
**NEGOTIATING INCLUSIVITY: SEXUAL MINORITIES IN
VASUDHENDRA AND MAHESH DATTANI'S SELECTED
WORKS**

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary Indian literature and theatre increasingly scrutinize the marginalization of sexual minorities, employing frameworks of queer theory and intersectionality to challenge social norms. By analyzing Vasudhendra's Mohanaswamy and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, this study juxtaposes regional prose with urban drama. Vasudhendra's work foregrounds the friction between rural roots and urban queer existence, influenced by caste and linguistic politics. In contrast, Dattani's plays utilize symbolism to unmask the hypocrisy within urban, upper-middle-class families. Collectively, these works dismantle heteronormative silences, establishing that true inclusivity requires navigating complex socio-cultural terrains to foster empathy and social justice.

KEYWORDS:

Sexual Minorities, Intersectionality, Queer Theory, Social Inclusivity, Indian Literature.



The exposition on the inclusivity of sexual minorities in India is accentuating in recent decades. In the light of global frameworks of queer theory and intersectionality, there is a need to contextualize inclusivity within the nation's diverse socio-cultural fabric. It is a known fact that sexual minorities had been systematically marginalized along with the intersectional challenges of class, caste, gender, and sexuality. Contemporary Indian literature, activism, and judicial pronouncements increasingly reflect these theoretical perspectives, underscoring inclusivity as both a moral imperative and a democratic necessity.

This paper examines Vasudhendra's Mohanaswamy (2013), a Kannada short story collection, alongside Mahesh Dattani's plays *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) and *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991). Both authors foreground sexual minorities, yet their mediums—regional prose and urban theatre—offer distinct strategies for negotiating diversity and inclusivity.

In Vasudhendra's Mohanaswamy, homosexuality and intersectionality emerge as central thematic concerns that not only disrupt the silence surrounding queer lives in Kannada literature but also foreground the layered complexities of identity formation in a socio-cultural milieu deeply structured by caste, class, gender, and linguistic politics. The text, often hailed as a pioneering work in regional queer writing, situates its protagonist Mohanaswamy within the fraught terrain of desire, shame, and social conformity, thereby offering a narrative that resonates with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, where identity is enacted under compulsion and surveillance rather than freely chosen (Butler, 1990). The stories oscillate between rural secrecy and urban visibility, demonstrating how geography itself becomes a determinant of queer experience. This rural-urban divide exemplifies the intersectional nature of queer existence, where sexuality cannot be disentangled from spatial, cultural, and economic factors. Intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, finds vivid illustration in Mohanaswamy, as the protagonist's homosexuality is never experienced in isolation

but always in conjunction with caste hierarchies, class struggles, and gendered expectations (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, the short story “Four Faces” highlights how caste privilege or marginality shapes the possibilities of queer relationships. By writing in Kannada, Vasudhendra asserts the importance of vernacular queer narratives (Raghavendra & Veerappa, 2019), and this act of linguistic choice itself becomes a form of cultural resistance, situating queer lives firmly within the Kannada cultural imagination and challenging the assumption that queerness belongs only to globalized or urbanized contexts.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the eminent playwrights who write about sexual minorities and homosexuals. These issues are no longer marginalized issues but they occupy the central stage in some of his plays. Same-sex love is treated as an unusual, invisible issue in the Indian context. Dattani, in some of his plays, tries to identify grey areas to which Indian society is yet to give its due recognition. Dattani, in the course of his introduction to *Collected Plays* (2000), says, “I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background.” This view finds support in the following observation of John McRae with reference to the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*:

“The themes of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deserve to touch the whole of society and to be touched by it. 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.”

This play deals with the sensitive subject of a group of homosexuals in Mumbai, their changing mutual relationships, their revelations, their self-delusions, and self-discoveries. Kamlesh is weak and sensitive. Sharad is his exact opposite, with his jaunty nonchalance. Ed assumes a double identity with Prakash as his second incarnation. Bunny is a good husband at home while he

enjoys himself as a gay soul in the company of the initiated. Ranjit solves his problem by going abroad where he feels he will be more readily accepted, and Deepali is a militant lesbian; totally free of guilt, she is strong and bold. The wedding music heard constantly in the background in the final act is an ironic commentary on the lives of these homosexuals for whom “marriage can only be a doubly dirty twice four-letter word.” The characters here struggle to find and establish their identities. Kamlesh goes to a psychiatrist to overcome his depression and his fears, but the response he gets from the psychiatrist is:

Kamlesh: ...He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while I believed him. Because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself.

Ranjit: How primitive!

Kamlesh: ...Could he help me cope with my loneliness and fear? The same way he would help a heterosexual cope with his?...

The following bit of conversation reveals how differently characters deal with their trauma and the tension of gaining an accepted position in society:

Bunny: Since you want us to help you – let me give you some advice... Get married. Find yourself a nice woman. You can always have sex on the side.

Sharad: And pretend to be straight like you!

Bunny: What’s wrong with that? Huh! Do you think I’ll be accepted by millions if I screamed from the roof tops that I am gay... camouflage! Blend with the surrounding. They can’t find you.

Kamlesh: I don’t want camouflage and I don’t want glitters. I don’t want to flaunt or hide anything.

Ranjit: Well, this is the price one pays for living in India... my

English lover and I have been together for 12 years now. You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country.

Deepali: Tina and I can tell all of you to go jump!

Ranjit: I guess you are an exception...

