Chapter I

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In the existing social structure, gender is often read in terms of two discrete categories - man and woman - that are required to perform the normative ideas of masculinity and femininity. This binary structure demands conformity from the social subjects and seldom allows any space to those people who engage in a subversive performance. The moment one enters the arena of the ‘human’ world, one has to identify with anyone of the two ‘valid’ gender categories determined by the binary structure. It is mandatory for all who wishes to be a part of the ‘human’ world to conform to the dominant ideology of the binary structure. One has to perform ‘conforming’ acts since liminal gender acts are compelled to face stigmatization and social exclusion. The term liminality is derived from the latin word “limen” that signifies threshold. The concept of liminality was first used by Victor Turner in the context of social or cultural liminality that signifies those who are situated on the social or cultural margins. Afterwards the term has been used by various critics in order to refer to those who are occupying a neither here nor there position amidst society. In other usage, it refers to an in between state. In the context of my thesis, I have used the term liminal gender acts to signify a neither here nor there position that refers to the eunuchs for instance. Their liminal existence caused by their performance of liminal gender acts (neither man nor woman) is portrayed in Dattani’s play Seven Steps Around the Fire, and two film texts Tamanna and Sabnam Mousi that I have analyzed in my thesis. Moreover, the term liminal that refers to an in between position, a fluidity that tends to challenge any kind of fixity is central to the theoretical and textual analysis that I have undertaken in my thesis. The theoretical inputs of
Foucault, Butler and other theorists that are relevant to my work, try to speak against fixity in terms of gender. Similarly, the plays of Mahesh Dattani relevant to my thesis, also try to show that gender categories are not water tight compartments. No one is a ‘pure’ man or woman having masculine and feminine essence. We are in a sense liminal regarding our gender identity – we have our foot in both worlds and as such no feet in any fixed world of the discrete gender categories. Nevertheless, people are expected to be either a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ and those who engage in performing liminal gender acts are stigmatized. In most of Dattani’s plays, we can find the playwright playing with the concept of fixity in terms of gender and thereby he exposes the existence of liminality, an in between position that tends to break the socially valued stereotypes.

My thesis attempts to explore issues like representation or performance of one’s gender identity before the social world, repression of individuality as a consequence of the fixity of gender structure, stigmatization of non-normative behavioural patterns, paradox embedded in the essential structure of gender, gender identity as a social construct, subversion of gender stereotypes and other such issues that unravel the hidden paradoxes and complexities of the existing gender structure. I have made an extensive use of the theoretical ideas generated by thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler among others in order to discuss the issues of gender as a social construct, the denial of social recognition to those who fail to perform in a socially approved manner and the oppressive “power structure” (to borrow Foucault’s term) that delimits individual liberty to be oneself. Foucault’s theoretical stance highlights the mechanism of the “power structure” that always attempts to regulate individual life or identity. They challenge the essentialist approach to gender.
Within the Western theoretical framework, I would be addressing issues related to gender in the Indian social context and as a textual illustration of such issues related to compulsory binary structure of gender, its impact on individual life, identity or subjectivity and the significance of performance in one’s life while constructing one’s social identity, I read selected plays of Mahesh Dattani: *Dance Like A Man*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Tara*, *Muggy Night*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Do the Needful*. These plays highlight how all are caught up in the web of the hegemonic structures of gender. Every one shares the same fate and has to perform within the limits of socially intelligible possibilities of gender. One cannot go beyond the scope of ‘normal’ comprehension. Two film texts—*Tamanna, Sabnam Mousi*, and other cultural texts that are relevant to this project, are also analyzed.

Mahesh Dattani’s plays and the other cultural texts that I analyze are situated mostly in the ‘Indian’ socio-cultural milieu and the task of reading gender issues entrenched in ‘Indian’ cultural matrix with the help of Western theoretical tools seem to be difficult. But the fact that the Western taxonomy of gender holds good within the contemporary ‘Indian’ social system, tends to bridge the gap between these two seemingly ‘different’ cultures. Although the pre-modern society was different, the contemporary Indian social system adheres to the norm of Western modernity.

The Western pattern of gender as a system of discrete gender categories that strictly follows the norm of heterosexuality is seen to have gained a consolidated status in the Indian cultural domain, although in the Vedic age the rigid categorization of gender as either male or female and the subsequent expulsion of other varieties were scarcely entertained.
Vedic society was all encompassing, and each individual was seen as an integral part of the greater whole. Third gender citizens were neither persecuted nor denied basic rights...they were awarded their own particular status and welcomed as a part of civilized Vedic society (Wilhelm 2010: 17).

In the Indian socio-cultural milieu evidences of gender tolerance and allotment of space to gender varieties (the eunuch or third gender) can be found in the Indian scriptures like the Mahabharata. Arjuna the warrior hero transforms himself into a hermaphrodite. Arjuna’s role as Brihannala is not at all stigmatized.

In the Vedic society, there seems to be space for everyone, but the scenario changed perhaps with the advent of the Mughals and later on the British with whom entered the influence of Western modernity as well as the concept of gender binary as a system consisting of two discrete gender categories. The socio-cultural frame has undergone various changes along with the passage of time. The Mughal Empire that was established in Northern India criminalized homoeroticism. After the Mughals, the Europeans and especially the Britishers consolidated their roots on Indian soil and their advent not only changed the political scenario of India but also the socio-cultural milieu of India. The Western concepts that flourished during the early modern period touched Indian socio-cultural milieu. The Western norm of gender that approves the pattern of discrete gender categories that adheres to heterosexuality began to gain ground in India and the earlier tolerance to various kinds of gender roles began to change. The influence of Western modernity on Indian social structure will be discussed at length in one of the subsequent chapters.
In the modern West, the essential structure that recognizes only two gender identities has resulted in the Western concepts of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual,' instead of the usual gender identities for men. Such kind of an essentialized structure that provides the license of validity to heterosexuals and stigmatizes other forms of gender identity could be visualized in India also. In the hetero-normative structure of the Indian society, the transgenders or hijras as they are called in India occupy a meager space. Their liminal identity in the world of gender makes them outcasts and consequently pushes them out of the mainstream society towards the periphery of non-existence or an 'abnormal', 'shameful' existence.

