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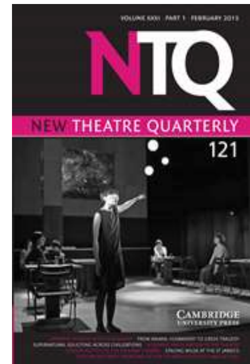

Inventing Narratives, Arousing Audiences: the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Susan Oommen

Inventing Narratives, Arousing Audiences: the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

In this article Susan Oommen looks at the plays of the popular Indian dramatist Mahesh Dattani as conversations between the writer and his audience on models of reality, and interprets their performance as moments in subjectivization. In initiating an audience into redefining identity, she argues that Dattani provides the parameters within which problematizations may be reviewed and better understood. He also seeks to queer the debate on Indian middle-class morality, thereby challenging its privileged status and underscoring the interconnection between repression and invisibility. The question for the audience is whether Dattani's plays can cue them into experiences of resistance and encourage them to reinvent narratives that may then function as personal histories. One of the plays on which this article focuses, *Dance Like a Man*, was seen during this year's Edinburgh Festival as part of the Celebration of Indian Contemporary Performing Arts.
Susan Oommen works in the English Department in Stella Maris College, India, where she has been on the faculty since 1975. She spent the past academic year at the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University.

MAHESH DATTANI'S plays talk to the audience. Sometimes they call for recontextualization of response; sometimes they suggest revisioning in what may appear to be standard cultural discourse. Dattani's conversations raise questions from recent years, questions that pertain to power and gender. What is the thinking that allows exploitation to happen? Who selects the narrative that is to be written out of history? When do differences become pathological? What is the historical process that validates exclusion as first principle? These cumulate into the overarching question about how to make sense of identity.

Dattani, who has come into his own as an Indian popular playwright, is seen today as a pragmatic writer who has the capacity to deal with obsessive issues head-on. His audience, in the main, is drawn from the ever-growing, English-speaking Indian middle class which has come to form a metropolitan fraternity. Audiences emerge from performances of *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Final Solutions* (1993), and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) excited about their contemporaneity. For some, however, there is a sense of unease that in performance there may have been an oversimplification of vocabulary. It is almost as if the audience has been brought under scrutiny.

What protocols of reading will they subscribe to? In the problematization of morality, how will they process the narrative? Will they segregate the story or make it their own? Dattani's observation in his preface to *Collected Plays* (2000) seems to take a swing at this process: 'I have yet to meet a homosexual who says, "I have nothing against heterosexuals, but do we have to watch them on stage?"'[1] The comment, even as it critiques the concept of a collective middle-class audience, serves to queer both audience sensibility and identity, unpacking the collective as multiple bodies with distinct histories and oddities, inhabitants of separate territories, yet participants in civil society. Dattani seems to be throwing more than the symbolic challenge to reciprocal identity[2] in the overt suggestion that respect for ambivalence is tied into respect for freedoms.

Indian society has evolved over the years, as any living organism must, from closed traditional settings to open, forward looking environments, marked by movements, collective action, awareness of exclusions, the

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Mahesh Dattani, born in Bangalore on 7 August 1958, studied in Baldwin's High School and St Joseph's College of Arts and Science, Bangalore. He has worked as a copywriter in an advertising firm and subsequently with his father in the family business. His theatre group Playpen was formed in 1984, and he has directed several plays for them, ranging from classical Greek to contemporary works. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will*, and from 1995 he has been working full-time in theatre. In 1998, he set up his own theatre studio dedicated to training and showcasing new talents in acting, directing, and stage writing, the first in India to focus specifically on new works.

In 1998, Dattani won the Sahitya Akademi award for his volume of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays* (East-West Books, Chennai), thus becoming the first English-language playwright to win the award.

Dattani teaches theatre courses at the summer sessions programme of Portland State University, Oregon, USA, and conducts workshops regularly at his studio and elsewhere. He also writes plays for BBC Radio 4.

