Chapter - 3

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The male, the female and the other – these terms indicate not only gender identities but also social hierarchical stratification. In any patriarchal society male is the most privileged gender, the female is the lesser privileged gender while the other largely remains the unprivileged gender. The male and female relate to each other as supportive, complementary or the opposites but the other remains an outlaw and unrelated to any gender apart from itself. The cultural construction of gender identifies only the male and the female. The other gender is ignored and so becomes invisible despite its presence on the fringes of the society. It consists of what may be called, for convenience, 'the third sex' or the invisible gender. The third sex lacks identity primarily because it is
forced to align with either the male or female. It consists the (a) eunuchs i.e., a male whose testicles have been removed or never developed (b) hermaphrodite i.e., someone having both male and female sexual characteristics and organs. (c) Transsexual i.e., someone who identifies with the opposite sex or may have even undergone a sex change surgery. (d) Transvestite i.e., a person who adopts manner or sexual role of the opposite sex, also called cross dresser (e) homosexual, someone having sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex.

Dattani is the first Indian playwright to depict openly on stage the intimate concerns of the unprivileged gender, in the Indian context. His plays portray the tortures, the traumas and the repressed desires of the third sex with an academic and artistic seriousness and without trivialising or unnecessarily politicising the issue. His plays put forward a perspective that operates outside the heterosexual matrix. They also acquaint the audience with a social reality confronted by the marginalised gender and the pressures from within and outside to align with the traditional and conventional structure of heterosexual relationship. Apart from creating an awareness of the presence of the third sex, in the Indian society, these plays by Dattani have also created space for those who wish to assert their right to be different both in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In an interview Dattani says:

You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that’s not Indian.
Dattani is a conscious writer. He does not deviate from contemporary issues and hard realities. Unlike his great predecessors Tagore, Aurobindo, Karnard, and the like, Dattani does not employ myth and make belief to tackle reality. He confronts the urban Indian reality, acknowledges it and depicts it with such deftness that the audience cannot escape in mythological elusion:

By pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre (Erin Mee, 319).

The plays of Mahesh Dattani deal with social issues and portray them with courage and conviction. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition and repressed desires. In an interview Dattani agrees:

Thematically I talk about the areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand this space. They live on the fringes of society and are not looking for acceptance but are struggling to grab as much fringe space for themselves as they can.2
This statement by Dattani defines his themes and concerns. Jeremy Mortimer, in the introduction to the second volume of collected plays expresses similar views when he observes:

Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for all of us.³

One such theme that recurs in several plays concerns the issues confronting the third sex. A number of plays by Dattani deal with this Indian reality. They attempt to throw light on the inner feelings and emotions of individuals forced to convert their personality in order to fall in line with the social ideal. Tara, Do the Needful, Seven Steps Around Fire, Bravely Fought the Queen, Night Queen and On a Muggy Night in Mumbai—which was also adapted as a film called Mango Soufflé – deal extensively with different aspects affiliated with the invisible gender.

The general perception in India remains that same sex love is a Western phenomenon. Issues of same sex love discussed and debated in academic circles, in seminars and conferences, generally analyse the subject from the western perspective using western literary theories and texts. Various studies seem to indicate that same sex relationship
exists in all cultures. Yale University Professors, Clelan Ford and Frank Beach in their seminal anthropological study, *Patterns of Sexual Behaviour* conducted in 1951 observed:

... in 49 of the 71 societies for which information is available, homosexual activities of one sort or the other are considered normal and socially acceptable for certain members of the community.⁴

William Eskridge Jr. in *A History of Same-Sex Marriage* has also mentioned the existence of same sex or transgender union in various societies ranging from ancient Egyptian to contemporary Asian societies. James Wilets, on the other hand, argues that if there is a western contribution it is not homosexuality but homophobia:

Much of the contemporary hostility towards queer people in non-western societies is a direct result of western colonialism, Judeo-Christian Islamic homophobia and anti-sexuality in general, none of which is rooted in indigenous tradition (Cited in Queer 18).

Homophobia is largely a colonial legacy as anti sodomy legislations were introduced in the third world during the colonial rule.

Same sex relations in ancient and medieval India were generally ignored or silenced. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai have analysed same sex love in readings from Indian history, mythology and literature in their book *Same Sex Love in India*. They found Indian
society from 2nd century A.D. till 18th century generally tolerant, relatively non-judgmental and devoid of violent persecutions while dealing with same sex love. According to Saleem Kidwai:

Medieval poetry depicts romantic and erotic interaction among men across class and religion divides . . . . Mir’s narrative poem Shola-I-Ishq is an example of a love affair between two males, one Muslim, one Hindu (Cited in Queer 68).

Taking an example from history they demonstrate that the relationship between Sultan Alauddin Khilji and his eunuch slave Malik Kafur was homosexual. The intimacy between these two men becomes evident with the fact that slave Malik Kafur was appointed as the deputy ruler by Alaudin Khilji. Kidwai says:

. . . he [Sultan] had fallen deeply and madly in love with the Malik Naib. He had entrusted the responsibility of the government and the control of the servants in this useless, ungrateful, ingratiating, sodomite (Cited in Queer 38).