In the contemporary modern social structure, gender is usually viewed as something fixed, and as such, the 'meaning' of the term gender is often restricted to signify received notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. This association of fixity with gender closes the possibility of difference and every individual is expected to perform their gender identity in a 'socially' desirable way. The tussle between performing oneself and confronting the hegemonic binary structure is the crux of human existence and it mostly results in representing oneself in a way designed or desired by the socio-cultural normative pattern of gender. The bonsai as has been used by Mahesh Dattani in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is perhaps a relevant image here where one pretends to be something that is desired by its creator and it just cannot be what it is. Role playing or performing becomes extremely significant in the life of a bonsai. Similarly, in the affairs of everyday life, an individual needs to imitate the signifiers of the socially acceptable idea of gender.
One is born into a world of gender which is already structured and one has to fit into the pre-existing format of that particular socio-cultural matrix and articulate oneself (or should be able to define oneself) through the language available. This very act of reciting or re-enacting the existing format of gender identity, tends to problematize the concept of gender as the expression of some inner essence, and brings in the notion of a body immersed in the hegemonic gender structures that arbitrarily puts a series of signifiers that go to formulate the gender categories. If we take these points into account, gender does not seem to be simply a matter of expressing some biological essence. Human beings do possess a biological body but the other external or social factors seem to be more prominent in fabricating the gendered self. One is entrenched in a socio-cultural matrix which determines how a body should represent its gender in public or how to perform oneself before the world.

Human beings exist in a social environment structured through language and symbols and this plays a much more influential role in determining how we behave than do the biological factors (Jackson 1998:63).

Although the essential notion of the gender categories is strictly imposed on ‘human’ society, certain questions tend to shake the consolidated structure of compulsory binary. The basic questions that need to be asked in this context could be summarized as follows:

How similar are the members of a particular category to each other? Will every member belonging to a gender category possess all the properties specifically allotted to that category? How clear are the boundaries of the discrete categories? Does the information
that an individual falls into a gender category tell us everything about the individual? Are the gender categories natural or artificially constructed? Do the gendered subject remains the same always? Do the properties associated with the category change over time, or remain stable? Are the approved gender identities expressive of some inner ‘reality’?

The answers to these questions challenge the dominant ideologies concerning gender roles and gender identity. Social identity refers to the common identification with a social category which creates the concept of a common identity among the individual participants. Categorizing males and females into socially prescribed gender roles create binaries, in which individuals feel they have to be at one end of a linear spectrum and must identify themselves as either man or woman. Biological differences between men and women are interpreted to create a set of social expectations which define the behaviors that are "appropriate" for man and woman and determine their different access to rights, resources, and power in society. A hermaphrodite who possesses a socially unintelligible body and cannot be placed in the acceptable gender categories is denied legitimacy in the ‘human’ world. Their identity becomes intensely problematic since they cannot be defined by the available linguistic categories ‘man’, ‘woman’ – they are both and none. The situation is same for all the members belonging to a specific social system. Everyone (whether a hermaphrodite or a male) is required to adhere to the dominant ideology that governs the world of gender norm and perform oneself accordingly.

Since gender identity is constructed by the social apparatus that comprises of various factors like society, culture, language, religion etc., gender seems to be a product
created by such factors rather than simply being the expression of some inner essence as I have mentioned earlier. When made to confront the binary, the so-called inner essence (if there is any) does not prove to be of any worth because one has to do what the social structure permits one to do. Instead of being the expression of some inner 'essence', gender seems to be a social construct, a matter of performance, where 'correct' imitation is eulogized and its contrary leads to punitive consequences. The nomenclature 'essence' itself is contradictory, when it is applied to gender. It is paradoxical because we talk about gender as the expression of some inner 'essence' but at the same time the normative structure denies the expression of an essence (if there is any) other than the 'essence' of society's choice. For instance, if gender identity is a matter of some 'essence' then where would we place those who differ from the socially approved 'essential' subject? The gender identity (or the expression of essence) of a hermaphrodite, can also be considered to be equally 'real'. And the undeniable existence of variations within the socially approved pattern tends to question the concepts of 'normal' or 'natural' associated with gender.

Regarding such issues related to gender, thinkers like Foucault, Butler, and several others have paid close attention to the troublesome ways in which modern society tends to accept essentialist definitions of what it means to be a male or a female, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual; and the roles of the social, cultural, linguistic, religious, medical codes in the fabrication of the gendered self. The gender specific attributes seem to be arbitrarily placed into each head - masculine and feminine. Personality traits, tastes or desires may vary from person to person. So the important question is what constitutes 'maleness' and 'femaleness'? They seem to signify certain
acts or traits that are arbitrarily placed under each head — masculine, feminine. For
instance, men are supposed to be mentally very strong and brave while females are
weak both physically and mentally. But these are stereotypes; can this reduction be
applicable to all men and women living in all time and all places? The signifiers that
constitute femininity and masculinity are arbitrarily allotted because (for example) there
seems to be no connection between being male and being brave because many instances
of female gallantry are easily available.

Gender essentialism, seems to predominate in the existing social system and as such the
‘norm’ stands as a qualifying agent that determines the essential qualities needed by one
to qualify as a human being. The identity of a human being rests solely on being able to
define oneself as either a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ according to the definitions provided by
language and the socio-cultural matrix in which one is entrenched. As I have mentioned
earlier, although a human being possesses a biological body; yet the factors like
language, society, law, religion and medical science are seen to be more prominent in
determining gender, regularizing the body and giving it a desired gender identity.
Language provides definitions of human identity and one need to fit oneself into these
socio-culturally permitted definitions provided by language.

A non-conformist individual is punished with a painful existence of social exclusion, a
horrible state of absently present — physically present but socially absent. The situation
will match with that of a subject destined to live in a house where there is no space
allotted for the subject — where and how to survive? Confronting the binary for a non-
conformist means to confront fundamental questions related to existence — survival and
death. Conformity leads to survival whereas non-conformity leads to the state of social
death (social exclusion) that jeopardizes the very existence of a human being. As it confronts the binary, individuality becomes extremely powerless. It has no other choice but to perform the socially acceptable script. Essentialism characterized by biological determinism assumes that gender resides within the individual in the form of personality traits and hormones.