Photo: Dattani with actress Lillete Dubey during rehearsals of *Dance Like a Man*.

need for alternative codes, and the interrelation between the personal and the public. Areas of conflict, however, contend in the discourse (or its lack) between rationalized systems and alternative experiences.

Dattani initiates his audience into the politics of lack in the area of identity. A dead father's mistress ridicules a son's pretensions to self-determination. A dancer becomes displaced when his self-esteem is brutalized. A surviving Siamese twin refashions the past for meaning. The sense of lack explodes in *Final Solutions*. A wrought-up chorus intones: 'What must we do? To become more acceptable? Must we lose our identity? O what a curse it is to be less in number' (p. 208).

Dattani would have his audience believe that the politics of lack is also the politics of being the minority in India. How does the non-heterosexual stake out his territory and demystify the gaze of the heterosexual custodian of truth? How does the non-majority negotiate, when the majority holds control? 'You can have an angry mob outside your house. You can play the civilized host. Because you know you have peace hidden inside your armpit' (*Final Solutions*, p. 192).

Dattani never baits his audience, though. His plays provide the spatial and temporal parameters within which problematizations may be reviewed. On stage he uses memory, provides physical spaces for both past and present, locates separate actions at multiple levels, transforms faces into masks, frenzy into voices, within contexts that are only too familiar. *One Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) can bring into the living room where the action in the play is located all at the same time the Mumbai skyline and the beauty and the terror it can hold for those who are shut out, the bedroom where the worst manipulations can happen, and the mainstream daylight world, at once buoyant, inquisition-ridden, and destructive. The playwright's offer to the audience is the insight into contrasting structures in identity.

The Narrative on Sexuality

One Muggy Night in Mumbai explores fear, loathing, and helplessness, closing in on confrontation: the moment of coming out.

BUNNY: All I am saying is that we should all forget about categorizing people as gay or straight or bi or whatever, and let them do what they want to do!

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RANJIT: Well, I am sorry. There is such a thing as honesty. Or maybe it is the company you keep. Or maybe it is the country I am in.

BUNNY: Why don't you go back to England or wherever if you are ashamed to be here?

RANJIT: Buggery do! I will be where I want to be, thank you.

BUNNY: You can leave the country, but you can never run away from being brown. You are ashamed of being Indian.

RANJIT: That's really rich coming from a closet homosexual like you! Yes, I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can't seem to be both Indian and gay. But you are simply ashamed. All this sham is to cover up your shame.

BUNNY (*really hurt*): That's not true. You cannot make me an outcaste both inside and out.

DEEPALI: Bunny, you are a Sardarji. Why did you cut your hair?

BUNNY: What has that got to do with it . . . ? Okay. Not because I am ashamed of being a Sardar. I am proud of it. I believe in my faith. My children learn from the Guru Granth Sahib . . . But because if I had a turban, I will end up playing a stereotypical Sird in all those movies. And that would hurt even more.

DEEPALI: Thank you, Bunny. I rest my case, Ranjit.

RANJIT: What do you mean?

DEEPALI: It's not shame, is it? With us? It's fear. Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be. (p. 89)

One Muggy Night in Mumbai

The fear of becoming the stereotype presumably lowers resistance to muscle-flexing and returns the subject to the closet. For the custodian this is a time-tested strategy in violence that will allow him or her the moral sanction to locate sexuality within parameters of heterosexuality. In the play Kamlesh and Prakash break up because Prakash knows Kamlesh still loves Sharad, who plans to marry Kiran, Kamlesh's sister, in the hope that the marriage will provide him the cover to return to his relationship with Kamlesh.

Ridiculous as it may seem, this set-up underscores the reality of contemporary India. The arrangement is picked up in *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), and Dattani offers a further variation in *Do the Needful* (1997), in which Lata and Alpesh enter into a marriage contract in order to allow each other the freedom to pursue their separate lives – Lata with Salim, Alpesh with Trilok. The nexus between compulsory heterosexuality and discursive categories[3] and the essentialist stance that sexuality is subject to mechanisms of repression[4] seem to inform, one more time, the narrative on sexuality in India.

