Chapter III
PERFORMANCE AND LIFE: THE THEME OF ‘ROLE PLAYING’ IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI
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This chapter discusses the significance of ‘role-playing’, ‘performing or representing oneself on the social stage of life. It discusses at length the idea of performance, its application in life and in the construction of identity. An individual’s identity or existence depends greatly on the act of engaging oneself in one kind of performance or the other all throughout his life. While performing or ‘representing’ oneself, in the face of fixities of the social order, one needs to be concerned about the acceptable role since a defying or deviating kind of performance may jeopardize one’s social existence. Performing in a socially acceptable manner brings in social recognition for an individual while a subversive performance may subject an individual to the darkness of ‘non-recognition’ and stigmatization. With an aim to analyze such issues, plays like Bravely Fought the Queen, Dance Like a Man, Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful, will be taken into account. While exploring such issues in these plays, I would also like to look at the theoretical ideas of Judith Butler, Irving Goffman, Richard Schachner, BertO.Stace and other relevant thinkers that have made thought provoking discussions on the significance of performance in one’s life and how it plays a pivotal role in determining one’s social identity.

The above mentioned plays of Mahesh Dattani show how individuals are caught up in the web of what will qualify as a socially acceptable representation of oneself and what
will not. Everyone’s life is controlled by some unseen but inevitable “power structure” that determines our identity and regulates our everyday codes of conduct. It is perhaps the most difficult task to transgress the binary or the societal norm. At this point one needs to clarify the usage of the term ‘norm’ in the context of this thesis.

The term ‘norm’ has been used here to signify the dominant ideology of a specific socio-cultural milieu. It refers to those beliefs, attitudes, rules and systems that have acquired the status of being the socially acceptable and socially approved norm for leading a socio-culturally meaningful and dignified existence. The norm proves to be so powerful that somehow or the other, everyone tries to fit into it due to the fear of being denied a legitimate place in the human world. Consequently there exists a conflict between an individual in private and how he should perform himself in public.

The tussle between the individual having specific tastes and temperaments and the norm that seldom allows anyone to cross the boundaries and lead a life of his/her own choice is explored in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. His plays try to explore the deep dungeons of human life and thereby give voice to the unheard and unspoken ‘realities’ that are often swept under the carpet with an aim to earn a legitimate and recognized place in the socio-cultural arena. The thematic concerns in the plays of Dattani highlight the predicaments of self being situated under the ‘hegemonic’ social structure that seldom provides any space for subversive performances.

While discussing such issues related to performance and individual identity in relation to the plays of Mahesh Dattani, this chapter also makes an attempt to discuss the issue of the body or self as a mode of dramatizing or enacting gender identity where in the
process the distinction between what is being ‘unconsciously’ performed in everyday life situation and what is ‘consciously’ performed on stage gets blurred. Performance (or “as if” being the common factor in an individual’s everyday life situation and in a stage show), could be seen as an element that tends to bridge the gap between life and stage performance. I have used the term ‘unconsciously’ and ‘consciously’ to signify that the first kind of performance which is associated with everyday life is unconsciously performed in the sense that the performers may not be aware that they are performing whereas a stage performance is a conscious performance in the sense that the actors are aware of themselves to be performing certain acts or roles on the stage.

This chapter endeavours to highlight the idea of performing or ‘representing’ oneself, in the face of fixity of the gender structure – gender seems to be more a matter of performance, a drag in everyday life rather than being some ‘inner’ essence. Dress code, make-up are often found to be the integral parts of maintaining a gendered identity. So amidst such a situation which element is more important for attaining a gendered identity – outward appearance constructed by make-up and dress code, or an essence?

Moreover the idea of putting on gender identity through the aid of dress code and make-up seems to be the common factor in drag performance and in life since certain codes pertaining to the modes of dressing, walking, talking, putting on make-up predominates both the worlds of everyday life and stage. Performance or “as if” – Victor Turner in (Schechner 2003: xvii), being the common factor in life and stage, a parallel can be envisaged between the two. For the purpose of arriving at a fruitful discussion of such issues, I would like to look at Judith Butler’s approach to gender issues and also take
recourse to Erving Goffman's seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). I would also look at other thinkers that are relevant to my work.

**Defining the Term Performance**

At the very outset, the term performance seems to put before us a vexing image since it is quite difficult to determine the perimeters of performance---what does it include and what does it exclude. It is perhaps not easy to bring the term performance under a set fixed, reduced and water-tight definition because as Richard Schechner says in *Performance Theory*, it is not easy to "specify limitations on what is, or could be treated as, performance" (Schechner 2003:290). A similar opinion is rendered by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman is of the opinion that performance is an extremely difficult concept to define since it cannot be determined for sure what it includes and what it does not. Performing is a mode of behaviour which may characterize "any activity". It, therefore seems to be a "quality" that may occur in any situation rather than being a "fenced-off genre". Goffman defined the term performance, in his first book, as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."

Richard Schechner labeled Goffman as an "outside" theorist whose basic interest was "the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives. The term "out side" theorist is used by Schechner in the sense that Goffman, from a professional point of view, is distanced from the world of performance as an art form. Goffman is not worried about some sublime issue related to existential question or performance. He is rather concerned about the modes of representation or the ways in which people repeat themselves. In Goffman’s context, theatre or performance served
the purpose of being a metaphor for analyzing social behaviour. For Goffman, it is very difficult to distinguish performance from life since all of us are located within a web of performance where one performance leads to the other.

Theatre is, in a sense, the quintessential repetition of our self-repetitions, the aesthetic extension of everyday life, a mirror, you might say, that nature holds up to nature. One wouldn't be likely to use the novel or painting as the key metaphor of such a project because their imitations of human experience are conducted in a non-human medium. Theatre, on the other hand, is the art that is most like life as it is lived in the real world. Hence it was made to order for Goffman (States 1996: 5).

In addition to the problem of defining performance or setting the parameters of performance, another intricate issue associated with performance is the “limit-problem” discussed by Bert O. States in his essay, Performance as Metaphor. Bert O. States addresses the semantic problem embedded in performance theory by taking recourse to what is termed in philosophy as a limit-problem, where the investigator or the “inquirer” turns out to be part of the problem. In other words, States is signifying the problem of observing when the observer is himself entrenched in the field of observation. Bert O. In some sense or the other, we are all performers and so to engage ourselves in investigating the nature of performance is perhaps another kind of performance. Bert O. States' position suggests that there is no outside to the world of performance and therein lies the problem of observing the system — being situated within the system.

No observer (subject) can fully observe or confront the self or the world because we can never stand outside what it is that we are trying to encompass and understand. In the
broadest sense, the limit-problem of performance is that we are all, in a manner of speaking, performers. If nothing else, as Judith Butler reminds us, we perform our gender. Even the attempt to investigate the nature of performance turns out to be something of a performance, in at least one definition of the word (States 1996:2).

Parallels Between Life and Stage: Performance as a Shared Space

Goffman constructs his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* on the basis of the argument that everyday life is framed and performed. He writes that “All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t not easy to specify” (1959:72). Goffman uses the imagery of the theatre in order to portray the importance of social action and focuses on the idea that social actors or individuals situated in a particular social context are playing roles and social interaction is the medium by which these actors present those roles to each other. Certain devices like movement of eyes, bodily gestures are significant elements in a performance, since through these devices, an actor articulates the role assigned to him. An ordinary individual who is not a professional performer would also have to take recourse to such devices in representing himself while confronting miscellaneous situations.