The essentialist approach to gender as the expression of some inner essence now leaves room for some challenging thoughts offered by the social constructionist approach to gender that gathered momentum under the initiative of thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler amongst others. Foucault analyzes human sexuality from a social constructionist perspective. He tries to explain that human sexuality and gender identity is more a matter of social censorship rather than being a mere expression of essence. Foucault (1980)\(^2\) claimed that there is no “pre-social” sex drive, and that gender seems to be a social construct formulated by interactions among people, language and “discourse” of a culture rather than being an essence. Gender is made rather than born as posited by Simon de Beauvoir in her postulation that one is not born as a woman but rather one becomes a woman.

Foucault is a constant presence in the theoretical works of Judith Butler. Butler, following the path of Foucault, applied the idea of performance to gender. She is of the opinion that gender identity relies on performance or representation of the self to meet the requirements of the societal norm, and the failure to perform oneself in a socially acceptable manner may lead one to the dark dungeons of non-recognition and stigmatization. The system of compulsory heterosexuality is consolidated through the
cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes. The body is a medium of “dramatizing” or “enacting” cultural conventions. Butler says,

What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status (1988:520).

Judith Butler’s position slightly differs from the earlier feminists, in the sense that she finds it quite problematic to reconcile with the idea of the category called “woman”. She begins her criticism by seizing the central assumption of feminist theory which considers “woman” as a category. Butler is of the opinion that construction of a category called “woman” is highly complicated – how does one define it, and who does one include or exclude from this category? Moreover she finds it problematic to distinguish between sex (what we are) and gender (what we become). Since the body is conceived as a cultural locus of gender meanings, it becomes difficult to distinguish what aspects of the body are “natural” or free from the markers of culture. A non-‘acculturated’ body (that is, without the markers of cultural signifiers of gender) is perhaps impossible to find, since a body can be read or perceived only through the apparatus of culture in which it is immersed. “The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time”, says Butler in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (1998: 523).
Butler challenges the notion of gender as the expression of some inner essence and instead puts forward the view that gender identity conferred on an individual is an amalgamation of the signifiers assigned by the socio-cultural milieu in which one is entrenched. The attributes that are taken to be the essence of gender are actually signifiers selected and approved by the societal norm as ‘natural’ attributes. The Butlerian perspective offers a different way of visualizing the operational mode of gender. Butler finds it somewhat uncomfortable to reconcile with the idea of the fixity of gender structure that categorizes all under two discrete categories without paying heed to individual differences.

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 confer ‘human’ identity on us.

Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform, to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way (Butler 1998:527).

Butler uses the concept of “drag” that 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 gender 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 either of the two discrete gender categories and thereby try to be a part of the
existing structure. We are always in a performance or “drag” while engaging ourselves
in walking, talking, dressing and such other activities of our day to day life. It is the
representation of certain “acts and gestures” (which are regarded to be the signifiers of
specific gender categories), that locates us in the world of gender and enable others to
identify us through the idioms of gender.

An important point to note here is that Butler has talked about drag or cross dressing as
a parody of the essentialized notion of gender, but she has not taken into account the
Hijra culture embedded in the Indian society. The idea of the Indian hijra – male figures
dressed and made up as female seems to be an extremely relevant example of Butler’s
ideas formulated regarding the complex issues of gender. This issue will be discussed in
the fourth chapter.

To return to Butler’s ideas we need to look at Butler’s idea of gender as performative.
She is of the opinion that the performative acts that are performed by individuals to
attain gender identity, constitutes or makes these gender categories. Thus, in order to be
a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’, one will have to perform those acts that are regarded to be
masculine or feminine respectively. Butler says that gender is something that people
“do” rather than a quality they possess; as constituted by performative acts rather than
by some inner essence.
Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler 1998:519).

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. 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 words of Judith Butler:

The mark of gender appears to “qualify” bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, “is it a boy or girl?” is answered. Those bodily figures that do not fit into either gender fall outside the human... (1990: 151).

The body of a hermaphrodite violates the code 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, dress up like a ‘man’ and be acceptable; or dressing like a ‘woman’ and engaging in a subversive performance, become a ‘strange’ creature. Dressing up and wearing makeup, 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 patterns. 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.

The act of performing gender seems to be more important than the so called essence because it is the performance that catches the eye of the beholder and to maintain an acceptable identity one can try to assume a non-‘controversial’ role, ‘camouflage’ oneself and thereby be a ‘legitimate’ part of the social world. It is the performance that goes a long way in determining one’s social status and as such one need to perform several roles ‘accurately’, keeping in view the norm. In the process perhaps individuality gets obliterated and pushed back to some dark corners from where it is difficult to re-emerge.

The major texts that focus upon gender issues relevant to this project and construct the theoretical framework for my study are Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) which argues that gender categories are culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. Gender is theorized as ‘performative’. Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive limits of “Sex” (1993)
emphasizes the role of repetition in performativity. *Undoing Gender* (2004) looks at the medical treatment of intersex and the suicide of David Reimer, due to re-affirmation of sex by medical experts. *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), observes the formation of the subject by societal norm which is beyond the control of the subject. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* argues that sex / sexuality are socio-linguistically constructed phenomena. Foucault's *Memoirs of the French Hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin* addresses the case of Barbin, which is similar to that of David Reimer. I speak of these texts at length in my review of literature.