Same sex love, in India, has never found the acceptance accorded to heterosexual love. Still, colonial impact significantly changed the perspective of people towards homosexuals. In 1861, anti sodomy law was passed. This made homosexuality a criminal act.
under section 377 of the Indian penal code. Raj Ayyar in the review of Yarana: Gay writing from India says:

... not only did colonialism stigmatize traditional non puritan sexualities, it also criminalized some of those behaviours.5

This law was framed in terms familiar to the coloniser. In fact, the word anti-sodomy itself seems to be derived from the Biblical reference to the destruction of the city of Sodom by God where homosexuality was believed to be widely practiced (Old Testament, Genesis 19).

Recently in India, there have been numerous instances of homo and transgender individuals boldly revealing their inner self publicly. Print and electronic media gave them limelight and the public another issue to debate and consider. The Indian public, like their ancestors in Medieval India, chose to remain silent and non-judgmental, after the initial shock, at these revelations. Manvendra Singh Gohil, erstwhile Prince of Rajpipla, in Gujarat, shocked the conservative community by revealing his gay preferences. His family disowned him for publicly confessing his sexual orientation:

VADODARA: Erstwhile prince of Rajpipla

Manvendra Singh Gohil, the face of the gay movement in Gujarat, on Thursday paid a heavy price for coming out of the closet. The royal family has issued a public notice, saying it had severed all ties with their son.
The notice virtually disowns Manvendra, probably the first member of a royal family, in the country to accept that he is a gay.6

But the initial intolerance from the family was short lived. They soon made amends and accepted their gay son, again publicly and gaily. Similarly, D.K. Panda, Inspector General of Police, Uttar-Pradesh, revealed his transgender identity in public by wearing female outfits and ornaments even to the workplace. The Times of India carried a detailed report:

LUCKNOW: Uttar Pradesh Inspector General of Police D.K. Panda, recently in news for declaring himself as Radha and attending the office dressing up as a woman, on Monday hit out at his detractors saying his devotion for God was a private matter and had nothing to do with the government or administration. "How I pray and whom I worship is a private matter concerning me and has nothing to do with the government or the administration." 7

Panda’s family also disowned him but Panda states that he feels relieved and free after a prolonged life of forced male identity. Both these instances become all the more important, in the present context, as the involved individuals belong to the upper strata of Indian society
and have a lot at stake. That they chose to come out of the closet also reveals the changing scenario in the Indian society.

*Tara* can best serve as a starting point to discuss the theme of gender in Dattani’s plays. It is a play about gender bias that questions the role of society and its double standards concerning gender. It depicts Chandan and Tara as “Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb”⁸ implying their hermaphrodite and thus, a genderless or neuter, complete existence. The fact that the twins, one male and the other female, “conjoined from chest down” (TR:331) possess both male and female characteristics and separate organs in one body symbolises the presence of both the masculine and feminine persona in all individuals. The play convincingly depicts how the patriarchal society with male preferences conspires to favour the male child over the female. The conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, had three legs. In spite of the fact that the foetus of girl provided a major part of the blood supply to the third leg the mother, the grandfather and the doctor conspired to give this leg to the boy. An operation to separate the twins at birth leaves Tara crippled for life. The fact that the victim’s mother is a party to the injustice suggests the involvement of women in perpetuating patriarchal norms.

Gender discrimination has always been a complex issue and Dattani’s *Tara* attempts an inclusive analysis of issues relating to skewed gender notions. It articulates problems of identity and identification and advocates the possibility of universal humanity and demolition of gender walls. On the surface of it, *Tara* is a story about
conjoined twins – Tara and Chandan – who are surgically separated and yet remain entwined. The plot revolves around the trauma and torture experienced by the twins. Their physical incompleteness, after being separated, results from the prejudiced mentality of other characters in the play. These characters represent the society at large that controls individual behaviour. Some of these characters actually make an appearance on stage while others are only referred to. The parents; Bharati and Patel, the next-door neighbour; Roopa and the wonder Doctor, Doctor Thakkar come on stage while the grandfather is revealed through memories and Prema through one-sided conversations. The personality of each character in the play, excepting Chandan and Tara, is revealed to emphasise the absence of the conjoined existence and the twin traits essential in all individuals.

Dattani depicts a confined world. The play begins at the end. Dan, the adult Chandan is the narrator personae. He attempts to write a play about his twin sister, Tara. The narrative is non-linear and the play is chiefly a recall from memory. It moves back and forth in time and arrives at the starting point. Dr Thakkar occupies the highest level on the multi-level stage.

Although he doesn't watch the action of the play his connection is asserted by his sheer God-like presence (TR:323).

He records the progress of the medical advancement with a self-assured indifference. He is instrumental in bringing about the misfortune that befalls Tara and Chandan. His unethical favouring
of the boy, for vested reasons invalidates the acclaim he deserves for the successful surgical separation of the conjoined twins. The fixity of his position on the stage, demonstrates the limitations of a dehumanised hand of scientific expertise. Dr. Thakkar is conceived as a stereotype. He hogs all the fame while the twins suffer in the cloistered milieu of gender prejudice.