Dattani uses symbolic means to foreground his ideas of gay relations. Kamlesh's small flat is a place where this gay group can meet openly. But in contrast to this small place available to them are visible and invisible signs of the outside world which has a continuous imposing presence – the Mumbai skyline, the wedding procession with all its loud paraphernalia, the failed air conditioner, the heat, claustrophobic atmosphere, etc.

The pictures of homosexual relationships we get from Dattani's plays are realistic and reflect their struggle for social recognition. He brings out their craving for social acceptance. He has created gay and lesbian characters who treat their sexual identities differently. Kamlesh yearns for social as well as sexual identity, and that is when Bunny, Ranjit, Sharad, and Deepali come up with solutions for this problem respectively. Ranjit has left India as homosexuality is treated as abnormal in India. Bunny is a double-faceted personality who has been politically correct by marrying a woman to satisfy social norms and concealing his 'gay' identity. Sharad and Deepali are happy with their respective gay and lesbian identities.

In his play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the couples Dolly-Jiten, Alka-Nitin, Old Baa and her husband (father of Jiten and Nitin) have a lot of differences between/among themselves. Though the family belongs to the upper middle-class society, the members of the family, though educated, do not share a good rapport. The beginning of the play where Dolly wears a mud mask on her face, her hair in clips, and aimlessly files her nails suggests that even the relationship between Jiten and herself is masked to project a perfect and beautiful relationship. The very fact that Dolly cannot laugh

heartily for the joke cracked by Lalitha because she has a mask on her face is the undertone that Dolly's relationship with Jiten too is a masked one. If the mask cracks, then the wrinkles on the face can be seen, as well as the cracks in the relationship that can be seen by other people, which Dolly does not want to happen.

Dattani creates a character named Nitin, the younger one of the Trivedis, who is gay. Nitin holds the advertising business with his elder brother, Jiten Trivedi, but has no say at home. He too is married to Alka, like Bunny in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Nitin, according to Baa, is "beautiful, like my father". She always has liked Nitin more than Jiten as Nitin reminds her of her father. Baa makes Nitin hate her husband since his childhood.

Nitin is split in two between Baa and his father. He is also split in two between his homosexual desire and satisfying Alka. The autorickshaw driver stealthily comes into the house through the servant's quarters to satisfy Nitin's sexual desires. This fact is kept a secret as he is already married to Alka and she cannot speak this out to others as it is a prestige issue. She suffers alone and Nitin is helpless. He marries Alka thinking that Alka knows about him but his partner, Praful, Alka's brother, deceives both Alka and Nitin. The last dialogue of the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is a soliloquy of Nitin which reflects his state of confusion and in the end, his decision of continuing the relationship with Praful.

Nitin: He tricked you too, didn't he?... Don't answer. Just sleep... That was a game he played. And I-I was caught in it... He tricked you... I am sorry. It wasn't my fault... Don't wake up. Stay drunk. You mustn't watch... those powerful arms... (exits to the kitchen)

Dattani uncovers the masks that people wear in terms of their relationships with others through his characters. They are bound in their own ways and cannot establish a healthy relationship with their counterparts. Dolly and Alka are not happy with their husbands. Jiten represents the typical patriarchal male who beats up Dolly

during her pregnancy. He is an embodiment of male chauvinistic values and doesn't respect Dolly. Nitin cannot make Alka happy because he is torn between the two partners – Praful and Alka. Nitin is gay and cannot come out of his sexual interests nor can he have a happy relationship with Alka because of his hidden identity to which only Alka is exposed in the Trivedi family. Besides this, Nitin is married to Alka and keeps his sexual relationship with Praful under wraps. So Alka is doubly victimized by Praful and Nitin.

One more interesting feature of Dattani's plays is the effective and apt use of symbols. In his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the wedding song which persists throughout the play is ironical to the characters' life inside the flat. The air conditioner which is not working and the humid, claustrophobic atmosphere inside the house represents the trauma, nauseating atmosphere of the society in which they are living. The prop bonsai plant in the play *Bravely Fought the Queen* represents the women in the Trivedi house being show pieces, as fragile and hardly useful as a bonsai plant. Their freedom is curbed as Lalitha explains about making the bonsai plants, "You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and ... stunt them."

Throughout the play, Naina Devi's thumri is played. The title of the play itself is very symbolic as it is taken from the poem *Jhansi Ki Rani* "So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi / So bravely fought the manly queen..." from which Dolly takes the inspiration of fighting in a manly valour though she knows that she is fighting a losing battle against the Trivedis.

In conclusion, inclusivity in Vasudhendra's Mohanaswamy and Dattani's plays is both thematic and linguistic. Vasudhendra emphasizes empathetic narration and individual agency, while Dattani fosters collective reflection through performative confrontation. Together, they reshape Indian literature and theatre into spaces of resistance, empathy, and dialogue. The multilingual

dimension underscores that true inclusivity must transcend both social and linguistic boundaries. By situating sexual minorities within broader frameworks of class, caste, and gender, these texts contribute to the evolving canon of South Asian queer literature, affirming the necessity of integrating marginalized narratives into mainstream literary spaces. Their contributions extend beyond visibility, offering critical interventions into broader debates on identity, power, and social justice. Vasudhendra's prose humanizes queer identity by portraying the protagonist's struggles with love, shame, and societal rejection, thereby challenging heteronormative conventions in regional contexts. Dattani, conversely, employs theatre to dramatize the silencing of sexual minorities and women, exposing the hypocrisy of Indian families and communities.

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