Butler opens a new vista of post-feminism that critiques the basis of identity and gender. Butler also critiques the distinction often made between sex and gender. The distinction drawn between sex and gender renders the notion that sex is biological and "pre-discursive", while gender is culturally constructed. Butler argues that a sexed body cannot signify without gender identity and the apparent existence of sex prior to discourse and culture is merely an effect of the functioning of gender. Thus both sex and gender are constructed. Butler in her book critiques Beauvoir and Irigary who assumes that there exists a female "self identical being" in need of representation. Butler is of the opinion that the arguments of these two feminists 'hide' the impossibility of being a gender at all. Gender is performative and no being or gender identity exists behind the acts since these acts constitute the illusion of the stable gender identity. So being constituted by the practice of performance, the gender man or woman remains open to "resignification". Butler advocates a kind of feminism that dispenses with the idea of the existence of gender categories and eliminates the gendered pronouns.
Since Judith Butler is a major presence in this project, let me briefly introduce her work. Judith Butler is currently Maxine Elliot Professor, in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature and the Co-director of the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. She was awarded her Ph.D. degree in Philosophy from Yale University in 1984, for her work on French Reception of Hegel. Judith Butler is a well known name in the theoretical domain, who has authored *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (Columbia University Press, 1987); *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990); *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993); *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997); *Excitable Speech* (Routledge, 1997), *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (Columbia University Press, 2000); *Precarious Life: Powers of Violence and Mourning* (2004); *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (with Gayatri Spivak in 2008); *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009); and *Is Critique Secular?* (Co-written in 2009). She has been awarded the Andrew Mellon Award for Distinguished Academic Achievement in the Humanities. Butler is a Jew, and she plays an active role in issues of gender and sexual politics, human rights, anti-war politics, and Jewish Voice for Peace. Her theory of “Gender Performativity” and the application of concepts like drag in everyday life have earned her immense fame as a theorist of extra ordinary perspective.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender ‘performativity’ visualizes gender as a mode of performing or representing oneself adhering to the existing societal norm instead of
taking gender to be the expression of some inner essence. An analysis of Butlerian theoretical perspective enables us to question several aspects of gender discriminations, biases and the arbitrary and taken for granted concepts associated with the operational mode of gender. For instance, such a kind of a theoretical stance persuades us to question whether the stigmatization of individuals (by labeling them as ‘abnormal’) who defy the normative pattern of gender is justified or not. Does patriarchy refer to a fixed system where a male always dominates a female or can there be a reversal of role within the patriarchal system? Are the signifiers specifically allotted to ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ arbitrary or are they constructed on the basis of some logical infrastructure? My thesis attempts to explore such kind of issues in the plays of Mahesh Dattani.

As I have mentioned earlier, in my thesis, I endeavour to read the plays of Mahesh Dattani and a few film texts that seek to establish a connection between the theoretical framework and its implementation in performed genres like drama and films. Drama/theatre as a “performed genre” relies upon role-playing as its basic requirement. Drama thus resides in the realm of the ‘make-believe’ where the actors are often seen trying their best to follow the principle of “as if” (Schechner 2003: xvii). An actor enacts a ‘role’ by representing himself “as if” s/he is what the ‘role’ demands him/her to be. Performance on stage, in some sense, seems to match with ‘real’ life situations. Role-playing plays a pivotal role in life while constructing and performing one’s identity. Butler’s “performative” theory of gender, which has been discussed above, endeavours to observe how gender works in terms of the stage. A human body has to represent itself “as if” it is what the acceptable gender role demands it to be. Also, the
individuality of an actor and the pre-designed role s/he performs on stage may not coincide and this situation can be seen to parallel that of a gay person ‘playing the role’ of a happily married man in ‘real’ life. The boy playing girl on stage may moreover be taken as a model for gender imitation – an individual imitates an acceptable gender role in ‘real’ life situations.

Before turning to the plays that are relevant to this project, let us briefly introduce Mahesh Dattani, the playwright. Dattani is often described as one of India’s most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English. He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi award. Born on August 7, 1958, Mahesh Dattani received his early education at Baldwin’s High School and then went on to join St. Joseph’s College of Fine Arts and Sciences, situated at Bangalore. Before entering the world of theater, Dattani worked as a copywriter in an advertising firm. He has also worked with his father in the family business. In 1984 he founded his playgroup 'Playpen' and in 1986 he wrote his first play. *Where There's A Will*. Since then he has written many plays such as *Final Solutions, Tara and Dance Like A Man*. All the plays of Mahesh Dattani are based on the social issues. Apart from theater Mahesh Dattani is also actively associated with the field of film making. His films have been appreciated all over the world. Some of Dattani’s plays were successfully adapted into films. One of his films *Dance Like A Man* has won the award for the best picture in English awarded by the National Panorama. His films like *Mango Souffle, Morning Raga* are thought provoking films that touch the hearts of people. Besides being a playwright and a director, Mahesh Dattani is also a teacher. He teaches theater courses at the summer session programmes of the Portland University, Oregon, USA and in
other parts of the world. He also imparts training in the field of acting, directing and play writing at his own theater studio in Bangalore.

The plays of Dattani often endeavour to unravel those ‘realities’ that are concealed by acceptable realities. Most of his plays expose the complexities confronted by individuals being situated within strictly hetero-normative social structures. Dattani makes an attempt to bring to center-stage marginal issues (alternative sexuality) and beings (eunuchs). He explores gay and transgender issues in plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Do the Needful*, and *Seven Steps around the Fire*, and questions the rigid categorization of masculinity and femininity and their socially approved attributes in plays like *Tara* and *Dance like a Man*.

The major plays of Mahesh Dattani are: *Where There's A Will, Bravely Fought The Queen, Dance Like A Man, Do The Needful, Final Solutions, On A Muggy Night In Mumbai, Seven Steps Around The Fire, Thirty Days In September*. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with gay love, a taboo topic for the middle class Indian society, since homosexuality is strictly prohibited in Indian society. The play is set amidst claustrophobia, and the “muggy” atmosphere within the room parallels the claustrophobia of gay life in India. The homosexual characters reveal themselves in an enclosed room – screened from eyes that would perceive them as ‘queer’, ‘shameful’, ‘misfits’. The typical Indian gay, Bunny Singh is significantly an actor by profession, prefers “camouflage” (Dattani 2000: 70) and seems to draw an interesting parallel between performance on screen and gender performance. Ranjit reveals the impossibility of being an Indian and a gay simultaneously: “… I can’t seem to be both Indian and gay” (Dattani 2000: 88). In *Bravely Fought the Queen* the artificial world of
Tara is a play about the reshaping of a ‘body’ to meet the requirements of a gendered anatomy. Medicalization is seen here as an extension of the socio-cultural normative system. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body is a historical idea - “man is a historical idea and not a natural species”. (1962:198). A fixed definition of the body has been handed down to us and medical science too attempts to ‘correct’ a body in order to satisfy this “historical idea” of the human body. Tara and Chandan, (perhaps an androgynous figure) share the same womb, but as soon as they enter the socio-cultural domain this unified self is forced to acquire the identities of discrete gender categories.