Muggy Night throws up two worlds with two separate geographies. One of the two worlds carries the larger space because it has assumed the power to exclude. The smaller world may be seen in the circle of friends who have come together at Kamlesh's apartment; the larger world lies outside, celebrating the ritual of marriage. The mood inside is hardly festive – in fact everybody feels betrayed at some level. Just as Kiran begins to understand her brother's world, she sees a photograph of her brother and his lover, in the nude. She recognizes the lover as her fiancé Ed, whom her brother had always affectionately called Prakash. She is devastated. Ed works himself into a fury. He tries to jump off the ledge. The friends save him: 'You will survive, Ed. Come back in!' (p. 109). He hits Kamlesh and hurls insults from the straight world: 'Faggot! Pansy! Gandu! Gandu!' (p. 110). Weeping, he turns to Kiran: 'I am sorry. . . . I didn't mean to harm you. I only wanted to live' (p. 110).

Patterns of Camouflage and Survival

Dattani's audience, themselves perhaps strangers to Article 377 of the Indian Constitution outlawing same-sex relationships,[5] may find themselves increasingly preoccupied with patterns of camouflage and survival. Two particulars begin to work on the audience's memory: the recurring reality of herpes, and the option of death in a world without exits. Herpes, with its post-seventies sexual association, requires no decoding. When Sharad points out to Kamlesh that he can never forget Prakash because he will keep cropping up like herpes (p. 58), the audience has already entered a discourse on normative sexual behaviour. Death as an option is a little more uncomfortable to deal with in a world that offers hotlines for help. It is not the first time that Ed has contemplated killing himself, only because he is not sure if there is anybody who wants to hear his story. And every time someone has listened to his story, and held his hand, and looked at the trees, and told him they were beautiful together, even if the larger world could not see him, he has deferred death.

Herpes perceived as shame and death perceived as cleansing serve to highlight the homophobic psychiatrist who is present in the play, who is present in Amnesty reports, and who is present in the collective audience too. The diagnosis is illness, the remedy reorientation. Kamlesh confesses that he had traced feelings of shame directly to his psychiatrist: 'I wished I wasn't gay' (p. 69). He gets rid of both his psychiatrist and his fear. Bunny believes that one must follow basic animal instinct and camouflage in order to blend with the surroundings; Sharad asserts, 'Honey, if you flaunt it, you've got it'; Kamlesh wants to make peace with himself: 'I don't want to flaunt or hide anything' (p. 70).

Eventually the argument falls back onto the audience. Kiran clarifies the position, as it were: 'If there are any stereotypes around here, they are you and me. Because we don't know any better, do we? We just don't know what else to be' (p. 107). In her recognition that she is what she is by default, Kiran is as much victim as anybody else in the play. But what becomes her saving grace is her willingness to acknowledge realities that lie beyond borders and probably beyond grasp too.

In *Final Solutions* Dattani locates bigotry as critical to both loss of memory and political violence. At the heart of *Final Solutions* lies the parable of the boy-hero who was forced into a choice that took away from him the myth of the hero.

> A minor incident changed all that. There may have been others which Javed didn't talk about. I can't remember how it started. Oh, yes. There was the cricket match. Not much of a match. We were playing cricket on our street with the younger boys. The postman delivered our neighbour's mail. He dropped one of the letters. He was in a hurry and asked Javed to hand the letter over to the owner. Javed took the letter . . . and opened the gate. Immediately a voice boomed, 'What do you want?' I can still remember Javed holding out the letter and mumbling something, his usual firmness vanishing in a second. 'Leave it on the wall,' the voice ordered. Javed backed away, really frightened. We all watched as the man came out with a cloth in his hand. He wiped the

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Mahesh Dattani fields a question from the audience at a discussion following the performance of *Dance Like a Man* at the Portland International Performance Festival. Also present: Michael Griggs, the artistic director of the festival, along with the actors, Lillete Dubey, Suchitra Pillai, Joy Sengupta and Vijay Crishna.

letter before picking it up, he then wiped the spot on the wall the letter was lying on and he wiped the gate! We stared at him as he went back inside. The postman came out of the next house and grinned when he saw this. 'Take no notice,' he said. 'That man is slightly cracked.' We all heard a prayer bell, ringing continuously. Not loud. But distinct. The neighbour had been praying for quite a while, but none of us had noticed the bell before. We'd heard the bell so often every day of our lives that it didn't mean anything. It was a part of the sounds of the wind and the birds and the tongas. It didn't mean anything. You don't single out such things and hear them, isolated from the rest of the din. But at that moment . . . we all heard only the bell.

