

CHAPTER 4

Subjectivities En/gendered:

Genders and Sexualities in Mahesh Dattani

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4.1 Mahesh Dattani: Life and Work

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian playwright writing in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for his contribution to drama. Born in 1958, Dattani began his professional life as an advertising copywriter and subsequently worked with his father in the family business. He formed his theatre group *Playpen* in 1984 and directed several plays, ranging from classical Greek to contemporary works. He wrote his first full length play *Where There is a Will* in 1986 for the Deccan Herald Play Festival. He went on to write many famous plays like *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (radio play for the BBC, 1998), and *Thirty days in September* (2001).

Dattani is now an internationally acclaimed playwright. In 1998 he received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Final Solutions*, a gripping play on communalism. He has handled with great success some comparatively less explored themes, such as alternate sexualities, the third gender, AIDS, conjoined twins, and so on. His plays have been

directed by eminent directors like Arvind Gaur, Alyque Padamsee and Lillete Dubey. In fact Dattani is more than a playwright: he teaches drama, acts in and directs plays, and is the founder of the theatre group, *Playpen*.

Dattani has acted in several well-known plays and has won accolades for his acting skills. He likes to direct the first production of any play he has written and to maintain creative control when others produce/direct it later. He is also an accomplished dancer. His famous production *Dance like a man*, featuring a traditional Carnatic musical score and Bharatnatyam, has won critical acclaim in India and abroad.

He has also been active in the world of cinema, working as an actor, director and screenwriter. His famous films as director are *Mango Souffle*, *Morning Raga* and *Dance like a Man*. The last of these has won the award instituted by the National Panorama for the Best Picture in English in 1998. As a screenplay writer, he has co-written *Chalo Memsahib* (for Shunyata Films, directed by Ayesha Sayani, 1992), *Hum*, *Tum aur Woh* (for Tutu Films, directed by Pankaj Parasher, 1994), an untitled script for Govind Nihalani (1996), *Ek Chingari Ki Khoj Mein* (for Madhyam, directed by K. P. Sasi, 1998) and *Ek Alag Mausam* (for Actionaid India, directed by K. P. Sasi, 1999).

Indian English drama has found a new life in the work of Dattani who chooses to walk on untrodden paths. On the one hand, he started writing in English when drama in English was not exactly

flourishing; on the other, he often selects unusual themes for his dramas. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri points out, “The preoccupation with ‘fringe’ issues forms an important element in Dattani’s work – issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage” (47). In *A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, for instance, Dattani chooses to dwell on same-sex relationships crumbling under the powerful influence of social demands. The play lifts the veil of secrecy which hangs over marginalised sexualities and lifestyles. The play is the first modern Indian effort to openly handle queer themes, raising serious issues that generally remain unaddressed. In *Do the Needful*, Dattani focuses on the twin issues of gender and alternate sexuality. Originally a radio play, it deals with the shared spaces between women and queer men under the pressure of social norms to conform and live in ways alien to their nature. The same hypocrisy and sham that Dattani rejects in *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* are presented as probably the only answer to maintain peace with social conventions, without taking the risk of upsetting them.

4.2 Disclosing the Unseen of Subjectivities:

Bravely Fought the Queen

As stated above, Dattani writes on unconventional subjects which include the seemingly mean, ugly and unhappy things of life, but his special focus is on the suffering that arises from problems centered on

sexuality. His plays address relatively unexplored and very contemporary issues of sexuality which are constitutive of the contemporary urban Indian subjectivity.

Bravely Fought the Queen deals with alternate sexualities, though the approach is oblique and the issue of gender differences assumes greater importance. The play showcases a joint family with Baa, the matriarch, her two sons Jiten and Nitin, and their wives Dolly and Alka (who also happen to be sisters). Both Dolly and Alka lead loveless married lives: Jiten is a dominating, self-willed and violent husband, while Nitin is a queer person who enjoys secret relationships with other men. Baa is confined to bed owing to an illness and is prone to fits of delirium. She spends alternate months in her two sons' homes. She hates Alka because of her sharp tongue and goads Nitin to turn her out of the house. Earlier, during Dolly's pregnancy, she had incited Jiten against his wife, prompting him even to beat her, which resulted in the birth of a spastic child, Daksha.