The next realistic level shows Dan making an effort to write. He has a typewriter and a sheaf of papers before him. But his inability to write a play stems from the absence of Tara, the other gender from his life. The play begins with Dan addressing the audience and acquainting them with his repeated failed endeavours in writing a play. He can write successfully only after realising the presence of the other gender, Tara, within himself:

To tell you the truth, I had even forgotten I had a twin sister. (*Music fades in slowly.*)

Until I thought of her as a subject matter for my next literary attempt. Or maybe I didn’t forget her. She was lying deep inside, out of reach... (TR:324).

He thus establishes a line of communication between the stage and the audience emphasising the fictional world of stage being continuous with the real world of the audience. The end, however, sees him tearing up whatever he has written seeking to make Tara's tragedy his own. The effective progress of Dan, the playwright,
therefore amounts to zero primarily because a writer, even an ordinary individual, cannot avoid his other self.

The main action of the play is a projection of Dan's memory. It is played out on the lowest level of the stage. It represents the house of Patels. The parents; Patel and Bharati, struggle to come to terms with their guilt, vindictively accusing and punishing each other. Their character shows no progression whatsoever and is bogged down by social stereotypes. The neighboring offstage fictional space of the kitchen is Bharati's 'burrow'. She often escapes to the kitchen, in order to cook Tara's favourite meals and silence the prick of her own guilty conscience. Even the distant offstage fictional space of the hospital, where she withdraws during her last days is more a morbid and hopeless reminder of her diseased self, than a place associated with healing. Besides, the absent figure of the grandfather pervades the narrative making the characters renounce control over their life and situations. The absent grandfather represents the abiding faceless patriarchal conventions handed down to generations. Chandan realises the unflinching grip of the social forces:

Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment's freedom find themselves hurled into space doomed to crash with some unknown force (TR:379).
Tara, who is sharper and smarter than her brother, is doubly victimised - once at the time of birth and then again by her parents' discriminatory behaviour. Patel the father of the twins wants the children to adopt gender specific roles. He is greatly annoyed to learn that Chandan is helping his mother in sorting out the knitting. He orders Chandan to accompany him to the office and prepare to go abroad for further studies. He has no such plans for his daughter, Tara. Even the grandfather has left a lot of money for Chandan but nothing for Tara. Her mother's apparent showering of love is the only source of strength in her: "I am strong" she claims, "my mother made me strong" (TR:330). When even this nurturing fiction of her life falls apart, she "wastes away and dies" (TR:319). All through the play Tara is seen within the enclosed space of the Patel household. The only contact she makes with the outside world is through the inquisitive and garrulous girl, Roopa. There is nothing natural about this relationship either, as Bharati has bribed Roopa to play with Tara. She serves a plot function and acts as a foil to Tara. Roopa too uses her entry into the Patel house as an escape from her own controlled and deprived ambiance at home. She frequents the Patel house primarily to watch videos. It is through her portrayal that Dattani explores the social prejudices towards the female gender. Bharati is worried about Tara's future, as she is aware of the social bias. She tells Chandan: "The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you-but not her" (TR:349). Every time Tara ventures to move into the outer space of the street
she has to face ridicule that, in turn, jettisons her back to the confines of her home. Here she finds a compensatory closeness to her twin brother. Their dependence on each other for happiness in spite of the physical separation, invites the audience to examine the rigid gender system. “Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable" (TR:325), says Tara. Their estrangement after Patel's revelation has a shattering effect on both.

Chandan tries to escape the pain by moving to London and shielding himself with masks. In order to write about Tara and confront her again, he needs to get rid of these masks and retrieve his other self, Tara, lying latent deep within himself. Erin Mee in her introduction to the play Tara quotes the view of one of her students:

Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara's story. Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole (Erin Mee 320).

Even the conversation between Tara and Roopa about the practice of drowning infant girls in milk, and Bharati and Chandan, in the house about Patel's preferential treatment of Chandan have overtones of the same narrative. Patel narrates the incident how
Chandan was favoured over Tara with the common leg, which made Tara a 'freak'. Roopa prominently places against Tara's house, a poster that reads: "We don't want freaks" (TR: 378). The dramatic structure thus works to produce a feeling in the audience towards something more intangible. It presents a world that shocks the audience into considering their own. The craft of Dattani's script is that the story never descends into sensationalism. The playwright structures his play as an intimate family drama surrounding a secret about the twins. Dattani reveals the larger social reality which exceeds the story of the characters portrayed in the play. Tara is an examination of much more than just one Indian family. It is an examination of a world that is known to favour men and frown upon those who are different.