In order to illustrate different phases of personal identity that unfolds itself when an individual is exposed to confront different social interactions, Goffman provides an account of the different roles that waiters play in the dining room and in the kitchen of a restaurant. The polite and obedient behaviour before the customers is replaced by a more relaxed and somewhat cynical behaviour in front of the fellow workers. Through this example, Goffman is trying to say that individuals do not simply change roles but also their selves as they move from one social encounter to the other.
The legitimate performances of everyday life are not “acted” or “put on” in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have. The expressions it is felt he is giving off will be especially “inaccessible” to him. But as in the case of less legitimate performers, the incapacity of the ordinary individual to formulate in advance the movements of his eyes and body does not mean that he will not express himself through these devices in a way that is dramatized and pre-formed in his repertoire of actions. In short, we all act better than we know how (Goffman 1959: 73-4).

The fact that the professional performer knows in advance what he is going to do or how he is going to perform does not seem to alienate him from a ‘real’ life performer because although the later is not aware in advance what he is going to do, he will equally have to make use of performance. In ‘real’ life situations one may not be aware of oneself being engaged in a performance but nevertheless he is in a performance where one cannot go beyond the discourse of behaviour assigned to a particular role. An army man for instance will have to perform himself or materialize the role of an army man by adhering to all the behavioural patterns assigned to that particular role. Certain parameters are already there and one needs to perform oneself within those parameters. Very much like an actor performing a given role.

The same postures, gestures or body movements that an actor uses on stage to materialize a role, is used by an individual performing in life. For instance, if a situation arises where an individual is needed to mourn some one’s death, he will do it according to the particular directives provided by the discourse of mourning, specific to the socio-cultural matrix in which he is situated. An actor who is instructed to act a
mourning scene will also have to perform within the discourse of the role assigned to him. Thus as Goffman says, even though we do not know that we are engaged or taking part in a performance, we are always in performance, performing ourselves in a better way than it is expected from non-professional actors.

We are perhaps always in performance, and a convenient argument can be put forward at this point that would perhaps reveal the crucial relationship between performance and ‘human’ existence or life. Performance in a broad sense seems to encompass the entire notion of human existence. From being a baby an individual grows up to be a man or a woman that entails a gamut of roles as first of all a man or a woman and thereafter as son, daughter, wife, husband, father mother, employee, employer, student, teacher patient doctor and many more carried out in various ‘socializing’ institutions like home, school, office, hospital and so on and so forth.

An individual’s existence seems to depend heavily on the roles that one keeps on performing in accordance to the parameters of those roles. If one ceases to perform oneself in a socially legitimized way one may face death or cease to exist either in the metaphorical or in the literal sense. Death in the literal sense has been used in this context to signify that state where a person breathes his last and thereby ceases to perform and death in the metaphorical sense tends to signify the state of ‘non-recognition’ and ‘non-legitimation’ on the larger social stage to borrow Butlerian terms.

The state where one ceases to perform oneself is perhaps the state where one ceases to exist—death, the state where the body becomes still an unable to perform. The moment
one is born, marks his/her preparation for performing a role, the very first role being the gender role, the new born baby is identified to be a male or a female and accordingly the cultural signifiers that constitutes the specific gender role are gradually imposed on it as if to announce the inauguration of the initial stage of rehearsal that would lead the baby to be a man or a woman and gradually play a myriad of roles in family, educational institutions, work place and several other places. The birth of an individual into the world would perhaps not be invalid to be perceived, as its entry into a labyrinth of performances where one role leads to the other. In the course of one’s life it becomes a process that continuously gathers momentum and it perhaps stops with death.

- It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (Park 1950:249).

In his book *Race and Culture*, Robert Ezra Park puts forward an argument that the first signifier of the term person is ‘mask’, an acquired identity, something that is put on. The mask represents the conception that one formulates about oneself and presents oneself in front of the world. Park is of the opinion that if the ‘mask’ in a sense represents the conception of ourselves or the role we are striving to live up to, then this ‘mask’ is the self we would like to be or we are required to be. Due to long years of engagement with the role, an individual’s conception of his/her role becomes its second nature and ultimately becomes an integral part of his / her personality, or in a sense it constitutes his/her personality — “we come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons” (Park 1950: 250).
The mask or the acceptable identity role that we submerse into becomes our selfhood and one who fails to perform an acceptable identity role becomes an alien to the social order; for instance an 'insane' person who violates all the terms of a socially desirable routine that constitutes the idea of the role of a 'normal', or sane human being. To attain the identity of a normal human being one needs to act according to the acceptable routine (that includes dressing, talking, washing, walking, eating, behaving in a certain manner) which is taken to be the 'proper' way of expressing oneself in a specific social context.

To maintain a meaningful existence in a social world, or to occupy a space of acceptability in the society, an individual needs to perform or present oneself in a socioculturally intelligible or desirable way. An individual will have to perform himself/herself according to the necessity of the social context and cannot perhaps be as he/she wishes to be. Staying alone inside one's room, aloof from the outside world is one kind of performance and that may contrast with one's way of performing oneself in front of other members of the society or in other words in a social gathering. For instance the kind of performance or representation of oneself that an individual indulges in while delivering a speech in front of a social gathering or while attending a party may not match with his performance when he/she is solely with himself/herself in his/her bedroom or study room.

An individual may perform or represent himself in a different manner or perform different scripts designed by the existing normative structure, when he is placed in different contexts and with different individuals. An individual's behaviour or manner of interaction with one's friend may greatly differ from his/her behaviour or manner of
interaction with his boss in his work place. Moreover social performances differ or needs to cater to the requirements of different formats pertaining to different contexts. For instance one knows in advance the patterns or modes of behaviour appropriate for attending a funeral ceremony and this performance will inevitably differ from one’s performance while attending a wedding party. Several types of performance or presentation of oneself is needed by several types of situation that one encounters being situated in a specific social context. And an interesting observation would reveal that within the arena of a single day consisting of only twenty-four hours, an individual perhaps indulges in performing several roles owing to the demands of various situations.

Thus an individual seems to be trapped in a web of performances where one seldom has the opportunity to transcend the commonly assigned performances and the interesting thing to take into account is that we exist only through our performances put before others and we earn acceptance and recognition or we are subjected to the state of non-acceptance and non-recognition depending on the kind of performance we engage ourselves in. As an illustration we may take into account the case of a person who shabbily wanders on the road, a homeless, ‘mad’ person.

The dominant ideological conception of a ‘normal’, ‘sane’ human being puts forward the requirements of following a routine that proffers instructions regarding almost every aspect of life ranging from the codes of dressing, eating, sleeping, walking, talking, behaving, and such other kinds of activities that are regarded to be the ‘normal’ codes of conduct in the specific social world in which that person is located. If a person fails to follow this routine that consists of what is accepted to be the ‘normal’ or ‘proper’ codes
of conduct in a specific socio-cultural milieu, then that person is often defined and condemned as a 'mad' person. So it is perhaps extremely important to perform or present oneself according to the codes of conduct that are already functioning actively in a specific society.

