The five plays discussed in this thesis refute heterosexuality and heteronormativity as the benchmark for all sexual formations and represent the anxieties and concerns of the queer communities in India and elsewhere. Though Dattani has embarrassed his audience and readers by presenting the lives of gays and transgenders, a careful reading of his plays, especially the five plays discussed in this thesis, reveals the psychosexual dynamics of his characters and eventually drive home the point that these issues cannot be closetted anymore, for the homosexuals and transgenders are an organic part of our culture.
Dattani’s plays offer us a glimpse into tabooed subjects that have been disturbing us for a long time. To pull these subjects and issues out of the closet and discuss them threadbare is a Herculean task which requires grit and forbearance and theoretical acumen and rigour which Dattani possesses abundantly. He is a playwright who boldly presents issues that have been closetted by the Indian society for decades and he will be hailed as a visionary for his contribution to Indian drama and culture. In *Indian English Literature J980-2000: A Critical Survey*, Naik and Narayan write:“Contemporary in time and spirit, alive to the pressures of the present and eminently stage worthy, Dattani’s plays squarely give the lie to the popular notion that Indian drama at its best is only a hot house plant” (210).

In the course of this investigation the present researcher has identified a few other areas in Dattani that will possibly lend themselves for further research. Satirising the male-female stereotyping, quest for identity within the mechanism of family/society, masculinity, gender ambiguity and power play are a few topics, among other possible areas, where further research is possible. Any research contribution in these areas will certainly enrich the critical understanding of Dattani’s plays. The present researcher is determined to undertake further exploration in a few of these areas.