The Context: Journal of English Studies
Volume 13, Issue 4, June 2026
ISSN: 2349-4948
www.thecontext.in

Research Article

Homosexuality, Identity, and Social Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

Dr. Manjeet Kumar Rai

Assistant Professor- English, Shri Bajrang Snatkottar Mahavidyalay, Dadar Ashram, Sikandarpur, Ballia, India;
manjeetalbion@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613403

Accepted version first published on 5 June 2026

Abstract: Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* marks a watershed moment in the history of Indian English drama - it is the first play in the subcontinent to engage openly and unflinchingly with the realities of gay life. Moving beyond mere thematic novelty, the play constitutes a sustained dramatic examination of what it means to live a queer identity within the constraints of a deeply heteronormative Indian middle-class society. Drawing upon queer theory - particularly the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick - alongside postcolonial critiques of sexuality by Gayatri Gopinath and Homi Bhabha, this paper analyses how Dattani's play interrogates the social, psychological, and existential consequences of enforced sexual concealment. Through close readings of the play's central characters - Kamlesh, Prakash/Ed, Sharad, Bunny, Ranjit, and Deepali - the paper maps the varied strategies of survival, accommodation, and resistance that gay and lesbian individuals deploy in the face of social stigma and legal prohibition. The study further examines the play's symbolic architecture - the muggy, stifling atmosphere, the broken air conditioning, the fireworks, and the offstage wedding music -as a theatrical system through which Dattani encodes the suffocating pressure of heteronormativity upon queer lives. The paper concludes that *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is not merely a play about homosexuality but a searching critique of a society that, in condoning compulsory heterosexuality, condemns its gay and lesbian citizens to lives of hypocrisy, anguish, and enforced invisibility.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Queer Theory, Heteronormativity, Identity, Marginalization, Social Stigma

Copyright: © 2026 Magnus Publishing, Pune, India.

ISSN 2349-4948

Introduction

The question of sexual identity and its social regulation occupies a central place in the drama of human self-understanding. Societies produce elaborate systems of norms, laws, and cultural codes to manage and discipline the sexual lives of their members, and no dimension of this disciplinary apparatus has been more relentlessly enforced - or more catastrophically damaging - than the compulsory organisation of desire along strictly heterosexual lines. In India, where ancient textual traditions such as the *Kamasutra* acknowledged the full spectrum of human sexuality with remarkable candour, the criminalisation of homosexuality under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code - a colonial imposition of 1861 - and its persistence well into the twenty-first century, represents a peculiarly violent form of historical amnesia. It is within this context that Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* acquires its historical and cultural significance.

Dattani has articulated the social imperative behind his dramatic project with characteristic directness. In an interview published in *The Hindu* (9 March 2003), he declares: "I write for my milieu, for my time and place . . . middle class and urban India . . . My dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire to freedom from society... Some under-explored subjects deserve their space. It is no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalised, including the gays." This statement of artistic purpose encapsulates both the social function that Dattani conceives for his theatre and the specific moral challenge that *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* poses to its audience.

John McRae, Special Professor at the University of Nottingham, captures the play's dual significance in his introductory note to *Collected Plays* (2000), describing it as "moving and hugely dramatic tragicomedy" (46) and "It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates" (45). McRae's formulation is precise: the play is not, ultimately, about the exceptional psychology of gay individuals but about the ordinary machinery of social conformity and its human costs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations for reading *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* are most productively drawn from the intersecting fields of queer theory and postcolonial studies. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976) provides the foundational argument that sexuality is not a biological "natural given" but a discursive construction regulated by social institutions such as law, medicine, and religion (105). He famously posits that "homosexuality" as a distinct identity category is a nineteenth-century invention. While same-sex acts existed previously under the legal category of "sodomy," Foucault asserts that it was during this period that the homosexual was transformed from a perpetrator of forbidden acts into a specific "species" with a unique "case history" and "morphology" (43). Simply speaking, sexuality is not a natural given but a discursive construction, produced and regulated by the very social institutions -