The play opens with the world of women in which Lalitha arrives as an intruder and becomes a medium for us to have a peep into the lives of Alka and Dolly with their own little arguments, bickering and fantasies - which they reveal to Lalitha as if performing before an audience. Both Alka and Dolly marvel at the opportunity of having an audience. Alka says, "There's . . . too much between just the two of us! We won't get a chance like this again" (259). And later when Alka

broaches the issue of Dolly's affair with the cook, she asks Dolly if the mention of the cook in front of Lalitha embarrasses her:

ALKA. Does this . . . will this make any difference to you?

DOLLY. No silly. Why should it? It's nice to have an audience. (293)

In a Brechtian way, the audience is made to realise that this is a drama being performed as the illusion of reality is shattered. A distancing effect is achieved in this way. The theme of performance in the play can be better understood in the light of Judith Butler's theory of performativity. As she suggests, identities are by no means as straightforward and singular as they may appear to be but are unstable and constructed. Identities are, in fact, performatively constructed. As noted earlier, Butler connects identity to linguistic performativity. Since identities are constructed and constituted in language, there is no identity that precedes language (*Gender Trouble* 25). And since there is no identity outside language, one is led to question the very existence of a "pre-linguistic inner core or essence" (Salih 65). This means that words and deeds are not just performed by a subject but constitute the subject performatively. In a similar manner, Dolly and Alka assume new identities through their performances in front of Lalitha, constructing new selves, probably unknown even to themselves.

When the play opens, Dolly is getting ready to go out for a party; but the party has been cancelled. She, in fact, knows that the party has

been cancelled, but clinging to a smothered hope she keeps on getting ready. Dolly and Alka speak to each other in a very slighting manner, often making allusions to the past in order to hurt each other. A constant tension prevails between the two sisters. This tension appears to arise out of jealousy. The story begins to slowly unfold, generating stray hints but no tangible facts about the sisters' lives:

ALKA. Then why did you bring it up?

DOLLY. I didn't. It was only . . . (*Angrily.*) All right, I will say it! You're always implying that you have a better deal than me! (*Mimics.*) Oh, didn't Jiten tell you that? Nitin told me a week ago! Or, Nitin told me that four of us were going but Jiten has changed his mind!

ALKA. But that's true! There's no need to imply anything, it's a fact! . . . (247)

The half sentences and unsaid truths point towards a complex scheme of affairs which remains an enigma until Act III. Lalitha's conversation with Dolly and Alka generates subtle hints about their lives, such as Dolly's affair with the cook and the secret of her spastic child, Daksha. Lalitha tries to discuss with them a masked ball arranged by the men, their husbands. It appears as if the men are trying to intrude into women's spaces by sending an interloper in the form of Lalitha.

Then there is Baa who, by her frequent instructions, disrupts the evolving intimacy between the three women. Lalitha, who begins as an

intruder, slowly merges into the world of the women when she reveals her own emptiness and purposelessness and her obsession with the bonsai with which she tries to confront it. She immediately bonds with Alka, who leads a loveless married life and has found refuge in alcohol, and Dolly, who escapes her boredom by imagining an adulterous union with the young cook. It is, therefore, escape that everyone wants: Alka by drowning out everything in alcohol, Dolly on the wings of fantasy, and Lalitha through her obsession with the bonsai.

The bonsai is a recurrent metaphor in the play. As Chaudhuri points out: "The stunted growth, the bizarre shape, the grotesque reality of the bonsai becomes resonant in the existence of all the characters in the play" (54). All the characters in the play are made to comment on the bonsai in a deliberate attempt at drawing parallels. Daksha, the spastic child of Dolly and Jiten, is an obvious parallel, whereas Alka too appears constrained by the patriarchal discourses as the bonsai is as a result of forced stunting.