Here comes in the notion of performing a role on stage in a proper manner or according to the pre-determined needs of the script. Because one who fails to do so or deviates from the 'proper' way of presenting oneself or performing oneself in front of others is often relegated to the 'backstage', the term backstage has been used here to signify the area that is devoid of the limelight, something which is less important when viewed from the audience's perspective because the audiences are concerned only about what is happening on the stage. It is only through the roles we are playing that we have access to ourselves and also we know others who are equally engaged in their own performances. We are accessible to each other or we can perceive or know each other only through the roles that we are playing.

The performances that an individual carries out in public becomes one of the (and if not the only) major component of his identity in the social world. Performing oneself in a socially acceptable way or performing in the opposite direction will go a long way in conferring an identity and determining his space in the social world. One who performs within the parameters of the routine of acceptable behavioural patterns earn the basic identity of a 'normal' human being and thereby occupies some 'dignified' space in the socio-cultural milieu. On the other hand, one who is engaged in a socio-culturally disapproved way of performance (a 'mad' person for instance), remains highly exposed.
to the possibilities of being stigmatized or condemned as an outcast and is often defined as ‘insane’ or ‘mad’.

**Social Identity: A Matter of Performing Acceptable Role:**

Thus this individual’s performance that transcends the parameter of acceptable social roles acquire an identity that is taken to be less ‘dignified’ in the socio-cultural milieu. So the question of social identity of an individual is intimately related to the question of performing oneself within or outside the parameters prevalent in the socio-cultural milieu in which he is located. The way in which a ‘mad’ person or a eunuch performs itself violates the norm of a socially desirable performance. The person is condemned as ‘mad’ because he represents himself in a specific way that constitutes the idea of ‘madness’ in the particular society to which he belongs.

At the same time if a professional actor deliberately plays the role of a ‘mad’ person in front of a gathering who do not know that he is playing (or skillfully representing the signifiers associated with) the role of an insane person as part of his job, then there is every possibility that the viewers might committee the mistake of thinking about him to be a ‘mad’ person roaming on the streets. Envisaging such kind of a situation, whose possibility cannot be denied altogether, we may invite our attention to a pivotal issue that our identity, personality or the question— who are we? depends on the way we perform or represent ourself, either in a socially acceptable way of performing or in the opposite way. We are then in a sense accessible to the social world solely through our performances.
If a ‘mad’ person in a ‘real’ life situation and a professional actor performing the role of a ‘mad’ person in front of an audience that is unaware of the fact that he is deliberately performing a role, could get similar responses from the audience, then it could perhaps be not wrong to think that in some sense or the other the idea of a ‘normal’ or an ‘abnormal’ human being is a matter of performance. Because performing in an acceptable way is sufficient for providing a meaningful existence while the opposite way of performing may lead to social stigmatization. The idea of playing a role both in life and in the domain of professional acting carries weight as performance in both the fields seems to be of equal importance. In both ‘life’ and ‘stage’ or in the professional domain of acting, performance could be visualized as a shared space. Performance is perhaps inseparable from ‘real’ life situations and it is perhaps the horizon where stage and ‘life’ mingle.

At the time of performing a role, at a dramatic situation on stage, for instance, the actor is inseparable from the role he is playing, or in other words, to the audiences, for that specific time, he is what he is performing on the stage before the audiences. In that specific space and time, the actor’s existence depends on the role he is playing. Similarly, in everyday life situations, also the ‘mad’ person roaming on the street and performing some acts is inseparable from the role he is playing. The performance that he is engaged in becomes his identity and it exists only in his performance. The street goers or the audiences so to speak, comprehend that he is ‘mad’ because he is performing a role that is regarded to be the ‘role’ of a ‘mad’ person in that specific socio-cultural context.
Moreover in a stage show or professional performance the actor performs with a kind of awareness that he is performing a role for a specific audience and as such his performance should be able to cater to the taste of the audiences. Similar kind of an action could be seen in case of an individual for instance who is at different points of time of a day is performing three different roles—attending a birthday party, then addressing a mass gathering as a political figure and then attending a funeral. This same person is required to behave or perform in three different ways, in order to cater to the tastes of three different sets of audiences on the same day.

The same individual performs three different roles keeping in view the need of the situation. The role that an individual performs in ‘real’ life situations, could conveniently be viewed as constituted by a set of norms, rules and values that prescribes how an individual, performing a specific role is expected to behave. Failure to represent appropriate behavioural patterns sanctioned for a specific role would be punished through some form of negative sanction. At this point, perhaps the script of a play could be taken into account.

The script of a play, in a narrow sense goes to signify the format of the play that structures the dramatic situation and sets the parameter within which the characters are expected to function for making it a successful performance. The script is an amalgamation of dialogues, scenes or situations, costumes and behavioural patterns that constitute the characters. For a successful presentation of the characters that are there in the script, an actor is required to follow the given pattern specifically designed for various roles and then try to materialize the role by investing his own skill or performs it in his own way. An individual performing a role in a social situation is in a similar
position as he has to perform within the parameters of a specific role, where the given appropriate behavioural patterns could take the place of a given script in case of a professional actor.

In this context we may take into account George Herbert Mead's conception of 'role'. He argues that our personal identity or our comprehension or conception of ourselves is composed to, or in anticipation of the actions of others. Mead defines a role as a sequence of gestures that are suggestive of how one reads or lends meaning to each other's actions or gestures, thereby to anticipate and respond to future actions. We begin to comprehend and materialize our own roles only by imaginatively taking the roles of others or representing a pre-existing representation.

The Concept of Theatricality:

Performance or its concretized form - theatre has often been used as a metaphor for anticipating 'real' life experiences that has given birth to the analogy: theatricality relates to 'real' life. We have often encountered theatricality expressed in metaphors like "all the world's a stage." The Shakespearean metaphor "all the world's a stage" (that appeared in his play As You Like It), can perhaps be seen as an expression of the notion that theatre relates to life. This metaphor seems to suggest that what is known as 'reality' or 'life' is theatrical, because it resembles theater. Although one may not agree with the generalizing concept of defining the whole world as a stage, yet the points of similarity between the two spaces could be taken into account - one where the actors are consciously performing (on the stage) and the other (in 'real' life situations) where
individuals are performing but they do not think of themselves to be professional artists and are not aware that they are equally involved in the art of performance.

The concept of theatricality has taken many forms throughout the long period of its usage in various contexts and by various thinkers at different points of time, and perhaps because of this, its meaning may seem difficult to grasp when one is to make a theoretical approach to the field. Often theatricality shows itself as a metaphorical relationship between the theater and the world. Plato tried to suggest similarities between the world and the stage by comparing mankind to marionettes directed by the Gods.

This notion gathered momentum and earned more popularity throughout the Christian Middle Ages: the world is a theater, and God its director and spectator. The idea of theatre being the metaphor of life or individuals as ‘role’ players can be seen to have arrived at quite a strong position in the opinion of Thomas Hobbes who said that it is no more than an illusion to believe that there is any difference between expressing one's personality and playing a role. He informs us that the word "person" is actually nothing but a dead metaphor, whose original or pre-metaphorical meaning is "mask."