ISSN 2349-4948

law, medicine, religion - that claim to describe it merely. Foucault's insight that 'homosexuality' as an identity category is itself a nineteenth-century invention - prior to which same-sex acts existed without generating a distinct species of 'the homosexual' - is directly relevant to the world of Dattani's play, where characters struggle precisely with the social identity that has been imposed upon their desires.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and her concept of 'heterosexual matrix' - the normative framework within which gender and sexuality are constrained to align in predictable, socially legible patterns - illuminate the coercions under which characters like Prakash/Ed operate. Butler's argument that gender is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (33) explains why Prakash's attempt to 'become heterosexual' is not simply a personal choice but a performance demanded by the social script. His adoption of the name 'Ed,' his pursuit of Kiran, his church attendance, the denunciation of his former love as 'filth' - all of these are performances of compulsory heterosexuality, desperate attempts to inhabit the regulatory frame that Butler identifies as constitutive of social existence.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's groundbreaking study *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) provides another essential framework. Sedgwick identifies the 'closet' - the structure of secrecy and concealment that organises gay existence in a heteronormative society - as "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71). The closet is not simply a place of hiding; it is an active, ongoing social performance that requires constant vigilance, self-betrayal, and the maintenance of a false self for public consumption. Dattani's play is, among other things, a detailed anatomy of what Sedgwick calls 'the epistemology of the closet': the tortured negotiations between concealment and disclosure, secrecy and exposure that structure the daily lives of all his gay characters.

Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) contributes a postcolonial dimension. Gopinath argues that queer diasporic subjects occupy a position of double marginality - excluded both from the heteronormative national culture and from the Western metropolitan gay culture that defines itself against that exclusion. Gopinath argues that the figure of the queer diasporic subject is constituted through a logic of double displacement - rendered unrecognizable within the heteronormative imaginary of South Asian nationalism, and simultaneously excluded from the homonormative framework of Euro-American gay and lesbian identity politics, which consolidates itself precisely by othering non-Western sexualities (*Impossible Desires* 11 - 18). Ranjit's self-exile to England - his pride in his 'English lover' of twelve years and his contemptuous declaration that "your lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country" (Dattani 71) - illustrates precisely the kind of queer diasporic negotiation that Gopinath theorises.

Discussion and Analysis

The play's central dramatic situation - Kamlesh's invitation to his gay and lesbian friends to help him exorcise his obsession with the ex-lover Prakash - provides a framework within which Dattani can systematically expose the varied forms of accommodation that gay individuals make with a hostile social world. Each major

ISSN 2349-4948

character represents a distinct survival strategy, and together they constitute a sociological map of gay life in urban India at the turn of the millennium.

Kamlesh occupies the moral and emotional centre of the play. His homosexuality is, for him, neither a source of shame nor a subject for apologetics; he "has no qualms about his homosexuality" and justifies same-sex love with disarming simplicity: "if two men want to love one another, what is the harm?" (Dattani 91). This frank acceptance of his desire makes Kamlesh the play's moral touchstone - the standard against which the various strategies of concealment and denial adopted by other characters are measured and found wanting. His crisis is not one of self-acceptance but of love and loss: Prakash has left him, and the pain of that abandonment - compounded by the knowledge that it was social pressure rather than any failure of feeling that drove Prakash away - is the engine of the play's dramatic action.

Kamlesh's experience of psychiatric treatment is one of the play's most cutting social commentaries. His consciousness "I know I needed meditation (Dattani 69) and awareness "I chose the psychiatrist" (Dattani 69) confirm that the psychiatrist's suggestion of "aversion therapy" (Dattani 69) and his eventual verdict that Kamlesh "would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society" (Dattani 69) and should "reorient" himself (Dattani 69) positions medicine as an instrument of social normativity rather than human wellbeing. This corresponds precisely to what Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, identifies as the medicalisation of sexuality: the transformation of sexual deviance from a moral category into a pathological one, with therapeutic cure replacing juridical punishment as the mechanism of social regulation. The psychiatrist does not punish Kamlesh for being gay; he pathologises his gayness and offers normalisation as its remedy - a subtler but equally coercive form of discipline.