Pause. Quietly, in a matter-of-fact manner.

The next day, the neighbour came out screaming on the streets. Yelling at our windows. We peeped out. He was furious, tears running down his face. We couldn't understand a word he was saying. I found out later. Someone had dropped pieces of meat and bones into his back yard. . . .
I didn't speak to Javed for many days after that. I was frightened of him. For months, whenever we played cricket and heard the bell, we remembered that incident and we avoided looking at Javed. And for Javed, he was – in his own eyes – no longer the neighbourhood hero. (p. 200–1)

The rest of the play builds on versions of this tale. Anger, pain, sacrilege, repudiation, denial, and shame go into spin. Muslim *versus* Hindu, minority *versus* majority, defiance *versus* authority.

The crux of the play is the political fallout that results from the murder of a temple priest and the collapsing of space between the personal and the public. In the momentum that builds, the near-impossibility of returning to the boy-hero or of looking at the self away from superstructural encoding become all too real. The plot plays out until the audience begins to worry. Did the post-Ayodhya riots[6] happen before or after the play? Was Dattani analyzing possibilities, or was he chronicling history, or was he looking at demons?

Separate Communities, Separate Worlds

The fear of being pushed into corners and the strategies of survival and of appropriating spaces that Dattani explores in *Muggy Night* come to haunt the worlds of Ramnik, Smita, Javed, and Bobby in *Final Solutions*. Nightmares unfold in the recognition that

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separate communities must inhabit separate worlds. There is no room for personal space. The mob takes over. The only community marker that the mob as chorus wears is a mask; other factors are common – victims and aggressors, helpless and oppressive. *Final Solutions* may be about people running from each other. It may also be about the scent that drives the pack. The play tracks the relentless search for the scapegoat. The direction begins to turn inward: what it is that must be excluded from history to gloss the demonizing of the self. Dattani stylizes this brutality in the mentality of a riot-mob.

The Chorus pounds with their sticks.

CHORUS ALL: Why won't you open the door?

JAVED (*pleadingly to Ramnik*): Please don't. We beg of you.

CHORUS ALL: Open up! Or we'll break your door!

RAMNIK: No!

Spotlight on Ramnik. The Hindu Chorus strike more stylized positions on top of the ramp and speak from within their masks.

RAMNIK: What harm have they done to you?

CHORUS 1: Set an example.

CHORUS ALL: Stop them.

CHORUS 1: Before they do harm.

CHORUS ALL: Tame them.

CHORUS 1: Before their passions inflame.

CHORUS ALL: Thwart them. So we may live in peace.

RAMNIK: We?

CHORUS ALL: We, who are right.

RAMNIK: And they?

CHORUS ALL: They who are wrong. Since we are right. And they oppose us. (p. 181)

Ramnik must prove he is the liberal Hindu. Javed understands that Ramnik hates him simply because he has proved Ramnik otherwise. Smita must display righteous indignation even if she betrays the trust her friend Tasneem has placed in her, in confiding the family secret that her brother Javed is a jihad-mercenary, hired to start riots, to be the one 'to throw the first stone' (p. 195). Bobby is ashamed of who he is and camouflages the Muslim name Babban. Just as Bobby tries to turn Javed away from the violence of mindless rioting, Smita's outburst works against him. Bobby returns the audience to the fable. He picks up the Hindu idol to prove to Javed the absurdity of imaginary sacrilege and the senselessness of payback:

> You can bathe Him day and night, you can splash holy waters on Him but you cannot remove my touch from His form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world. (p. 224–5)

Final Solutions troubles the audience with a question from the past, of the sense of belonging, of strictures of inclusion and exclusion.