Being members of a society, individuals are engaged in playing one role or the other in their day to day life. Being a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’, a ‘father’, a ‘teacher’, a ‘student’, a ‘doctor’, an ‘wife’, a ‘party-goer’, an ‘actor’, a ‘politician’, so on and so forth, are roles that an individual can perform either subsequently or in combination. In ‘functionalist’ sociology, a role is taken to be synonymous with the prescribed set of behavioural expectations that constitutes or defines that role. As soon as it enters the arena of the
human world and applies for human identity, the most significant ‘role’ that an individual receives for performing throughout his life is the role conferred by the determination of the new born’s gender identity.

Once a baby is born, the question needs to be answered whether it is a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ and the answer plays an important role in determining and fabricating the subsequent roles that the individual performs in his/her everyday life. In the existing socio-culture structure that favours fixity, only two ways of gender performances are approved and as such individuals are required to perform either the behavioural patterns sanctioned for ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’. Consequently the deviating kind of performances like that of a eunuch, for instance, is relegated to the darkness of stigmatization.

**Judith Butler’s Approach to Performance and Gender Identity**

For the discussion of issues like fixity of the gender structure, individual difference and the idea of performing or ‘representing’ oneself, I would like to look at Judith Butler’s approach to gender issues. Butler (b.1956) is credited with works like *Gender Trouble*, *Undoing Gender*, *Bodies That Matter* among others, where she comments upon and assesses theoretical works of Beauvoir, Foucault, Freud and Irigaray. Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender suggests that gender is something that people *do* rather than a quality they possess; as constituted by performative acts rather than by some inner essence. Therefore, instead of stigmatizing and labeling them as ‘abnormal’, transgender acts or performances could be visualized as subversive performances or acts that are subversive of the dominant ideology of the gender system.
Butler is of the opinion that rather than requiring an essence, gender requires a performance that is “repeated” and this repetition refers to a “reenactment” and “reexperiencing” of an already existing socially determined set of meanings. Since gender is constituted through representation of socially sanctioned acts and gestures, specific to particular gender categories, gender seems to be a matter of performance that has taken the shape of a ‘fixed’ ‘reality’, and both the audiences and the actors are submersed in this belief. Gender could therefore be perceived as a constructed identity or in other words:

...a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler in Salih 2004:115)

The system of compulsory heterosexuality is consolidated through the cultivation of the body into discrete sexes. Butler reads gender in terms of performance and the very idea of performance itself rules out the possibility of any kind of fixity. Performance suggests the idea of representing and when applied to the world of gender, it tends to reshape gender by suggesting the very idea of gender to be the re-presentation of the existing idea of gender categories that confers ‘human’ identity on us.

The acts that a body performs to attain a specific gender identity is an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene much like an actor performing a pre-existing role. The pressure of expectations, from a culture or society where one grows, make one perform the idea of a stereotyped ‘man’ (‘masculine’ in nature) or a ‘woman’ (‘feminine’ in nature), since a contrasting way of performing oneself may bring in unpleasant consequences. In this context, I have used the term 'stereotype' to signify an
image or idea of a particular type of person or thing that has become fixed and even legitimate through being widely held. It is often found that ambiguous bodies or beings are seldom given a place in the society. A meaningful social existence demands one to perform one’s life or body in a socially approved way.

Bodies are made to acquire desired shape and function in a desired way in order to engage in performances that are in close proximity with the stereotypical notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ prevalent in the social structure in which an individual is situated. The body is a medium of dramatizing or enacting cultural conventions. One is expected to behave in a way that adheres to the given/historical idea of either of the two gender categories. The acts that a body performs to attain a specific gender identity is an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene much like an actor performing a pre-existing stereotype or role.

A gender stereotype consists of the behavioural patterns taken to be appropriate for men or women, situated in a specific socio-cultural milieu and these patterns are repeated while performing oneself in day to day life situations. In other words gender stereotypes consist of those values that will qualify as ‘normal’ human beings. Gender roles are defined by behaviors, and gender stereotypes are beliefs and attitudes about masculinity and femininity. The concepts of gender role and gender stereotype is related to one another. Stereotypical notion of gender, which approves only two ways of performing either in a masculine or in a feminine way, contributes a lot in constructing a fixed structure.
When a specific pattern of behavior is associated with either woman or man, the social structure may overlook individual variations and exceptions and come to believe that the behavior is inevitably associated with one gender category but not the other. Therefore, gender roles furnish the material for gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes prove to be very influential; they affect conceptualizations of women and men and establish social categories for gender. These categories represent what people think and are liable to do, and even when beliefs vary from reality, the beliefs remain powerful forces in conceptualization and judgments of self and others.

But the gender stereotypes that are supposed to be fixed identity categories for individuals to perform themselves in a specific way, could be exposed to be subject to fluidity, by the example of “drag” that puts before us the idea that being a man or a woman is to imitate, ‘put on’ or perform the idea of one of the discrete gender categories. In her thought provoking work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler looks at drag to discuss the constructedness and performative aspect of gender.

Butler is perhaps endeavouring to show how performance can powerfully manipulate ‘reality’ and can replace it by illusion. In a drag performance for instance, when one sees a man dressed and disguised as a woman, then the spectator would first be influenced by the outward appearance of the performer and if the spectator does not know who is actually performing, then the spectator may possibly think that it is a woman performing before him.

Therefore, this ‘reality’ which is actually an illusion becomes the ‘reality’ for the spectator. In this case, the apparent signifiers of gender that constitutes dress make up
and the style of articulating or performing the body is taken into account and not some anatomical signifiers and it is perhaps the way the body is performed that is of great importance in representing its gender identity. To exhibit our identity before others, what we need to do is to perform ourselves in a specific manner – dress ourselves, put make-up, walk, talk and perform such other acts or signifiers of gender identity in either a ‘manly’ or ‘womanly’ manner.

Thus a drag performance exposes the failure of the spectator to read the actual anatomical condition that lies behind the surface appearance which is constituted by clothes and make-up that plays a vital role in articulating the body. In such a situation one cannot say for sure whether the body it perceives is that of a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. So here what we believe to be the ‘real’, fixed or ‘natural’ aspect of gender proves to be a matter of performance that entails revisability and changeability.

Drag performance is fundamentally centered on the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the role or the gender he or she is performing. It challenges the question of gender reality and brings in the notion of gender as a fluid entity, because in drag performances the body proves to be a locus of gender signifiers where one set of signifiers could easily be replaced by another set of signifiers and thereby questions the concept of gender reality as something fixed. Gender parody suggests that the original identity after which gender is fashioned is an imitation that constantly defers its origin, and so the notion of essentialized gender identity is jeopardized.

The loss of the sense of ‘the normal’, however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal’, ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably
failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived (Butler in Salih 2004:113).

In a drag performance, gender identity is revealed to be a matter of imitation that is open to resignification which questions the reality of the ‘natural’ discrete gender categories that are considered to be of immense value in the normative pattern of gender. “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency” (Butler 1990:187).

Both in drag performance and in the consolidation of the normative gender structure, performance or imitation gains the upper hand and it is empowered to destabilize the structure by questioning the notion of gender as an expression of original essence that constitutes the infrastructure of gender identity. Drag entails or highlights the possibility of gender identity being constituted by signifiers that are accumulated from outside the body. The culturally constructed signifiers are seen to be imitated in case of a drag performance to attain a specific gender identity and a similar kind of situation can be seen in everyday life where an individual is required to imitate the culturally approved signifiers that are allotted to specific gender category.