*Do the Needful* is a romantic and satirical radio play. It was broadcast on B.B.C. Radio on 14th August 1997. As the title suggests it reveals the compulsions of two generations of Indians and their different approaches to comply with social norms. The play is set in Mumbai and Bangalore. Alpesh, a Gujarati vegetarian boy with gay sexual orientation and Lata, a South Indian non vegetarian girl, in love with a Muslim boy, are pressurised by their parents to form a marital alliance. The parents of both these characters are aware of their social differences. They do not understand each-other's culture and language but are eager to wed their children owing to social compulsions. They exchange their children's photographs; family details and then set a date to "meet personally for all parties concerned to do the needful."
The Gowda family comprising Devraj Gowda and Prema Gowda cannot find a match for their 24-year-old notorious daughter, Lata, in their own Gawda community. The Gowda community in Bangalore is aware of Lata's illicit premarital relations with Saleem, a Muslim boy. Lata's mother is annoyed not because of her daughter's pre-marital relationship but because all the prospective young and the bachelors in the Gowda Community know about Lata and refuse to marry her. Prema Gowda says: "They told their mothers and their grandmothers and the whole wide world!" (DTN:122). It is the family honour that worries her more than her daughter's physical relationship with Saleem. Prema tells her husband Devraj: "She has to do it in his hostel! Couldn't they go to some hill station or somewhere?" (DTN:122). Her attitude brings forth the hypocrisy of the urban middle class and adds a comic strain to the play. Devraj and Prema also blame each other for not paying adequate attention in bringing up their only child:

PREMA GOWDA: This stupid girl! It is my fault. I shouldn't have helped you with the nursing home. I should have been a proper housewife.

DEVRAJ GOWDA: Good I am glad you realize your mistakes (DTN:121).

Thus the marriage of their daughter becomes for them a compulsory ritual to rid themselves of their guilt and social responsibility as parents.
Lata feels dismayed, as her views and consent do not matter to her family. Even before meeting the boy, Alpesh, and his family the Gowdas are determined to marry off their daughter to him. Even the fact that Alpesh "is thirty plus and divorced" (DTN:121) does not deter them. Lata feels like a caged victim in her own family and blames her parents:

I am forced to be displayed to some has-been because you don't have the courage to tell them all to go jump in a well (DTN:122-23).

Similarly, the Patel family comprising Chandrakant Patel, and Kusumben Patel are desperate to remarry their only son Alpesh. The pressure to marry off their divorced son can be seen when even the liftman advises Chandrakant Patel: "Tell Alpesh Bhaiya to just say yes. Arre, he should be having two children by now!" (DTN:123). Chandrakant Patel goes to the temple and asks the Pujari to perform a special prayer so that his son may get married. Kusumben Patel also wants her son to get married to evade the social stigma. She compels her son, through emotional blackmail, to agree to remarry. Alpesh pronounces his apprehensions of another unsuccessful marriage, as he knows his gay orientation. He does not have the courage to face reality and tell his parents that he is gay. The trauma and emotional turmoil he experiences cannot be shared with anyone in the society. His mother Kusumben is adamant to see her son married at any cost:
KUSUMBEN PATEL: No I will not let it happen again. It can never happen again. I might as well take poison and die if it happens again (DTN: 126).

The two families meet, as arranged, at the house of the Gowdas, first at Bangalore and then at their farmhouse. The conversation between Chandrakant Patel and Devraj Gowda is equally applicable to the gay scenario in India. Both of them know that they are breaking the tradition and convention by not marrying off their children in their own community. Just as the gay community feels that their same sex inclination is beyond their control similarly the two families feel the compulsions of breaking the family tradition. When the coconut vendor tells the Gowdas about Alpesh: "He looks a little older than our Lattamma. . . . You should find a nice Gowda boy for our Lattamma." Devraj Gowda angrily reacts: "This is not your grandfather's time, you fool"(DTN:140).

The coconut vender represents the traditional society symbolised by his traditional profession. He abhors change but is powerless. His resentment for the affluent city dwellers, who are trying to encroach upon the traditional society and the indigenous rural setup, becomes evident when he curses the passengers of the speeding car that knocks him off his bicycle. His words aptly describe the helplessness of the traditional rural society in the wake of imminent change:
I am a son of this soil, this is my land! We don't want you, you sons of whores! Born in the most inauspicious time! (To Devraj Gowda.) And you! You we have served for so long, you give your daughters to them. . . . Kaliyuga! Kaliyuga! Our mother is being raped and her own sons are watching...!

(DTN:141).

Both the Gowdas and the Patels feel like mere spectators. They cannot but drift with the flow of social change though only to save face by marrying their children outside their community:

DEVRAJ GOWDA: Who can stop change.

. . . I . . . I . . . don't know what to say. I know my parents and forefathers will be hurt very badly, and I am . . . betraying them, but . . . my daughter's happiness is most important.

Please, sir, please accept my daughter

(DTN: 147).

The acceptance of change under compulsions is more painful than the acceptance of change by choice. Lata and Aplesh wish to lead their lives according to their personal choices. Lata does not want to marry Alpesh. She still fantasies about her relationship with Salim:.

LATA (thought): Salim, I know you are allowed four wives—what's the point in thinking all that now? I will have to be
content keeping you as a lover. How are we going to work this out? What if you have to go back to Kashmir? . . . I will have to find another lover. I can have more than four. . .

(DTN:126).

She is aware of her physical needs and does not allow the catholic school preaching to send her on guilt trips. In order to avoid marriage with Alpesh she even hints at having physical relationship with the Mali.