Apart from the drama texts, two film texts that are analyzed are *Tamanna* and *Sabnam Mousi*. Although ‘drama’ and ‘film’ are vastly different modes of representation, there seem to be some affinities between these two artistic genres. Film screenplays could also be read like drama scripts. Martin Esslin makes use of semiotic theory in tracing drama on stage and on screen. Andre Bazin (in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ) suggests that certain techniques and situations of drama that had degenerated in the course of time, have re-emerged in cinema. “Both media are collaborative artworks and work in polyphony” (Chaudhuri 2005: 66).

Mahesh Dattani has adapted some of his plays into films: *Dance like a Man*, and *Mango Soufflé*, both of which are of special interest to this study. A similar kind of approach can be seen in the film *Tamanna* by Mahesh Bhatt. In an unusual fashion, Bhatt tries to exhibit sublime human values incorporated in the personality of a hijra called Tiku. The director Mahesh Bhatt makes two different kinds of representations of hijras in this film - a group of stereotypical hijras and the other is Tiku – a contrasting figure. We are
shown complex sides of a “hijra lifestyle”, one being more familiar than the other (Tiku) within Indian society. Bhatt has explored issues like parenthood, friendship and many more in relation to a hijra. *Shabnam Mousi* is another film that represents the hijra community, portraying a community of hijras within their social/cultural ethos.

In the Indian popular cultural domain, films play a major role in shaping the consciousness of the audiences. *Tamanna* and *Shabnam Mousi* are two Hindi films that attempt to represent on celluloid what it means to be a transgender in Indian cultural milieu. While such films are few and far between, these have not only allowed space, but have made transgender issues the focus of their gaze. My study will look at both the marginal and comic space allocated to the representation of the hijras in Indian cinema, as well as analyze these two texts that are ‘about’ them.

The film *Tamanna*, represents a Muslim hijra who is not a stereotype, dresses and behaves like a male. Tiku (Paresh Rawal) lives in human society with his best friend Salim, thus highlighting the fact that hijras can live with men and women. The film does not show any kind of sexual relationship between Salim and Tiku, breaking another stereotype. The climactic point arrives when Tamanna learns that Tiku is a hijra, and responds with the socially conditioned prejudice that allows no space for the “third” gender. Mahesh Bhatt, the director, has made two different kinds of representations of hijras – including a group of “stereotypical” hijras also in his film. We are shown complex sides of a “hijra lifestyle”, one being more familiar than the other: (Tiku) within Indian society. Bhatt has explored issues like parenthood, friendship and other issues in relation to a hijra.
"Shabnam Mousi" is another film that represents the hijra community, portraying a community of hijras within their social/cultural ethos. Unlike Tiku in "Tamanna," Shabnam is a stereotypical hijra in the sense that she cross-dresses, dances for a living, keeps her hair long and lives with the hijra community. But like Tiku, Shabnam too is endowed with many positive qualities. Like Anarkali in Dattani's play "Seven Steps Around the Fire," Shabnam is accused of murdering another hijra (her mother). Shabnam manages to escape from prison where she is brutally beaten up. She later becomes a successful political figure, after overcoming various obstacles. The story of Shabnam is the story of a hijra proving "her" worth – a journey from despair to hope.

To return to the discussion of the gender issues relevant to my thesis, it may be said that it becomes almost mandatory for all to conform to the dominant idea of gender roles or discrete gender categories irrespective of individual tastes, desires or aspirations. Certain codes pertaining to the mode of dressing, walking, talking, behaving and such other aspects of everyday life, prevails in the world of gender and everyone needs to follow the pre-existing codes of conduct. A human anatomy or a human self needs to fit into the definitions of 'male'/'female' and exhibit 'masculinity' and 'femininity' respectively. It is never taken into account whether the behavioural patterns sanctioned for 'masculinity' for instance suits an individual or not. To be a part of the social world, one has to conform or else will be banished as an outcast, and since there is practically no world outside the social world there is no other option except maintaining an obliged existence amidst the hegemonic social structure.

When individuality confronts the binary structure, its very existence is threatened and the towering binary structure usually wins the race. Individuality or selfhood can never
dare to assert itself since a meaningful social existence rests on the act of performing the behavioural patterns sanctioned for masculinity and femininity sincerely or one’s conformity to the dominant ideology of gender.

The behavioural patterns sanctioned for masculinity and femininity varies with time and across culture. For instance Michel Foucault’s investigation in the Roman, Greek and Indian society reveals that the concept of abnormality or perversity are constructs that seldom had any existence prior to the 19th century. Such kind of counter arguments compel us to allot some space to the social-constructionist point of view that offers a perspective by dint of which gender identity is regarded to be the replica of a socially constructed phenomenon ruled by the yardsticks of normality and abnormality. The fear of being denied human identity compels one to hide behind the mask of an ‘acceptable’ identity. The process of putting on an acceptable identity may lead to self alienation that can perhaps create inconvenience for the self and this inconvenience has to be tolerated as a survival strategy for the sake of managing a space to live amidst the normative structure. The very survival of a social subject demands conformity to the norm.

The desire to kill someone for not conforming to the gender norms by which subjects are supposed to live means that ‘life’ itself requires the norm, while living outside the norm involves placing oneself at risk of death- sometimes actual death, but more frequently the social death of delegitimation and non-recognition (Butler in Salih 2004:11).

In my work I also propose to discuss the politics of stigmatizing non-normative gendered/sexual practices and observe how difficult life is for those who fail to conform or how rigorously norm is imposed on the social subject at the cost of extreme
inconvenience to the individual selfhood, and would also try to focus on the arbitrariness of the signifiers associated with the discrete gender categories. For these purposes, the condition of the Indian hijras would be taken into account and their representation in the drama and film texts mentioned earlier. The object of this thesis is to offer a critique of the factors that reinforce binary gender normativity and thereby highlight the conceptual weakness of the norm. For instance, the signifiers that constitute the socially approved gender identity of an Indian woman may vary from that of a woman living in any other country belonging to the Western world.