To be ‘of’ a certain gender is to imitate or perform certain given acts or gestures. Drag traverses a long way in blurring the distinction between ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’, or the inner/outer binary by showing that what is thought to be the inner essence could be recreated or reenacted into a different essentialized gender category by the help of outside factors like dress code, make-up and coping styles of walking, talking and so on. Drag possibly mocks the idea of gender as an expression of inner essence and the
idea of a true gender identity. Esther Newton's concept of drag as quoted by Butler is given below:

At its most complex, drag is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says “my outside appearance is feminine, but my essence inside (the body) is masculine. At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance outside (my body, my gender is masculine but my essence inside myself is feminine” (Butler 1990:186).

The idea of performance, being a common presence in both performing gender, as in ‘real’ life situations and gender in performance as in drag or parody, suggests that the acquisition and exhibition of gender identity is a matter of representing or repeating the approved and available cultural signs that may not be mistaken as essence. Even if a man for instance is supposed to have an ‘inner’ essence that makes him ‘manly’, he could easily switch to the domain of what is called ‘womanly’ by the aid of imitating the limited cultural signs that constitute “womanly” mannerisms, dressing in a specific manner and putting some sort of make-up to be like a woman. Therefore, to display oneself to be the member of a certain gender category, one needs only to imitate the “historically delimited” possibilities of a body placed in either of the discrete gender categories.

The concept of “drag” suggests the idea of dressing up as a member of the ‘opposite’ sex and performing a given role by which drag artists are subverting the ideas of gender fixity and challenges the “constitutive categories”. The idea of ‘putting on’ gender or wearing an acceptable gendered identity relates to everyday life because we dress up or behave in a way that will be able to cater to the expectations of the existing idea of
"I". It does not matter what the "I" is but what matters is how the "I" performs its gender before the world.

The "I" that appears before the public may contrast with the "I" in private. If we take the "I" to be an actor playing the role of a villain, it is not necessarily true that the personal traits of the actor suit the 'role'. What is of prime importance is how successfully or appropriately the actor performs the acts that constitute his 'role' before the audience. Here seems to be an interesting parallel between performing on stage and performing oneself in life.

The performative acts that are there and are performed by individuals to attain gender identity, constitute these gender categories. Thus, one needs to perform those acts that are regarded to be masculine or feminine respectively. Butler is of the opinion that gender is something that people do rather than a quality they possess; as constituted by performative acts rather than by some inner essence. As I have mentioned earlier, "The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time", says Butler in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory (1988:523).

The socio-cultural matrix provides the acts and gestures that go to qualify as the identity markers of gender categories and the selection of signifiers that constitute gender seems to be arbitrary.

In her essay, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory (1988) Judith Butler discusses the intricate relationship of gender, performance and theatre. Just as the script of a play and the actors are interdependent,
Actors are always already on stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives (Butler 1988:526).

**Distinction between Life and Stage**

A discussion that takes into account the analogy between life and stage where performance is a shared space, should however, also refer to the distinction that could be drawn between performance in theatrical context and performance in non-theatrical context or to say in ‘real’ life situations. The distinction between theatrical role playing and playing a social role is pointed out by Bruce Wilshire in *Role Playing and Identity: The limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (1982: 274-81).

A performer in non-theatrical or ‘real’ life situation is prone to more punitive consequences, than a theatrical performer or stage actor. A professional actor who fails to perform in a manner that will cater to the public (audience) taste would have to confront negative consequences that may harm his career but an individual who fails to perform in a socially acceptable manner, remains exposed to threats of banishment from society and denial of ‘human’ identity.

The spectator’s usually seen attitude of distancing a dramatic act from what is called the ‘real’ is responsible for it. Something seen on the stage could be excused on the ground that this is just the world of performance and not the ‘real’ world and thereby de-realize
the act. But if the same thing happens in a non-theatrical context, it would get an altogether different response from the same person who was the spectator of a play for instance. The response of a spectator to the sight of a hermaphrodite on stage is very different from his response when he encounters one in a non-theatrical context or in a real life situation.

Although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. The conventions which mediate proximity and identification in these two instances are clearly quite different (Butler 1988:527).

The sight of a hermaphrodite in a non-theatrical or ‘real’ life situation often induces pejorative feelings and ‘discomfort’, in the mind of the spectator. Their body violates the codes of ‘normal’ gender categories and this endangers their gender identity. They have a certain kind of ‘unintelligible’ body but it is also the performance that makes them more ‘strange’. It could only be a matter of performing — with a male voice, dressing up like a ‘man’ and be acceptable; or dressing like a ‘woman’ and engaging in a subversive performance, become a ‘strange’ creature.

**Performing Gender Identity**

Dressing up and wearing make-up, which are two indispensable organs of performance, are also two extremely important aspects of gender identity. The eunuchs do engage in
it but their performance as women subverts the other performance as men and aggravates their strangeness — a male voice in female clothes.

So even if there is an “inner essence” that gives expression to our gender identity, we can subscribe to any of the acceptable gender performances with the aid of dress, make up and imitation of behavioural codes. In this regard, to represent oneself as a member of either of the two socially approved categories, the outward appearance is more important. The outward appearance or the way one performs a gender identity, is capable of camouflaging the inner essence if there is any.

Performing gender identity therefore seems to be more important than the so called essence because it is the performance that catches the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless a human body is expected to exhibit these signifiers under the garb of ‘innate’ qualities. The process of ‘humanizing’ a body rests on the act of placing a body in the existing idea of the two gender categories, a girl or a boy which are socio-culturally intelligible as ‘human’.

In the light of Butlerian concept of gender as the accumulation of performative acts, the transgender acts or performances can be visualized as subversive acts that are subversive of the dominant gender system, instead of stigmatizing and labeling them as ‘abnormal’. This perspective would perhaps be able to make ‘living’ somewhat convenient for those performances that deviate from the socially approved performances.

Since the system recognizes only two ways of performing gender — masculine and feminine, the culturally unintelligible bodies are either forced to acquire desired shape
and perform gender in a ‘correct’ way or pushed out of the ‘human’ world. Corrective surgery is imposed upon individuals in order to restore anatomical ‘normalcy’. Thus ‘medicalization’ becomes an extension of the socio-cultural normative system. Foucault’s memoirs of the 19th century French hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin demonstrates how Barbin was raised as a woman but later, medical experts recognized him as “really” a man. Unable to adapt to this new identity, Barbin committed suicide. Living thus becomes intensely problematic for those who are anatomically unintelligible to the existing socio-cultural matrix.

Performing A Queer Identity: Link with the Next Chapter

The case is same with the eunuchs that inhabit Indian territories that also with ‘modernity’, strictly adhere to the ‘bi-gendered’ pattern of culture. In India the eunuchs or “hijras” (as they are popularly known) exist as a distinct ‘community’, constituted by ‘born’ hermaphrodites and castrated figures who indulge in ‘cross-dressing’. They are, quite literally, an ‘invisible’ group that exists on the fringe of society; but detached from the society of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. They are engaged in performing a queer identity—‘strange’ beings—males disguised as females. Such issues related to the representation of this ‘third’ gender that engages in a subversive performance would be discussed in the next chapter.