Similarly, even Alpesh does not feel guilty about his homosexual preferences. When Lata finds him with the Mali, in a compromising situation, he does not regret. The Mali feels guilty. He starts crying and begging Lata for forgiveness, but Alpesh intervenes: "Stop crying, I will take the blame" (DTN:153). The difference between the attitude of Alpesh and the Mali on being seen in the homosexual act spells the difference between the conventional and contemporary attitude. The Mali, in spite of knowing that Alpesh is gay, pleads Lata to marry him for the sake of family honour. In any traditional social structure heterosexual marriage defines happiness and honour. Even if it is known that a person is inclined towards same sex love, the social norms compel to imitate the rituals and ceremony of marriage and acquire a social recognition as man and wife. These compulsions are sometimes wilful, sometimes forced.

The end of the play also evolves out of social compulsions. If marriage is a necessary social institution, Lata and Alpesh decide to go
their own way by cheating not themselves but the institution of marriage. Just as the parents in the Gowda and Patel family compromise with rigid social customs, similarly Alpesh and Lata compromise with the social institution of marriage. The only difference is that the parents feel the guilt of treading the unknown terrain while Alpesh and Lata do not feel the qualm. Though such a compromise may be a good end to the play it surely is not good for the social structure and the institute of marriage. Dattani does not favour either the conventional or the contemporary view expressed in the play. He just portrays the situation where an individual when pushed against the wall and left with no choice but to yield to social pressures adopts deceit and infidelity as means to escape and evade social binding. When social institutions function under the imperative of forcibly moulding the non-conformist into a heterosexual framework the results could be disastrous both for the society and the individual.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* is another play that discusses the theme of homosexuality and its impact on marriage. It reveals the guilt, compulsions and hypocrisy in a marriage of convenience. The dichotomy of leading a dual life and the dangers of deceit constantly experienced by the gay individual and his helpless wife form one of the themes of *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The psychological trauma ensuing from the feeling of guilt and disillusionment has its impact on the traditional family structure. *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a stage play that depicts the tensions and compulsions in marriage when the
husband is gay and the wife becomes a helpless victim of circumstances.

Nitin, owing to his preferences, is attracted towards Praful. He frequently visits Praful's house and uses the darkness of the night, when Praful's mother and sisters are asleep, to consume his same sex desires. Praful seems to give-in owing to his social responsibility of marrying off his sisters, in the absence of their father. He persuades Nitin to marry his sister, Alka. Praful thus represents the social stereotype who does not hesitate to transfer his burden of social responsibility to another man. He deceives his lover, Nitin, and his sister, Alka. Nitin and Alka are forced to lead an incomplete and unconsumed married life. Nitin's guilt and incompetence forces him to evade his wife, Alka. He finds another male partner in the form of an 'autoriksha driver' and establishes clandestine physical relationship with him, first at the office and later in the servant's quarters of the house. The social compulsions of keeping his marriage intact, as a tag, and his physical incompetence force him to lead a dual life. He regrets his position both as an incompetent husband and a socially unacceptable homosexual lover. He feels deceived by Praful and the guilt of deceiving his wife Alka. He regrets his position towards the end of the play. Even while going to meet the rickshaw driver in the outhouse, leaving his intoxicated wife Alka, asleep, he still thinks about his relationship with Praful:
I loved him too. He is . . . was attractive.

And he responded. Oh! But how ashamed he made me feel after! He made me cry each time! That was a game he played. And I-I was caught in it . . . He told me to get married . . . How could I? And to whom? . . . He told me that you knew. That he had told you . . . about me. And that it didn’t matter to you. You only wanted the security of a marriage. He . . . he told me everything would work out fine . . . But you didn’t know! He tricked you! I—I am sorry. It wasn’t my fault.  

Nitin does not have the courage to disclose his preferences to his wife like Alpesh does in *Do the Needful*. Alka too is forced to compromise with the situation as she realises the deceitfulness of her own brother. Even if she is not happy and satisfied with her husband, Nitin, she cannot complain about it to anyone. She tries to escape the sordid reality of being an unwanted wife and family member by intoxication. Her brother-in-law, Jiten, wants to see her thrown out of the house. He always instigates his younger brother to throw her out of the house:

**JITEN:** Throw her out of the house. This time, for good. . . . Your marriage never worked. She is a drunkard. An alcoholic.
Your wife is a boozers and you still keep her?

What kind of a man are you? (BFQ: 290).

Her own sister, Dolly, blames her. Alka is left with no support. She tells Dolly:

He tricked me, you know it and yet you take his side....Our brother is a cheat! He lied about our father to them. And he lied to me! He lied to me by not telling me. . . (BFQ: 256).

ALKA (Sarcastically): For you he is the descendant of a saint! A saint! (Laughs hard) Like my husband. Such close friends! (BFQ: 257).

The agony and trauma faced by Alka is far greater than Nitin's. Nitin is indifferent towards his wife. He tells his mother:

Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death, I don't care. It doesn't make a difference to me! (BFQ:305).