In an exercise that seeks to queer the debate on consensus and socio-cultural unity, Steven Seidman expresses reservations about the moral vision of a rational society associated with the Enlightenment. He observes:

> At issue is the question of whether today it is still credible and desirable to invoke an ideal of a unified humanity, of a transcendent truth, a strong notion of cultural consensus, and the very idea of social progress.[7]

The debate pertains to differences and the human being's ability or inability to enter into reconfigurations. Paulo Freire adds a fierce political twist to this speculation on epistemology in the equation:

> If, then, marginality is not by choice, marginal man has been expelled from and kept outside of the social system and is therefore the object of violence.[8]

The leap of faith for the middle-class Indian, if the audience is to go by *Final Solutions*, has been in the direction of violation.

Disability as Alternative Experience

For Dattani there seems nothing sacrosanct about any point of view, because at any given time it may only be one among several points of view. In *Tara*, Dattani posits the freak against the non-freak. On the one hand is the world shared by Chandan and Tara,

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the conjoined twins consigned to medical history, one-legged and sterile, clever, intelligent, witty, but apprehensive about the external world. Tara comments: 'Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out' (p. 324).

On the other hand is the world of Bharathi and Patel, Dr Thakkar, Roopa – inheritors of the world of normality, myopic, selfish, cruel, and surrounding themselves with protective rules. Access to the world belongs to them. Alone after the death of Tara, Chandan relocates to London as Dan. But Tara's death haunts him; it is as if he has had no personal history at all. That their mother made a politically incorrect choice in Chandan over Tara, in the matter of apportioning a limb, does not make matters easy. He hopes to find salvation in writing. He acknowledges that if he must feel, he must open the flood-gates of memory, and create personal history, even if it means appropriating Tara's tragedy.

Patel and Bharathi live out unforgiving lives, unrelenting in both their inability to forgive themselves and their cruelty to each other. Consumed by guilt and indignation, not only do they fail to create the spaces their children require for growth, but they also dehumanize the limited spaces they are given access to. The method of stunting in the art of growing *bonsai* that Dattani uses as a metaphor in *Bravely Fought the Queen* seems to apply to the freaks of the world. Chandan's comment at the end of the play – 'Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who defy even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force' (p. 379) – hints at the odds stacked against anyone who does not have the cover of cultural consensus.

Presumably the audience is not forced into corners because *Tara* seems to be about the human heart and about choices and decisions that allow the human being to approach disability as alternative experience. But at the primary level *Tara* initiates the audience to a world without the protective rules of resemblance and causality. It suggests that chaos may be a condition that rational thinking cannot keep at bay, or even that the rules of normality may have to be redrawn. It posits that environments may be altered, providing the impetus for opening up which, in philosophy, someone like Deleuze

Dance Like a Man

Bravely Fought the Queen

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would explain as a constant loss of ideas – which indeed is a normal process, because 'thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and earth'.[9]

Deleuze's argument seeks to view earth as embracing elements together, rather than as one among other elements, in its capacity to use these elements to 'deterritorialize territory'. Dattani seems very gently but very definitely to be overriding boundary markers. Devoid of markers, social constructs lose legitimacy. *Tara* comes to pose the fundamental question: who creates the freak?

The Invisible Minority

In what seems to be a recurrent pattern, Dattani creates a bipolar world in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The point of reference is marriage. The world of the *hijras*, the freak community who cannot procreate, and the normal heterosexual community who necessarily must procreate, form this bipolarity. *Seven Steps* has all the makings of a thriller. The murder of Kamala, a *hijra*, unravels as an act of homophobia. It is an execution carried out by a father to protect his son. The case is closed. Two factors seem to account for the silencing: one, that the father carries political clout; two, that homophobia may be indulged. Sharma has his son Subbu's bride Kamala murdered, because to him it is unthinkable that his son can be gay. He seeks to force his son into a heterosexual wedding, the Hindu ceremony in which the groom holds his bride by the hand and takes the ritualistic seven steps around the fire. As Sharma claims, 'My truth is in ensuring he is on the right path' (p. 37). The ritual doesn't quite work. Subbu kills himself. Echoes from *Muggy Night* sing in:

> KIRAN: I really wish they would allow gay people to marry.
>
> RANJIT: Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex.
>
> (p. 98)

Uma Rao, who does research on *hijras*, sees herself as a sociologist turned sleuth. She meets with the *hijras*. Her intentions are good. The community wishes her well, gives her a charmed locket that assures her motherhood, but pleads that she leave them alone. There can be no interaction between the two worlds. To the fanatic, 'one *hijra* less in this world does not matter' (p. 35); the refrain goes, 'Back! Beat it! Kick the *hijra*!' (p. 7). For the *hijras* life goes on unnoticed by the other world. Uma explains:

> The invisible minority. Behind Russel Market, everyone knew where to find them, although I couldn't see any *hijras* on the streets. They only come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand clap.
>
> (p. 21–2)

The only instance when the groups accord mutual visibility is at marriage and birth, when the majority group sanctions the minority group the power to bless through their singing and dancing and clapping. In the event of infertility, the *hijra* becomes the scapegoat: a lack of blessing is cited. Uma comments on the irony:

> 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.'
>
> (p. 11)

Indian middle-class morality presumably defines its core in the principle of polarity, and the basic assumption that it requires a saint to create a sinner and *vice versa*. Having assigned all subscribers particular places in the grand scheme, the moral custodian cannot account for non-categorized elements which, when they do surface, follow convention, maintaining semblances of contiguity. The convention however brings undue pressure on persons or groups falling outside the grid.

Dattani showcases the venerated Indian family in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*. The Indian joint family is introduced in costume: the mother-in-law, two sons married to sisters, the brother-in-law, also a close friend, and the family business. Behind the mask lies whoring, wife-beating, pretence of marriage, either because of the

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absence of love or because the husband is gay, forbidden embraces in strong, dark arms, mistresses, shady business deals.

Bravely Fought the Queen carries the ironic Indian middle-class line: 'The best part about the ball is everyone will be in costume! And we will have masks on!' (p. 237). The plot uncovers two figures: the saint and the sinner. The saint is Praful, who threatens to burn his sister when she is seen with a boy-friend. The saint arranges for his sister to marry his lover. The saint burns his lover with guilt and shame because they are not heterosexual. And Ed goes through similar motions in *Muggy Night*. The sinner is Alka, the sister who can never have a husband because the saint is her husband's lover. For her there is no end of the road because she remains in costume. She learns to be content with simple-minded distractions: drinking, enjoying the sensual music of Naina Devi, and wild dancing in the rain. Her sigh, 'Aren't there times when you don't know what you are doing?' (p. 300) is as close as she gets to answers.

Dattani continues to map Indian morality as cruel and repressive in *Dance Like a Man*, where he presents the unhappy history of a passionate young dancer who is stripped of desire and self-esteem. In a plot conceived by his father and abetted by his dancer-wife, he is rescued and sacrificed because his father believes 'a woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic' (p. 427). His marriage collapses, his infant son dies from an overdose of opium, his career fails to take off, and he wallows in drunken cynicism: 'We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God' (p. 447).

Dattani appears to be extremely sensitive to the sense of defeat in cynicism which, the way he comes to see it in *Final Solutions*, leads to procrastination and the point of no return:

HARDIKA: Do you think . . . do you think those boys will ever come back?

RAMNIK: If you call them they will come. But then again – if it's too late – they may not come.

The lights fade out slowly and go off last on the men standing amidst the Mob/Chorus and their masks.