In our present structure of gender, with its dichotomous and permanent gender categories, they are deprived of the right to vote, claim employment and other benefits, unless done in the garb of one of the other genders. Thus a socially meaningful identity for a ‘human being’ is one where an individual can fit into the idea of being a ‘man’ or
a 'woman' that has been historically present in that particular society. Failure to
perform gender in a socio-culturally 'proper' or 'correct' manner, results in the denial of
legitimacy within the socio-cultural space. 'Disobedience' to the order of the gender
structure leads to punitive consequences.

Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture;
indeed those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished (Butler 1988:522).

The intricacy embedded in the binary structure of gender system is that if one performs
gender in an 'incorrect' manner, it will bring in severe consequences and thereby make
living quite difficult. On the other hand if gender is performed in a 'correct' manner,
then it is a kind of reassuring and consolidating the essential structure of gender.

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect,
and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender
identity after all (Butler 1988:528).

Conclude Theory and Move towards Analysis of Plays

Thus, to conclude the theoretical discussion and move towards the analysis of the plays
mentioned earlier, we may say that if gender is taken to be performative rather than
being the matter of some inner essence, it would perhaps be possible to envisage a space
for those that are victims of cultural marginalization and stigmatization for not being
able to fit into the essentialized gender structure.

If gender is regarded to be a matter of performance, it should be taken into account that
the way of performing oneself on the social stage is important. A gender performance
that complies with the existing 'normative pattern of gender' is rewarded with
acceptance and the opposite way of performing is viewed in a pejorative sense. Instead of expressing the ‘inner’ essence it is perhaps the performance of the existing idea of the essence which is important for an individual to earn some ‘legitimate’ place in the socio-cultural space.

One who deviates from the ‘normal’ tract are rigorously punished and pushed back to dark dungeons of illegitimacy and non-recognition. They are made to disappear from the centre-stage and made to live lives that are devoid of any kind of positivity and hope. The politics of stigmatizing individuals who perform their gender in a way that tends to transgress the binary structure and the consequent problems that such individuals are compelled to confront will be discussed and illustrated in the next chapter that analyzes gender performance in the ‘Indian’ socio-cultural context. For the fear of being denied legitimacy within the social world, individuals are left with no other options but to play roles that are socio-culturally approved.

There lies a gap between what one desires to be and what one has to be or in what manner an individual has to perform or represent himself/herself so as to earn social recognition. An individual has to be what others permit it to be. Mahesh Dattani’s play Bravely Fought the Queen highlights the gap between what one desires to be and what one has to be. Ultimately one has to be according to the social directives. This play exhibits how one is compelled to perform oneself or keep on playing roles and thereby indulge in self deception in order to be a part of the social order that encourages only hypocrisy and sham.

This is a play about performance; and uses the theatre to demonstrate how, in a world of hypocrisy, acting becomes a way of life (Dattani 2000: 230)
In this play, the ‘bonsai’ stands as a loaded signifier. Its roots are constantly trimmed and ‘made’ to acquire a shape that is desired by others. The significant aspect of a bonsai is that it is made to perform the role of the actual tree of which it is an imitation. It pretends to be a tree but actually it is not. Mimicry or imitation becomes the sole basis of its existence. The art of making a bonsai refers to the act of stunting the growth of a sapling and giving it a shape desired by the creator. Therefore it ends up in being an object that has to represent or perform itself according to the will of its creator. The creator of a bonsai keeps on stunting its growth and designs its branches according to his or her wish. In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Lalitha the bonsai maker sums up the art of making a bonsai in the following few words:

Lalitha: “You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and ... and stunt them” (244).

Thus the sapling chosen to be a bonsai becomes what its creator wants it to be. It attempts to imitate the original tree but ends up in being a “bizarre” thing that has attained a “dwarfed maturity” and bears small sized fruits. So pretension is the crux of a bonsai’s existence and it is the same in the life of the characters displayed in the play. They pretend to be something else or keep on engaging in role playing of one kind or the other but when their hidden identities are exposed they appear to be bizarre creatures of stunted growth whose roots are trimmed and who live in a world of fake or forced harmony. Their condition is very much like that of the bonsai, they pretend to be something but end up in exposing only grotesque images of their own selves.
Lalitha: “I myself prefer fruit bearing tree because when they are fully grown—I guess you can’t call them fully grown—but when they’ve reached their dwarfed maturity, they really look bizarre with pea-sized mangoes or oranges!” (pp. 246).

This theme of performing oneself, keeping in view what others in the society would be pleased to see us as or performing ourselves or pretending to be something that we are not in order to fulfill the expectations of the socio-cultural milieu in which one is located is extensively explored through the characters engaged in playing roles or pretending to be something else. The portrayal of the character of Dolly with a mud pack on her face in the very beginning of the play seems to initiate the theme of putting on a masked identity that hides the ‘real’ face.

The characters are shown to be trying to perform acceptable or in a sense stereotypical social roles as mother, wife, husband but as the plot develops certain grim realities are unveiled that tend to contrast their earlier performances. Dolly the wife of Jiten and perhaps the only ‘strong’ character in the play likes to talk about her daughter’s achievements in school but later on it is revealed that her daughter is a spastic child. Her husband Jiten pretends to be a stereotypical, dominating male figure who beats his pregnant wife Dolly at the persuasion of his mother. But when Jiten is made to confront the horrible ‘reality’ that his violent act of beating his pregnant wife Dolly is solely responsible for his daughter Daksha’s physical disability, he fails to bear it and ultimately proves to be a weakling and an escapist who is afraid of encountering the ‘reality’ of his daughter.
The play also demonstrates another kind of hypocrisy encouraged by the heteronormative pattern of Indian society. Heterosexuality and heterosexual relationship is regarded to be the norm of the society. Therefore homosexuality is regarded to be a taboo in the Indian socio-cultural milieu and as such gay people are often found trying to play the role of ‘happily married’ people. For fear of being denied a legitimate position within society. Gay people engaging in heterosexual marriage bring in unfavourable consequences both for himself and his spouse. Such relationships end up in being grotesque imitations of marital bliss very much like the bonsai that imitates the original tree.

In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the two gay characters Nitin and Praful are seen to be making arrangements for a similar kind of forced harmony by playing the ‘acceptable’ role of a heterosexual person. Nitin, the brother of Jiten marries Alka, the sister of his homosexual partner Praful. Nitin pretends to be a heterosexual male in order to cater to societal or public taste. but under the garb of this fake identity he keeps on engaging in homosexual activity with Praful and towards the end of the play they are exposed.

Nitin and Praful’s performance as socially acceptable heterosexual males brings in severe consequences for his wife Alka. She becomes a drunk, being deprived of ‘real’ marital bliss. The men’s performances that adhere to stereotypical societal roles are not capable of satisfying their individual desires, cravings, hopes and aspirations. They are compelled to play roles that contradict their own ‘true’ selves.
In this play, the playwright explores performance at several levels. The characters are compelled to perform stereotypical social roles: Dolly as the mother of a ‘capable’ daughter Daksha, the name itself contradicts the person. The word ‘Daksha’ refers to one who is capable but unfortunately she is a spastic child. Dolly keeps on misleading the audience by saying that her daughter Daksha is learning dance and that she is an accomplished dancer. But the horrible ‘reality’ comes out when Dolly performs the movements of a spastic person’s uncoordinated arm and neck with her eyes dilated.