My thesis consists of five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. In the following few pages, there is a brief description of the chapters that constitute the thesis. The proposed chapters of my thesis are an amalgamation of the theoretical framework and an analysis of the dramatic texts that throw light on the 'Indian' socio-cultural milieu. The first chapter is an introduction to my thesis. The second chapter is entitled **The Compulsory Binary and Individuality: Anatomical Dissection of Gender in *Tara***. This chapter attempts to discuss and define the compulsory binary structure of gender or in other words gender essentialism and its impact on individual existence being placed within this rigid normative structure. What happens to individuality or selfhood when it is pitted against the backdrop of essentialism? Selfhood/individuality has to encounter intense repression due to the essentialized notion of gender that demands uniformity from all the members of a particular social context. The self is subject to the social order. From the theoretical perspective also, we could take into account the regressive journey of selfhood from a state of supreme power to a state of
powerlessness. The concept of the Cartesian “Cogito” provided enormous power to the self.

This chapter discusses the compulsory binary structure of gender and the problematic situations encountered by individuals while confronting the fixed and arbitrary nature of the binary structure that demands uniformity of behaviour from all the subjects belonging to a specific socio-cultural matrix. It also analyzes the play *Tara* that demonstrates the anatomical dissection of gender in order to fulfill the demand of the compulsory binary. This chapter looks at gender essentialism, tries to trace its genesis and its present status – its hold on the contemporary social system. The discussion will move on to the shift from gender essentialism to the social constructionist approach to gender issues by foregrounding the theoretical works of Foucault and Butler among others. As a literary illustration of these issues, the play *Tara* is discussed. The play suggests, among other issues, the power of the compulsory binary that celebrates its victory in the anatomical dissection of the conjoined twins Tara and Chandan. The societal norm has been internalized to such an extent that in order to fulfill the prescription of the social norm, the mother of the conjoined twins, does not hesitate to cause fatal harm to her girl child. The chapter concludes with the stress on gender as a matter of social construct that stands upon the act of performing the existing norm of gender prevalent in a particular socio-cultural milieu.

The third chapter entitled, *Performance and Life: The Theme of ‘Role Playing’ in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani*, discusses the significance of ‘role-playing’, ‘performing or representing oneself on the stage of the social world, where one exists or establishes his/her identity only by the aid of engaging oneself in one kind of performance or the
other. Gender identity seems to be a matter of performing the existing societal script of gender as has been pointed out by Judith Butler:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (1998:526).

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. For the discussion of such issues related to gender, identity and performance in individual life, I would be referring to the theoretical insights of Butler, Goffman and other relevant thinkers. Then as a textual representation of such issues I will take into account Dattani’s plays viz—Bravely Fought the Queen, Tara, Do the Needful, Dance like a Man, Muggy Night in Mumbai, Seven Steps Around the Fire. Such plays of Mahesh Dattani shows 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 it is required that I clarify the usage of the term ‘norm’ in the context to 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 norms 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 losing a ‘legitimate’ place in the human world. But the idea of gender norm could be subverted by the idea of putting on, wearing or making up a gender identity and this notion would refer to Butler’s concept of ‘drag’.

The fourth Chapter entitled Subversive Performance and Social Exclusion: Portrayal of Eunuch Life in Seven Steps Around the Fire and Two Film Texts – Tamanna, Sabnam Mousi, discusses the condition of the eunuchs situated in India. It throws light on their lifestyle and their status in the Indian society. The eunuchs as a community of people engaging in “drag” or cross-dressing and performing an altogether different gender identity, is exclusively visible in India. Even though the existence of intersexed people have been recognized, medical literature and physicians still insist upon ‘male’ and ‘female’ as the natural options. The condition of the eunuchs that inhabit Indian territories is very inconvenient, because the existing Indian social system strictly adhere to the ‘bi-gendered’ pattern of culture. India adheres to the norm of patriarchal social system that gives space to various stereotypes. It also takes into account the change of notion regarding the third gender. Historically transgender figures were allowed adequate space in the Vedic society of India, but this scenario changed due to the influence of colonial modernity.

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 fringes of society; but detached from the society of 'man' and 'woman'. They are thought to have special powers of blessing on occasions like childbirth and marriage. They perform dance on such occasions and thereby their livelihood. They take female names and overtly imitate 'womanly' mannerisms. As a textual representation of the issues related to eunuchs inhabiting the Indian territory, the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and two film texts, *Tamanna* and *Sabnam Mousi* are analyzed.

Then there is the concluding chapter that concludes the thesis. Thus this thesis aims at highlighting the complexities and problems encountered by individuals while confronting the social structure that exercises an authoritative power over its subjects by compelling them to conform to the existing script of a meaningful social existence since a deviating kind of representation of oneself is never entertained. In this regard, the theoretical ideas of Foucault and Butler have widened our horizons and have persuaded us to rethink about the taken for granted 'realities'. The factor that establishes a link between the theoretical inputs of Foucault and Butler and the plays of Dattani is that all of these works are trying to raise its voice against the taken for granted concepts that reigns supreme in a particular socio-cultural domain and tries to show how it cripples individuality. It also highlights the negative consequences of stigmatization of those who transgresses the 'normal' tract. It looks at the structure of the Indian social system that strictly adheres to the norm of compulsory binary; strictly prohibits homosexuality and stigmatizes the eunuchs commonly known as the “hijras”. In other words there is no place for those who are other than 'male', 'female' or heterosexual. Moreover a male is expected to carry out the stereotypical notion of 'masculinity' (that perhaps signify a
brave, strong and sturdy image) and in the same way a ‘female’ is expected to exhibit
the stereotypical notion of ‘femininity’ prevalent in the Indian socio-cultural matrix.
The ‘master’ narrative of Indian culture seems to approve certain ways of representing
oneself and disapproves certain other.