Alka finds herself trapped in the relationship. She does not have any alternative—not even the fantasy of Kanaiya, a nineteen-year-old servant who is the brainchild of her elder sister, Dolly. Dolly likes to fantasise about a nineteen-year-old savant but Alka cannot bring herself to accept that, as any relationship with the opposite sex was considered bad during her school days. She can never forget how her brother Praful once burnt her hair for sitting behind a boy on a
motorcycle while coming back from school. Her sense of guilt does not allow her to imagine or fantasise any relationship out-side her marriage while her husband's incompetence leaves her lonely and ruined to weep over the circumstances of life. She has no other alternative but to compromise:

I know I haven't been an ideal housewife.
And you haven't been a . . . well, a competent husband. But who's complaining? Nobody's perfect! (laughs.) Nobody's perfect! (BFQ: 300).

Nidhi Singh in her article captioned: "The Not-so-gay ‘Gay’ Plays of Mahesh Dattani” very aptly argues:

Dattani highlights the hypocrisy inherent in arranged marriage or marriage of convenience that homosexuals enter into due to their inability to take a stand against societal pressure. The victim in such marriages is the wife who either develops self-doubts if unaware of her husband’s preferences, or is left with little option but to adjust. Dattani critiques the workings of personal and moral choices of the gay sensibility.¹¹

Night Queen is yet another play that discusses the unspeakable agony of gay lovers, Ashwin and Raghu. In a presumed homogenous
social structure, where same sex love is abhorred, Ashwin struggles to evade his sense of guilt. Love between same-sex, as it cannot procreate, is considered carnal and immoral. In this background the play explores the possibility of love loyalty and dedication in a homosexual relationship. Initially, both Ashwin and Raghu mistrust each other. Though they yearn for each other’s company and compassion they cannot reveal their inner feelings. Even when they exchange names during their formal introduction, Raghu introduces himself as Babu and Ashwin calls himself Ash. The only difference between them is that Raghu is more self possessed and confident. He has a secure job and dwelling where he can practice his preferences without guilt and interference. He confides in his sister Gayatri. His old mother is senile and probably unaware of her son’s preferences. With no other male in the family to force Raghu to align with the social matrix Dattani aptly describes his secure position through the stage setting. Raghu lives in:

[a] tiny room with two doors. The side door leads directly to the street. The other door leads to the rest of the house. It is the sort of room which would be built for a paying guest who may need to come and go without disturbing the rest of the household.¹²

On the other hand, the inner struggle of Ashwin stems from his sense of guilt. He begins to hate himself due to his inability to align with the heterosexual matrix. The pressure from the society becomes
visible when Ashwin himself begins to consider his same sex love as ‘ugly and repulsive’. He tends to analyse his own conduct through the presumed judgment of his brother. He cries out his fears and tells Raghu:

**ASH:** My brother beat me up. . . . He hit me hard. The next evening he took me out. To the park. He showed me those guys, looking around, waiting for sexual partner. A stranger. He told me how unhappy and miserable they were. They looked unhappy and miserable to me. And ugly. And I didn’t want to be a part of that. I didn’t want to be ugly and repulsive. In my brother’s eyes they were worse than lepers. And I was my brother’s favourite. In his eyes, I didn’t want to be so ugly (NQ:68).

Dattani portrays the inner conflict of Ashwin and Raghu very convincingly. The feeling of guilt and the fear of alienation forces the gay characters, in the play, to create a web of vicious cycles that ultimately leads towards self-defeat. The real reason for the sojourn of Ashwin and Raghu becomes clear only towards the end of the play when the reader learns that Ashwin wants to marry Gayatri, Raghu’s sister, to escape his guilt. Raghu invites Ashwin to his house only to confirm the sexual orientation of his would-be brother-in-law.
Gay characters, in Dattani's plays, when confronted with such situations lose their ability to affirm their right to be different. Nitin, in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Ashwin in *Night Queen* fall in the same category. *Night Queen* thus explores the possibility of interpersonal and emotional support within the gay community for a more congenial and comprehensive understanding of each other's situation. The fear of being identified and branded as gay and the inability to relate and share with other members of likeminded preferences, in a socially acceptable atmosphere, creates a sense of insecurity and isolation. Even the secure and sympathetic surrounding that Raghu possess, with a job and a supportive sibling, does not alter his sense of emotional insecurity. Ashwin and Raghu realise that neither God nor their family members can help them overcome their sense of sin and guilt. Ultimately they look to each other for support:

**ASH:** God! Why won't you help me? God!

**RAGHU:** God won't.

(*Ash looks up at him. Pause*)

**ASH:** (rising) But you will.

**RAGHU:** I don't know. I am just as scared as you are. I too am looking for help—from you. Help me (NQ:70).

It is only this bonding with Ashwin, that finally enables Raghu to laugh loudly and declare, "I am playing Mother! At last I am playing" (NQ:70).
While Ashwin and Raghu seek each other for understanding love and support *Seven Steps Around the Fire* questions the stance, which rejects the possibility of love loyalty and dedication in a relationship between a homosexual and a eunuch. It portrays the struggle of the invisible gender for voice visibility and social space challenging the sanctity of conventional marriage. The play attempts to bring to the fore the position of the eunuchs in the society and to reveal their world of intricate functioning and complex relationships.