Dolly: “You want to see her dance? They teach her dance where she goes! Only they call it physiotherapy. I’ll bring her tomorrow from her ...special school and she will dance for you! Like this...” (pp. 312).

While exposing her husband’s guilt in rendering their daughter into a spastic, Dolly performs this dance, that reveals the harsh ‘reality’ of her life and at the same time a performance that further helps in revealing the emotionally weak Jiten in stark contrast to his earlier performance as a ‘strong’, dominating male. Dolly’s performance dismisses two earlier performances – Dolly’s role of the mother of a daughter who excels in various fields including dance, and Jiten’s performance as the ‘man’ of the house.

The playwright than makes an interesting use of the image of the bonsai with an aim perhaps to symbolize the basic theme of the play – pretensions of being something that you are not. The masked ball is another kind of performance introduced in this play. When Dolly Alka and Lalitha discuss the masked ball, Dolly’s wish to send her daughter Daksha decorated with splendid dancing costume and jewellery, is interrupted
by Lalitha who is guided by the idea of the masked ball that signifies the act of presenting someone as someone else.

Lalitha: “That’s no good. You have to come as something you are not” (pp.297).

The moment she utters the central idea of the masked ball, Dolly picks up the bonsai and admires its little fruits. An interesting connection is drawn by the playwright between the performance in the masked ball, the bonsai and the performance of the characters. The major characters Dolly, Jiten, Alka, Nitin are all trying to perform socially acceptable roles while they have their own private worlds and this subject is relevantly symbolized by the bonsai and the masked ball, both of which refer to the act of pretending to be something that one is not. Lalitha who is told that Dolly’s daughter Daksha is a dancer says that she cannot perform as a dancer in the masked ball because she is actually a dancer. But Dolly who knows the ‘reality’ of her child wants to make her perform like a dancer because she is not a dancer. Dolly’s act of immediately picking up the bonsai perhaps is indicative of what is the ‘actual’ picture of her life and her child. Lalitha at this point is capable of visualizing only the socially acceptable role of Dolly as common mother of a ‘normal’ child, but it is Dolly who can immediately comprehend the connection between the bonsai and herself and also the image of her daughter that she has presented to the social world. All are engaged in playing roles or pretending to be something that they are not, perhaps for the sake of maintaining an acceptable social existence.

In this world of masked identities, where one performance leads to the other, it is perhaps possible to pursue one’s heart’s desire in the extremely private world of one’s
mind. Dolly's longing for pure love takes the shape of Kanhaiya who is only a figment of her imagination. Amidst a life that consists of a violent mother-in-law, a dominating, abusive and adulterous husband and a spastic child, perhaps Dolly finds some solace in her imagination. Kanhaiya, the name refers to Lord Krishna who is regarded to be the perfect lover in whose proximity, love transcends physicality and reaches the spiritual plane that provides mental peace and strength. Dolly, in spite of the heavy toll that life has taken from her emerges to be the strongest character in the play, who is capable of maintaining a patient existence amidst all odds of life.

The theme of playing an 'acceptable' role in order to be a part of the socio-cultural milieu in which one is situated is also explored in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. This play highlights how only certain kind of performances are allotted legitimacy while a deviating kind of performance may lead one to the peripheries, away from the 'normal' world of 'man' and 'woman'. Since 'difference' is not entertained by the essentialized social structure, an individual needs to perform an acceptable identity. Without conforming one cannot confront the binary. This play highlights how self-deception becomes a part of performing gender in the public. How will the "I" perform its gender, the way it wishes to perform or the way others or the society at large want it to perform? This play portrays gay characters that are struggling with themselves with their socially unacceptable identities and like the image of the bonsai in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, they are playing roles, constructing acceptable identities and are pretending to be something that they are not. They are pretending to be heterosexual man and woman while revealing their hidden identities in an enclosed room, away from the eyes of the common mass.
In this play Dattani tends to exhibit how the restrictive modern Indian society encourages hypocrisy and self-deception rather than self-expression. This play portrays gay life in India, a topic which is regarded to be taboo in the Indian society. The characters represent various aspects of gay people – the overt, the comfortable, the hypocritical and the escapist. These characters show how individuals are caught up in the web of behavioural patterns created by the society that should inevitably be performed in order to be a part of the ‘mainstream’ society.

In this play, except for Kiran all the other characters – Kamlesh, Sharad, Prakash, Ranjit, Bunny Singh, Deepali are gay/lesbian people. The play is set in one locale: the living room of Kamlesh, a fashion designer and a gay. He is entertaining a few guests of his kind. The atmosphere within the enclosed room, where all these people have gathered is ‘muggy’ – uncomfortably hot, sweaty and suffocating. The heat and the claustrophobia within the room parallels the claustrophobia in the lives of the gay characters inhabiting the Indian society. It is very difficult for a misfit to survive and therefore it becomes perhaps better to pretend or perform oneself in an acceptable way than to be a misfit and ostracized from the given society.

For the fear of being placed in the stigmatized category of homosexuals, a homosexual self never dares to articulate his/her desires. The ‘correct’ object of desire is already there, for a male it is a female and if the unexpected happens one will have to conform to the prevalent norm or will be pushed back to some dark, neglected corners. This fear of being marginalized perhaps compels one to conform and hide behind an acceptable identity. Deepali: “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 “(89).
Hypocrisy and role playing are the only two options laid down by a strictly heteronormative society and Bunny Singh, a popular T.V star, exhibits a tactful way of survival – "camouflage." He plays the acceptable role of a happily married heterosexual male. According to Bunny the best way would be to hide himself behind an acceptable social performance. Bunny: “Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings They can’t find you.” (70). Performance or role playing does not confine itself to his profession but extends to his real life situations. In front of his family and the society at large, Bunny performs the role of a happily married, ‘normal’, heterosexual self while his concealed selfhood finds articulation in the enclosed little world of Kamlesh’s apartment. He denies himself in public. The social self contradicts his selfhood as a gay person. Bunny Singh represents the distinction between one’s public performance or appearance and one’s private world.

Bunny: “The man that my wife loves does not exist. The only people who know me – the real me – are present here in this room. I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I donot exist in either…I deny them in public, but I want their love in private – I am a gay man. Everyone believes me to be the model middle class Indian man. I lied – to myself first…there’s no such person…”(102-103).

Homosexuality is the common factor for almost all the characters in this play but they interestingly represent different shades of the homosexual self. Ranjit is overt – he is least bothered about the ‘normal’, heterosexual world. Instead of conforming he wants to leave India. Ranjit: “I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can’t seem to be both Indian and gay” (pp.88).
Sharad and Prakash want to be 'straight.' They are escapists who want to be 'normal' human beings. They want to be "real" men and women roaming freely in the society.

Edward: “Look outside, look at the wedding crowd! They are real men and women out there!” (pp.99).

An interesting distinction is made between those who are socially acceptable and those who are not. The wedding crowd is marching ahead in front of the society with dignity while the homosexual individuals are revealing themselves in an enclosed room hiding from the eyes of society. Therefore Sharad and Prakash want to engage in a gender performance that will bring acceptance for them and thereby provide an opportunity to take breath in fresh, free air.