Dattani the playwright seems to be endeavouning to subvert the ‘master’ narrative of
Indian culture by digging up the inherent paradoxes that lie within the pattern. Dattani’s
plays keep on struggling to bring those controversial issues that have the power to
challenge the socially approved stereotypes. The plays of Dattani unveil the nude
‘reality’ that the normative and stereotypical pattern of Indian social milieu encourages
only hypocrisy. For the fear of being expelled from the social domain, or for the fear of
being provided a less dignified position, individuals pretend to conform to the social
world and thereby suppress their ‘real’ selfhood. In his attempt to penetrate beneath the
veneer of ostensible ‘reality’, he ends up in subverting the existing stereotypes. His
plays are subverting those stereotypes that are often thought to be fixed. For instance,
in his play Dance like a Man, the playwright subverts the stereotype associated with the
‘power-play’ of patriarchy that considers only woman as the receiving end of the
oppressive power structure of the patriarchy. Here a male patriarch is oppressing
another man, his son Jairaj. A stereotypical ‘male’ figure in the ‘Indian’ context is
supposed to be both mentally and physically strong and dominating. In the play,
Bravely Fought the Queen, the strong, dominating wife-beater Jiten is exposed to be an
escapist who fails to bear harsh reality. It is his wife who emerges to be one of the
strongest characters.
Again the stereotypes associated with gender roles always consider male as the dominating patriarch oppressing females but Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and Bharati in the play *Tara* are presented as 'surrogate' patriarchs---females oppressing females. The playwright is thus subverting the existing stereotypes and thereby complicating the distinctive gender categories----'weak' man/'strong' woman, female 'patriarch'/oppressed 'male'. Such kind of miscellaneous issues related to gender, identity, subjectivity, 'performativity' will be discussed in the chapters that constitute my thesis.

**Review of Literature**

My preliminary research revealed no doctoral/research works that might have already been undertaken in my chosen area that focuses on the theory of gender performativity, rigid, generalized, binary structure of gender and individual differences in the context of Indian society and it’s representation in literary/film texts. However, there has been some research works on related areas. For the purpose of conducting research I have used certain texts that have helped me in formulating the thesis that consists of theoretical, literary and film texts.

The Western theoretical tools that equip me to construct the theoretical framework of my thesis incorporates especially the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among others like Lacan, Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig and several others. Foucault in his works, offer a critique of various social institutions, most notably
psychiatry, medicine, and the prison system, along with his theories on the history of sexuality. His theories generally focus on power and the relation between power and knowledge, his ideas concerning "discourse" in relation to the history of Western thought, have been discussed and applied at an ample scale. Foucault applied the social constructionist paradigm to the study of human sexuality. He argued that gender identity, or human sexuality is subordinate to social construction rather than being a matter of natural essence. His work is often described as postmodernist or post-structuralist. Foucault is credited with the composition of several thought provoking texts like *Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic, Discipline and Punish, Order of Things, Archeology of Power, History of Sexuality* and many else.

In his book *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault tends to question the concept of "normalcy" in his discussion on the Great Confinement of the 17th century Europe—the process of confining, locking up and institutionalizing "unreasonable" members of the population. Then in the eighteenth century, madness came to be seen as the opposite of Reason, and, ultimately, in the nineteenth century the opposite or reverse of reason was declared as mental illness and madness lost its power and was silenced by Reason. Foucault further examines the rise of scientific and "humanitarian" treatments of the insane. In his famous work *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault applies the social constructionist paradigm to the study of human sexuality. It consists of three books that were published before Foucault's death in 1984. The first volume, *An Introduction* was published in France in 1976, and translated into English in 1977. In this volume he talks about the "repressive hypothesis, "He shows that human sexuality which is often thought to be a natural essence is controlled by the societal norm and is constructed by
the norm of heterosexuality that stands on gender binary. The second and third volume, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of The Self*, respectively dealt with the role of sex in Greek and Roman society. It reveals that homosexuality is a modern concept, since in the ancient Greek and Roman societies; homosexuality was not regarded to be taboo. Stigmatization of homosexuals and the attitude of disregarding behavioural patterns that defies the norm of heterosexuality is a construction of the modern society. Foucault book, *Birth of the Clinic*, highlights how the "medical gaze" works as an extension of the societal power structure and as such takes on the responsibility of correcting or manipulating human body. Foucault's another book *Herculine Barbin* is the memoirs of a 19th century French hermaphrodite who was brought up as a girl but the medical experts declared that her "true sex" was that of a male. Being unable to cope with this newly conferred gender identity, she committed suicide. This book shows how gender identity is a matter of social construction. One is required to obey the social instructions regarding the dominant idea of gender prevalent in a particular society.

The works of Judith Butler that are very relevant to my project are as follows: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)

*Gender Trouble* was first published in 1990. The crux of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* is her act of challenging the coherence of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. She advocates that the natural-seeming coherence, for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies and feminine desire in female bodies is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized bodily acts. These stylized bodily acts, in due course of time establishes the appearance of an essential gender. It is in this seminal work, Butler famously theorizes gender, along with sex and sexuality, as
performative. According to Butler, the performance of gender, sex, and sexuality, is not a voluntary choice but a reiteration of the existing norm. While theorizing gender, Butler follows the path showed by Foucault. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) tends to clarify the interpretations and supposed misreading of the theory of performativity that visualizes the enactment of sex/gender as a daily choice. With this aim in view, Butler emphasizes the role of repetition in performativity, by highlighting Derrida’s theory of “iterability” or repetition. Butler highlights J.L Austin’s concept of the “performative utterance” and talks about the ability of words to “do things”. Butler’s another work; *Undoing Gender* (2004) highlights her reflections on gender, sex, sexuality, psychoanalysis and the medical treatment of intersex people. Butler discusses how the norm is internalized and an individual performs the existing script of gender without being conscious of it. While discussing the condition of intersex, Butler takes into account the case of David Reimer, a person whose sex was medically "reassigned" from male to female after a botched circumcision at eight months of age. This case is quite similar to that of Foucault’s Herculine Barbin. *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) discusses Butler’s theory of subject formation and for this purpose she borrows the ideas of Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Laplanche, Adriana Cavarero and Emmanuel Levinas, Butler theorizes the subject in its relation to the social environment which is constituted by a community of others and the social norm that is beyond the control of the subject. The subject is subordinate to the outer environment sanctioned by the social order.