The foremost question confronting the eunuch community, as portrayed in the play, is identity. Their relationship with other genders in the society results from their lack of positive identity. They are forced to identify themselves with either the male or the female but neither the male nor the female accommodate this third gender. When Uma desires to meet Anarkali, a hijra, in the jail, Munswamy, a constable refers to the hijra as ‘it’—neither a he nor a she. He addresses Anarkali as a neuter gender. But Anarkali has been lodged in “the male section of central jail Bangalore.” The male members in the jail force Anarkali to satisfy their sexual desires and even do not hesitate to physically assault the eunuch. When Uma requests Anarkali for an interview Anarkali bursts out:

> Go away. After serving all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk

(SSF:8).
The prisoners do not identify with the eunuch. When Munswamy orders:

... Beat it! Kick the hijra! ... The other inmates scream with pleasures as they beat up Anarkali (SSF:9).

Similarly, even when Uma asks her husband, the superintendent of police, “why do they put her in the male prison?” her husband’s reply reflects the discrimination the eunuchs have to face regularly:

SURESH: They are as strong as horses. . . .

Don’t believe a word of anything it says.

They are all liars. . . .

They are all just castrated degenerate men (SSF: 9-10).

The play realistically portrays the prejudiced defensive and uncertain position of the eunuchs in the Indian society. The eunuchs form the invisible minority. They come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand clap. There are many beliefs and misconceptions regarding their past; their origin is almost shrouded in mystery:

Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to the country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? (SSF:16).
Dattani poses very vital questions regarding this invisible community and endeavours to peep into their world with an academic and studied empathy. The deprived position accorded to the eunuchs in the society forces them to live a clustered and clandestine life. They have evolved their own social structure and hierarchy. The inherent irony regarding their position in the society springs from the fact that:

The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable—marriage and birth—ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons' (SSF:11).

The main theme of the play Seven Steps Around the Fire is woven around these questions confronting the hijra community:

The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female' (SSF: 10).

Thus the social identity of a hijra is defined in negative terms suggesting what a hijra is not — 'neither a male nor a female'. They do not have an identity as the third gender that may be neutral or positively different. This negative identity forces the hijra community
to camouflage and adapt according to the situation. With a masculine castrated physic and a feminine dress, the hijras are caught between two incomplete identities.

On the surface *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a murder mystery. Dattani uses the ‘whodunit’ detective plot primarily to unravel the petty jealousies and strong loyalties that regulate the hijra community. Uma, a Sociology scholar and the wife of the superintendent of police and the daughter-in-law of the commissioner of Police is well placed to assess the position of hijras in the society. Her proposed research leads her to the dark dungeons of the Bangalore jail and consequently to the cramped interiors and the withdrawn habitats of the eunuchs. The audience/readers learn about the little known customs and hierarchies of the eunuch community that leaves little option for individual choice concerning life and interpersonal relationships both within and outside their rigid social structure.

Kamala, a beautiful eunuch, and Subbu, the son of a powerful government minister, Mr. Sharma, defy the social conventions and secretly marry. Mr. Sharma, on learning about the clandestine marriage, gets the beautiful hijra, Kamala, burnt to death. The investigating officer Suresh, owing to the inherent social presumptions and prejudices against the eunuch community postulates that the murder of Kamala must have resulted from the internal rivalry within the eunuch community. Anarkali, a hijra, is accused of the murder and arrested. Anarkali’s inability to defend herself symbolises the
community’s lack of voice in the social power structure. The male inmates thrusting their phalus into Anarkali’s mouth also symbolises the condition of forced muteness faced by the eunuchs in a patriarchy. Uma, with the help of her reluctant aide, constable Munswamy, discovers that Mr. Sharma, Subbu’s father, had perpetuated the murder. He forces Subbu to marry a girl of his own choice amid a social gathering of invited guests in order to beget a social sanction for his homosexual son. Mr. Sharma justifies his position by saying: “My truth is in ensuring he is on the right path” (SSF:37). Subbu’s powerlessness leaves him with no option but to shoot himself amidst the chanting of mantras and the festivities of marriage. His act of self-destruction in the presence of the society and on the occasion of marriage must be seen as an act of protest. It also conveys the futility of Mr. Sharma’s conspiracy and his version of social truth as the only possibility. The play depicts the hapless situation of eunuchs and homosexuals who are forced to align with the society and accept their assigned positions, or perish.

Issues related to the third gender are portrayed on a larger canvas in Dattani’s On a Muggy Night in Mumbai. M. K. Naik says:

The play presents a group of well-to-do homosexuals in Bombay, their changing mutual relationships, their revelations, their
self-delusions, and self-discoveries, though they are all sailing in the same boat; each has his/her own oar to put in his/her own flag to hoist. \(^{14}\)

The action of the play takes place in a small flat. The flat is too high up for the outside noises or vision to interfere. The window extending the view to the Mumbai skyline and beyond creates a secure space for the occupants from where they can view and review the outside world, without being visible. The flat belongs to Kamalesh, a gay individual, and represents his "attempt at creating a world where he can belong." \(^{15}\) Dattani, in the play, portrays alternative realities about sexuality. His characters in the play expose the dynamics of individual and ethical choices concerning themes of love and betrayal, friendship and deception in relationships that do not follow the accepted social matrix. The story unfolds in the living room of Kamlesh, an affluent fashion designer living in Mumbai. One night, Kamlesh invites his friends over to his house and asks them for help. His dilemma springs from the fact that his sister, Kiran, and his former lover Prakash are getting married. He confesses to still be in love with Prakash. Prakash, however, has denounced their relationship as the work of the devil and moved on to become a straight man.