Through a limited setting and limited number of characters, Dattani skillfully portrays the complexities underlying the life of a homosexual self in the Indian social context. This play brings to light a 'marginalized' 'queer' culture of India, which is very much there, but whose existence is denied by the 'mainstream' Indian society. Like the play Bravely Fought the Queen, the play Muggy Night also explores how an individual is entrenched in a labyrinth of performances, where one is required to perform oneself in a socially desirable way in order to earn a legitimate space in the socio-cultural milieu.

Dattani's play Do the Needful also highlights the tussle between the self and the society. Here too, the social performance of an individual contrasts with his/her private selfhood. The title itself is very suggestive and the two major characters are to do whatever is needed for maintaining a non-controversial social existence. They try to find an intelligent way of survival - do whatever is socially needful and behind that
Alpesh is a homosexual person who is indeed doing the needful. He pretends to be a ‘normal’, married heterosexual man but secretly maintains gay relationships. Fortunately Alpesh gets a life partner Lata, who is in love with another person whom she cannot marry due to the objections from her family. With a sense of shrewd compromise, both pursue their heart’s desire. While doing whatever is socially needful, Lata continues her relationship with Salim and Alpesh continues his relationship with Trilok. All are ‘happy’!

A discussion of such plays shows how individuals at first conform, while insidiously confronting the binary. While performing oneself in public or before the society, one will have to an acceptable role because subversive performances are seldom offered any space. The homosexuals in a hetero-normative society like contemporary India are needed to suppress their individuality and perform the role of a heterosexual male. Therefore they can be regarded to have a less advantageous position. They have no other option but to conform. The condition of the eunuchs or hijras as they are commonly known in India is also intensely problematic. They do not seem to have any ‘legitimate’ space in the ‘Indian’ socio-cultural milieu. So the homosexuals and the hijras that are placed in socially ‘unacceptable’ categories are under direct oppression of the social structure.

The situation is not less problematic for one who is placed in the ‘acceptable’ categories. No one seems to enjoy a privileged position, since everyone will have to
adhere to the existing gender norm. A man who is supposed to be in a privileged position for instance is equally subjected to the norm that regulates life in the 'human' society. The existing ideas of gender categories structure 'human' life; those who 'belong' to the acceptable gender categories and those who do not, are equally subject to the hegemonic structure - no one is in a 'better' position. Everyone is required to perform in a socially desirable manner. A reading of Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* illustrates this. The play *Dance Like a Man* highlights the oppression of a male who fails to be a 'man' in the "real" sense. A male who is often thought to occupy a privileged position in the society, is demonstrated to be under the same pressure of the socio-cultural notions of performing one's gendered life.

This play seems to be directly questioning the very notion of gender categories - masculinity and femininity. What constitutes masculinity? What does the category called 'man' signify? In the world of gender certain things are arbitrarily put in the female domain and certain others in the male domain. Growing long hair, dancing, effeminate walk are considered to be the signifiers of femininity and accordingly, Amritlal, the dominating father figure cannot come to terms with the idea of his son Jairaj becoming a dancer. He wants his son to be a "manly" man adhering to the behavioural patterns sanctioned for masculinity. Dance an art form is also categorized as something that belongs to a feminine domain. It is relegated to the female world. Regarding this categorization of dance in the Indian context, there is a shift away from the earlier 'Nataraj' figure of Lord Shiva who is supposed to be the originator of the dance form - his rhythms were assertions of the power of creation. Modernity renders the quality effeminate. But in the same cultural milieu, dance was relegated to the
female domain, 'inaccessible' to men because of the cultural corrosion that it seems to have undergone with time. (The Devadasi system, for instance). And hence, dance even goes to threaten the masculinity of Jairaj, leaving him an effeminate, weak male in the eyes of his father and the world at large. In the body of the play, Jairaj’s father keeps on referring to the Devadasi to assert the view that dance is a ‘tainted’ form of art that will lessen his son’s ‘manliness’.

Amritlal further demarcates the world into two halves – the man’s world and the woman’s world, when he says: A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic (Dance Like a Man, 427).

Amritlal talks in terms of two gender categories that are essentially different from each other and have distinctive properties of their own. One has to perform the acts, the gestures or signifiers very carefully keeping in mind what things qualify as masculine and what as feminine. Amritlal wants his son to engage in a ‘manly’ performance – he should assume roles that suit his station in life as man of the family. But with Jairaj, ‘manly’ performance is disrupted by a ‘womanly’ performance (that of a dancer) and this overlapping of performances problematizes his existence since according to his father he cannot be both a male and a dancer simultaneously. In spite of the tremendous pressure from his father, Jairaj continues with his dancing – he engages in a subversive performance which is not regarded to be the ‘legitimate’ part of his social performance as a male.

Thus these plays show how performing oneself or acting out the culturally allotted gestures or behavioural patterns become an integral part of one’s social existence. Thus
the distinction between performance in a performed genre and 'ife could be challenged. Performance does not confine itself to stage shows but could be seen as a significant presence in 'real' life situations. We are perhaps always in drag. The Butlerian perspective that reads gender as a matter of performance is perhaps capable of widening the horizon of social 'legitimacy'. If gender is taken to be a matter of performing the existing model of gender, then the concept of 'normality' and 'abnormality' will appear to be irrelevant and that may further put an end to the stigmatization of non-normative gender performances.

Gender seems to be more a matter of performing oneself instead of expressing an 'inner' essence. It is an individual's performance which is more significant in determining one's gender identity. It is a 'drag' in everyday life. Butler discusses how a drag performance can challenge the concept of essential gender because it can show how outward appearance, dress, make-up and imitation of the behavioural patterns sanctioned for a certain gender category can subvert the existing model of gender norm. Through the aid of one's performance one can easily switch from one gender to the other. But nevertheless, the binaries are strictly imposed and individuals are compelled to adhere to the norm. If anyone tries to transcend the boundary or fails to perform in a socially acceptable way, one has to confront marginalization, stigmatization and would be relegated to the state of social non-recognition and expulsion like the hijra community of India. These issues would be discussed in the next chapter.
End Note

1. In the book *Judith Butler Reader*, edited by Sara Salih, we come across the terms 'non-recognition' and 'non-legitimation', that are used by Butler to refer to the horrible state of social exclusion encountered by those who are not able to fit into the socially approved options of discrete gender categories.

2. In his book *Mind, Self and Society*, George Herbert Mead discusses the issue of 'Symbolic Interaction', and talks about the intricate relationship that exists between the self and the society. Mead is of the opinion that while interacting with the society, the self acts or assumes a role which is predesigned for him/her. In other words, the self plays the roles of others.

3. Plato tried to suggest similarities between the world and the stage.

4. Thomas Hobbes writes about the idea of Theatre as a metaphor of life.

5. According to *A Modern Dictionary of Sociology*, functionalist sociology visualizes the society as an amalgamation of various parts that includes various roles. No part could be understood in isolation.

6. In his book *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty talks about gender identity as an act of imitating the "historically delimited" possibilities of a body. The idea of the body of a male or a female has been handed down to us by history and an individual is required to imitate those possibilities of expressing a body either as a male or as a female keeping in view the given idea of what is a male and a female.
Work Cited