Prakash/Ed represents the play's most psychologically complex and theatrically compelling portrait of the damage that enforced heteronormativity inflicts upon the self. His adoption of the name 'Ed,' his pursuit of Kiran, his church attendance, and his venomous denunciation of homosexuality as "the work of the devil" (Dattani 85) are all symptoms of what Sedgwick calls "the agonistic closet" - the state in which the repressed homosexual turns his self-loathing outward, attacking the very desires he cannot extinguish. Ed's behaviour toward Kamlesh - calling their intimacy "Filth! Rubbish!" (Dattani 93) and exclaiming "Faggot! Pansy! Gandu! Gandu!" (Dattani 110) - is the behaviour of a man at war with himself, using the language of homophobia to suppress the desires he has been taught to regard as shameful.

The revelation of Ed's real motive for pursuing Kiran - "Once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any . . . . You are my brother-in-law. I can meet you any time . . . . I will take care of Kiran. And you take care of me" (Dattani 104 - 105) - is the play's most devastating moment of social critique. Ed's plan is not simply selfish or dishonest; it is the logical outcome of a social system that offers no legitimate path for same-sex love. Unable to marry Kamlesh, he designs a marriage to Kamlesh's sister that would give him both social respectability and continued access to the man he loves. As John McRae observes, this is the "compulsory hypocrisy" that a society "which

not only condones but encourages hypocrisy" demands from those who "cannot be allowed self-expression, responsibility and dignity" (46).

Sharad, by contrast, is the play's emblem of gay pride - unapologetic, flamboyant, and contemptuous of concealment. A. K. Chaudhuri's characterisation of him as the "flamboyant gay" who "cares a fig about how the world views him" (49-50) captures the function he serves in the play's moral economy: he is the living refutation of the argument that gay identity requires concealment. However, even Sharad is not untouched by the social pressure that surrounds him. His final soliloquy - "What Makes A Man A Man? / What have I got? / And what I am and what I am not . . . ." (Dattani 111) - reveals that beneath the performance of nonchalance lies a genuine existential uncertainty about identity and value. Butler's insight that all gender identity is performative - that there is no stable "real self" beneath the performance - finds its most poignant theatrical illustration in Sharad's closing question.

Bunny represents the most socially normative of the play's gay characters - and in this representation, Dattani produces his sharpest satire of respectable Indian middle-class culture. Bunny is a happy married husband and a good father who enjoys himself as a gay soul in the company of the gays while publicly performing heterosexuality. His defence of this duplicity is both honest and chilling: "Do you think the millions will accept me if I screamed from the rooftops that I am gay? . . . Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They cannot find you" (Dattani 70). The use of the animal metaphor - camouflage as a survival strategy - is telling: Bunny has accepted the logic of his predators and adapted himself to it, at the cost of authenticity and at the cost of the wife who loves a man who does not exist. His is the tragedy not of persecution but of self-erasure.

Ranjit's solution - emigration to England - introduces the postcolonial dimension of the play's social critique. While talking to Shard, he demonstrates that he takes it as a pride and says, "Call me what you will. My English lover and I have been together twelve years now" (Dattani 71). This positions the metropolis as a space of queer liberation unavailable in the former colony - an ironic reversal of the colonial narrative in which Britain imposed upon India the very anti-sodomy laws that continue to persecute gay Indians. Ranjit's self-described regret at "being an Indian, because I cannot seem to be both Indian and gay" (88) encapsulates what Gopinath identifies as the impossible bind of the queer postcolonial subject: the national culture demands the surrender of sexual identity. In contrast, the metropolitan queer culture demands the surrender of national identity.