(p. 226)

Dattani's plays help audiences to cue into experiences of resistance, opening windows on how separate worlds come to be constructed. He seems to work on a certain assumption that his audience may be willing to go with him. In the distancing that underscores much of the parody in his plays, he seems to encourage his audience to invoke events and characters who exist off-stage. The post-orientalist Indian familiar with the argument of his colonized ancestor that non-Europeans were also capable of rational thinking, presumably recognizes not only the non-necessity to reduce distinctness but also the necessity to avoid distortions. Any audience which begins to look at officially designated spaces as politically tenuous may apprehend agency as political prerogative.[10]

The Preoccupation with Identity

Dattani makes no claim to be creating epic theatre; neither do his critics. But Sharad's voyeuristic comment in *Muggy Night* – 'Oh, my Gawd! Those heterosexuals are at it again!' (p. 53) – or Anarkali's inability in *Seven Steps* to consider Uma as sister because Uma is not a *hijra* (p. 13) draw on audience recognition that these are parodies of hegemonic behavioural patterns. In addition the audience is also keenly aware of the male/female identity of the actors playing the *hijras*.

In a note on fluidity of identities, Butler explains the sense of perpetual displacement that drag or cross-dressing brings about in performance. She argues that the 'parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities', and creates a climate for resignification and recontextualization.[11] The kind of popularity Dattani enjoys, because it evokes an extremely easy relationship between playwright and audience, makes the passage possible. In fact the audience may even be willing to consider the performance as a moment in subjectiviz-

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ation, evolving out of conversations between audience and variation models of reality. To challenge privileged status and thereby to problematize it[12] becomes one more option in an evening of performance.

In positing fable as a counter to the-end-of-the-world, Lyotard writes:

> Rigid systems like a bent bow or even an instinctual programme (to borrow examples from living things we know) prohibit amoebas, sycamores, or eels from fabling, as a general rule.[13]

Substitute eels *et al.* for the 'other', and Paul Monette's statement reads like an affidavit: 'Genocide is still the national sport of straight men, especially in this century of nightmares.' And he continues, 'Why do they hate us? Why do they fear us? Why do they want us invincible?'[14]

This correlation, as it were, between repression and invisibility may be sourced in a lack of discourse. Grand narratives and monologues create implosions, while distinct narratives presumably generate multiple readings. Separate narratives make a seemingly strong case for geographical spaces – community, nation, metropolis – into which future people may enter. Dattani seems to be suggesting to his audience different ways of seeing spaces: hanging upside down from a tamarind tree, cutting down the tree, or just reinventing other ways of seeing the world (*Where There's a Will*, 1988).

In Dattani, contemporary audiences recognize the magic of individuation. But this time the actor becomes located in the audience rather than on stage. Instead of recognizing the private person behind the actor's mask, the audience glimpses the separate men and women behind the mask of the middle-class audience. Subtexts come into their own. The preoccupation with identity continues. In riding the wave of redefinition, identities come to territorialize or deterritorialize or renegotiate or altogether reinvent environments.

The commercial bent, the parody, the middle-class down-to-reality thinking, and the story-telling make it possible for straight, linear audiences to enter the world of fabling which has already made spaces for amoebas, sycamores, and eels. There they imagine and recreate subtexts in which they may be both actor and playwright, listening to and inventing narratives that would belong to both individual and community, and which begin to act out as personal histories.

Notes and References

1. Mahesh Dattani, *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000), p. xi-xii. All citations from Dattani are from this edition.
2. Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1989), p. 129. Melucci locates absence of reciprocal identity – 'I recognize myself and I am recognized/I recognize myself and I recognize the other' – as a consequence of breakdown in interaction, caused by suffering such as marginality or stigmatization.
3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 24.
4. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 4.
5. *Breaking the Silence: Human Rights Violations Based on Sexual Orientation* (New York: Amnesty International, 1994), p. 38. Article 377 of the Indian Constitution criminalizes sexual behaviour between consenting adults of the same sex.
6. In 1992 militant Hindu activists, aspiring to construct a Ram temple, wrecked the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Communal riots were orchestrated directly afterwards.
7. Steven Seidman, *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.
8. Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, trans. Donaldo Macedo (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), p. 48.
9. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burcell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 85.
10. Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism",' in *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 47.
11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 175.
12. Stevi Jackson, 'Heterosexuality, Power, and Pleasure', in *Feminism and Sexuality: a Reader*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 175.
13. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), p. 94.
14. Paul Monette, *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 2.