The other books that are relevant to my thesis are Serena Nanda’s *Neither Man or Woman: the Hijras of India* (1990). It is a cultural study of the Hijras of India, a
religious community of men who dress and act like women. It focuses on how Hijras can be used in the study of gender categories and human sexual variation. She questions the Western conception of gender that forces all to choose to be one of the two socially sanctioned permanent categories of gender 'male' and 'female'. Zia Jaffrey’s *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* (1996), focuses upon the hijra community of India that consists of born hermaphrodites and castratis who dress as women and live together. Empathizing with their sense of otherness, she pursued the story of their semi-secret existence. Jaffrey sensitively investigates the mysteries associated with this marginalized community. Charlotte Sutherell’s *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing and Culture* (2004) is a study of transvestism. Cross-dress is analyzed here in a cross-cultural context to highlight the cultural responses to cross-dressing especially in Britain. This book contains a section on Indian Hijras—“Disorder within the Pattern: the Hijras of India”, which provides a good amount of information about the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of hijra life style. Gilbert Herdt’s *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (1994) challenges the accepted gender categories. It questions the idea of natural, universal gender and invites the reader to move beyond the limitations of dualistic thinking. Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (2005) focuses on the religious and kinship structures of hijra community. Reddy argues that alternative genders are not rigid categories but multiple, changing identities shaped by a variety of sexual and social forces. Reddy challenges Foucault’s notion of a modern homosexual persona and the idea of a coherent universal gay identity.
While the above are full length books, several relevant scholarly articles focus upon my broad area of study. Laurence W. Preston’s “A Right to Exist: Eunuchs and the State in Nineteenth Century India” (*Modern Asian Societies*, Vol. 21, 1987) makes an attempt to trace the history of the hijras of Western India before 1857. He also looks into what happened to the hijras after the British Conquest. Robert P. Goldman’s “Transsexualism, Gender and Anxiety in Traditional India” (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol 113, No 3, Jul-Sep 1993) discusses some salient examples of transsexualism drawn from the religious and mythological texts of ancient and medieval India. He attempts to analyze the construction of gender, power and authority in a traditional patriarchal society. In an India-specific work, A.M. Shah’s article “A Note on the Hijadas of Gujarat”. (*American Anthropologist*, New Series Vol 63 No.6, 1961) looks at the hijras of Gujarat whom he has come to know both as a field worker and as a native of Gujarat.

**Review of film texts**

Hijra characters have very often made their appearance in Indian cinema as comic relief. A notable turning point occurred in 1974 when real Hijras appeared in a song and dance sequence in *Kunwaara Baap* (‘Virgin Father’). We also find Hijras in the Hindi film *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977). They accompany one of the heroes, Akbar in a song entitled “Tayyab Ali Pyar Ka Dushman” (“Tayyab Ali, the Enemy of Love”). One of the first sympathetic portrayals of Hijra was Mani Ratnam’s *Bombay* (1995). In 1997 the film *Tamanna* directed by Mahesh Bhatt, starred actor Paresh Rawal in the central role as Tiku, a Muslim hijra who raises a young orphan Tamanna (played by Pooja.
Bhatt). Manoj Bajpai plays the role of Salim, Tiku's friend. In this film, Paresh Rawal and Manoj Bajpai prove themselves to be performers of great depth. Hijras are also seen in Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (2005). There is a brief appearance in the 2004 Gurinder Chadda's film *Bride and Prejudice* of the hijras singing to a bride-to-be in the marketplace. *Shabnam Mousi* was made in 2005 on the life of a eunuch politician of the same name, directed by Yogesh Bharadwaj, and the title role was played by Asutosh Rana. Instances of cross-dressing in Hindi films are too numerous to be cited individually, and are mostly used, as with the hijras, in terms of comic relief. In the film *Welcome to Sajjanpur* also we can see a hijra asking for political power in the course of a song. Two other films *Darmiyan* and Rituporno Ghosh's *Chitrangada* also depict transgender situations in the Indian social context.

**Methodology**

In the context of my thesis, I have used relevant theoretical works of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Queer Theory as texts for analysis and tools that provide the theoretical framework for my thesis. Butler critically discusses the theoretical works of Simon de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Jacques Derrida and most significantly, Michel Foucault. My thesis builds around the development of the argument in the theoretical domain, that rather than being a 'natural', 'essential' phenomenon, 'gender' is something constructed through language. Inter disciplinary inputs, such as those from anthropology, sociology, history, culture studies, law, religion etc are required in my assessment of contextual data regarding compulsory gender and transgender issues in Indian society. The above
mentioned theoretical tools are also used to assess the binary gendered system and transgender questions in India.

In terms of textual analysis of literary and cultural texts where the representation of the 'queer' gender in concerned, I read selected plays of Mahesh Dattani and two film texts. I have analyzed the Indian gendered system and gender liminality as portrayed in texts that are entrenched in Indian socio-cultural milieu through Western theories since there are similarities between these apparently 'different' cultures in terms of gender. As I have stated earlier, although the pre-modern Indian social structure was different, the contemporary Indian society follows the Western model of the rigid binary in terms of gender due to the influence of colonial modernity. Theories from theatre and film studies like performance theory will be required in my analysis of texts that focus upon gender/transgender issues. 'Performativity' is the notion that acts as the link between the critical theory and the analysis of the drama and film texts. The common factor between the theoretical inputs and the texts that are analyzed in the light of those theories is that all of them are trying to subvert the norm or the taken-for-granted realities. Like the theoretical insights of Foucault and Butler, Mahesh Dattani's plays and the film texts that I have analyzed, try to unearth those 'realities' that are buried by socially acceptable realities. These texts try to speak for those who are victimized, marginalized and stigmatized for not being able to 'fit into' normative social structures. I have also undertaken fieldwork where I visited and conversed with a group of hijras located at Kalipur, Guwahati, in order interact firsthand and understand the lives and
troubles of the people who live in such luminal areas of gender. The details of my fieldwork are incorporated into the fourth chapter of my thesis.

End Notes

1 In his work *Discipline and Punish* (1976), Foucault talks about societal power structure that attempts to regulate or control human life in order to make human beings capable of leading a 'civilized' social existence. This oppressive power structure is unanimous and the 'human' subject is entrenched in it.

2 In *History of Sexuality* (1980) Foucault discusses the issue of human sexuality and gender identity. He is of the opinion that both sexuality and the human subject are social construct. Sexuality can only be read in terms of the socio-cultural 'discourse' in which the subject is located. The society is a pre-existing element and an individual’s sexual identity is determined by the prevalent societal norm.

3 In her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler puts forward her opinion that it is not possible to talk about a body which is free from the markers of culture. We can perceive a body only in the state of being entrenched in a specific cultural milieu.
Works Cited