Deepali, the play's lesbian character, represents a different kind of queer subjectivity - one defined by what the play presents as a specifically feminist pride. Her declaration that "Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman" positions her lesbian identity as an extension of, rather than a departure from, female solidarity. Her decisiveness in striking Ed when he turns violent and her clear-eyed analysis of the situation throughout the play illustrate what Chaudhuri identifies as the play's subtle implication "that it is the woman who is sensible, even in gay culture" (50). Adrienne Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum" in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian

Existence" (1980) - the idea that lesbian identity is part of a wider spectrum of woman-identified experience rather than a simple sexual category - finds resonance in Deepali's characterisation.

The play's symbolic architecture is as significant as its characterisation. Dattani's use of the muggy Mumbai heat - the failing air conditioning, the stifling interior atmosphere - as a sustained theatrical metaphor for the psychological pressure of heteronormativity is noted by Chaudhuri: "The spaces within the home are muggy too hot to be comfortable, the air conditioning breaking down even as the interior spaces of the psyche have to be confronted. Meanwhile, the exteriors keep exerting pressure, intruding into the other spaces occupied by the characters in the play perpetually reminding them of their isolation" (43). The private space cannot be a refuge because the social pressure penetrates it; there is no room in which the gay characters can breathe freely. The fireworks - which Prasad compares to the "major images of Shakespearean tragedies' and identifies as symbolising 'explosion of one's self" (163) - mark the moments at which the repressed truth erupts into the social surface. The wedding music heard constantly offstage functions as an ironic counterpoint to the gathered company of people for whom marriage is simultaneously a social necessity and a personal impossibility.

M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan, in their landmark book *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey* (A Sequel to M. K. Naik's *A History of Indian English Literature*), comment on the play's social realism: "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, everyone has their own oar to put in, their own flag to hoist" (Naik and Narayan 207 - 208). The play presents a very real picture of the gays and their suffering. This image of individual navigation within a shared predicament captures the play's structural logic: each character represents a different response to the same social conditions, and together they map the full range of human possibility within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality.

Conclusion

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is a play of genuine theatrical and moral courage. In bringing the private realities of gay and lesbian life onto the Indian stage for the first time, Mahesh Dattani performs an act of cultural visibility that is also an act of political argument: that gay and lesbian citizens deserve the same rights to love, dignity, and social recognition as their heterosexual counterparts. The play's characters - each navigating their own complex accommodation with a society that refuses to acknowledge their humanity - constitute a collectively devastating portrait of what compulsory heterosexuality costs in human terms: love suppressed, identity fragmented, lives distorted by the demands of a social performance that no one can maintain without cost.

The theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Butler, Sedgwick, and Gopinath converge in illuminating what Dattani makes theatrically visible: that sexuality is

ISSN 2349-4948

socially constructed and disciplined; that the 'closet' is not an individual failing but a social institution; that queer diasporic subjects navigate multiply constraining systems of exclusion; and that the recovery of sexual dignity requires not the transformation of individuals but the transformation of the social norms that degrade them. In the play's final image - the unheard oath, the concealed photograph, the question "What Makes A Man A Man?" - Dattani leaves his audience not with resolution but with responsibility.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Chaudhuri, A. K. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. Foundation Books, 2008.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. Penguin Books India, 2000.

---. "My Favourite Book." *Outlook*, 2 Oct. 2000, p. XV.

---. "Interview." *The Hindu*, Sunday Special, 9 Mar. 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, 1978.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2005.

McRae, John. "A Note on the Play." *Collected Plays*, by Mahesh Dattani, Penguin Books India, 2000, pp. 45–46.

Naik, M. K. and Shyamala A. Narayan. "Cinderella Still: Drama." *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey*. Pencraft International, 2007.

Prasad, A. N. "The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Fine Fusion of Feeling and Form." *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*, edited by R. K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant, Prestige Books, 2005, pp. 155–68.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631 - 60.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California P, 1990.