Kamlesh's friends, who are all gay, represent the many facets of homosexual culture. There is the flamboyant and witty Sharad, who is not worried about how the world views him; Bunny, the closet homosexual who plays a happily married father on a television sitcom;
Guard, the exploited heterosexual with unacknowledged homosexual leanings and Dipali, the level-headed lesbian in command of herself. Kiran is the only straight character projecting heterosexual womanhood but she too is deprived of her womanhood. Her marriage to straight individual breaks and later, her brother's friend, Ed, a gay individual, wishes to marry her to camouflage his homosexual preferences by marrying her. Kamlesh and his friends have complex personalities but deep ties with each other. For instance, the kinship between Dipali and Kamlesh simply cannot be ignored. At one point, Dipali says to her best friend, "If you were a woman, we would be in love." Kamlesh answers apologetically, "If you were a man, we would be in love." After a short pause, Dipali retorts good-naturedly, "If we were heterosexual, we would be married"(MNM:65). This conversation presents three different possibilities of interpersonal relationships, though none of them may be regarded as ideal.

In the course of the play Dattani focuses on numerous social realities that haunt the contemporary society. The play explores various issues like infidelity in marriage, lack of choice for women, exploitation of individuals as sex objects, be it male or female, the need for support group and bonding amongst homosexuals, stifling in conventional marriage, marital violence, marriage between gays, hypocrisy of 'closet' gays, demonising of homosexuality by religion and society, stereotyping homosexuals, non-congenial Indian milieu for homosexuals, the need to conform...
owing to social pressures, marriage of convenience to camouflage gay identity, and gays not at ease with their sexuality.

The characters undergo subtle shifts of perception. Kamlesh is able to appreciate the views expressed by his friends and get over his infatuation for Prakash. Kiran is the most mature character. She can accept her gay brother and his friends as they are. On learning the truth about Ed and her brother, she does not break down or look for support. She emerges a stronger individual with decision-taking power. The closet homosexual Bunny accepts:

I have tried to survive in both worlds.
And it seems I do not exist in either
(MNM: 103).

He resolves to be true to himself and to his wife by confessing and asking for her forgiveness. Ranjit's decision to leave India gets reinforced, when he says: "I can't seem to be both Indian and gay" (MNM: 88). Ed emerges as the most pathetic character. Once the mask of masculinity slips, a weak, deceitful and hypocritical character is revealed, who in his machinations to conform to heterosexually, ends up becoming self-alienated. His position is not much different from that of Subbu in Seven Steps Around the Fire, Alpesh in Do the Needful, and Nitin in Bravely Fought the Queen. The only difference in their position emerges from the fact that these characters are forced into conformity by the social stereotypes while Ed is pressurised to remain a homosexual by the gay community. Both these forced conditions interfere with the
individual’s freedom of choice. Labelling people as homosexual, bisexual, straight etc. is like drawing tight boundaries of differentiation that may lead to discrimination.

Dattani’s characters speak as his mouthpiece. He maintains the position of an outsider and never allows himself room in the plays he writes. He appears to be non-judgmental and hence an indifferent observer with little attempt to advocate change or even convey a message. His unconventional themes regarding the invisible gender gain credibility through the deployment of appropriate characterisation, felicity with language and his use of theatrical space. He knows the world he is talking about and shows it just the way it is— the hypocrisy, the prejudices, and the dilemmas— nothing is spared.
NOTES


2 Angelie Multani, “Mahesh Dattani Author Profile” in Goethe Institute, Writers in Residence http://www.goethe.de/ins/in.


4 Cited in Arvind Narrain, Queer: Despised Sexuality, Law and Social Change (Bangalore: Books for Change, 2004), p. 16. All subsequent citations and references from this book are from this edition and henceforth referred to as Queer in parenthesis.


7 “I G 'Radha' Panda hits out at critics” in Times of India November 21, 2005.

8 Mahesh Dattani, Tara in Collected Plays (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p. 325. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as TR in parentheses.
9 Mahesh Dattani, *DO the Needful* in *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p. 120. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as DTN in parentheses.

10 Mahesh Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* in *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), pp. 314-15. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as BFQ in parentheses.


12 Mahesh Dattani, *Night Queen* in *Yaraana, Gay writing form India* ed. Hoshang Merchant (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1999), p. 57. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as NQ in parentheses.

13 Mahesh Dattani, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* in *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p. 7. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as SSF in parentheses.


15 Mahesh Dattani, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* in *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p. 49. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as MNM in parentheses.