There is a conspicuous role reversal between genders in the play. Jiten, outwardly a self-willed dominating male, is driven to tears near the end of the play when Dolly reminds him that Daksha, their spastic child, is a result of his violence on her person. Then there is the "manly queen" Dolly who, though a victim of persecution at the hands of her husband, yet stands up against him when she has to defend Alka, her sister.

The play also deals with the theme of alternate sexuality though this theme is secondary to the more apparent theme of the domination of one gender over the other. Nitin exemplifies the way social pressures and uncommon sexual preferences construct a queer subjectivity. Like Bunny Singh of *A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the “happily married” TV star, who covertly indulges in queer relationships behind the facade of his macho public image, Nitin too tries to continue a loveless relationship with his wife Alka, a screen behind which he seeks to hide his clandestine queer relationships. He was talked into marrying Alka by Praful, his one time lover and Alka’s brother. Nitin too, thus, appears to be a victim of the heterosexual superiority complex of the world of “normal” men.

Nitin’s reactions to Alka are therefore mixed. On the one hand, he knows that he is in financial difficulties from which only Baa can rescue him. To please Baa he must throw Alka out of the house as Alka is often accused of confronting everyone, including Baa and Praful, when her tongue is loosened by alcohol. On the other hand, he is guilty of using Alka to conceal his homosexuality behind the veil of marriage. He is unable to make up his mind and keeps oscillating between guilt and greed.

Baa, the tortured and the torturing mother, is both a persecutor and a victim. Her husband has abused her and now she takes it out on her daughters-in-law. She goads Jiten to hit Dolly, accusing her of

carrying another's child, and she pressurises Nitin to turn Alka out of the house on the pretext of her impure parenting:

BAA: I don't forget bad deeds. It is in your blood to do bad! (283)

She too has discovered her escape in fits of delirium constructing images from the past and the present simultaneously and confounding other characters in the play. In fact, the fusion of the past and the present is a recurrent device in Dattani. This device brings to the fore the temporal layers of subjectivity, accumulated over the course of time.

Dattani achieves it through two methods; firstly, by the juxtaposition of dialogues in two simultaneous scenes on two different parts of the stage: and secondly, through the hallucinations of Baa who imagines herself to be in some past moment at one instant, and in the present at the next.

Both methods reinforce the concept of subjectivity as constituted by multiple layers. The theatrical technique employed by Dattani reinforces a perception of subjectivity as multi-layered, demolishing the Cartesian idea of a stable self. When the same subject is put simultaneously in different temporalities on the stage, it becomes impossible to assert the notion of an authentic core of subjectivity.

Significantly, when Lalitha comes to Baa's room, she takes her to be some dead relative:

BAA (*her face lights up*). Oh, Lally! Where have you been,
Lally?

LALITHA. I'm not Lally. I'm Lalitha. My husband works . . .

BAA. You are Lally? Padma's daughter? No?

LALITHA. No.

BAA. Oh! I'm so happy you are not Padma's Lally. Padma's
Lally is dead. (272)

She confuses the present with the past, forgetting that her sons are grown up now. She still believes that Nitin is a ten year old, afraid of the dark, afraid of his father who used to beat Baa mercilessly. The very next moment Baa is hallucinating that she is being beaten by her husband and cries out:

BAA. You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit
me? Go on. Hit me again. . . . No! No! Not on the
face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face!
I beg you! Hit me but not on . . . aaaah! . . . (278)

Baa has been a victim of brute patriarchal violence; but now she herself has become an instrument of patriarchal discourses, and tries to oppress her daughters-in-law by instigating her sons to use violence against them. She forgets that she herself has been a victim. Such is the way the discourses function in our lives, determining both memory and forgetting. According to Foucault, because of their claims to expertise, discourses determine the way we talk and think and persuade us to keep others and ourselves under constant control (*Power/Knowledge* 119). Explaining the functioning of discourses in our lives Hans Bertens says, "Since we are all extensions of the discourses that we have internalised,

we ourselves constantly reproduce their power, even in our intimate relations” (156).

Alka, probably the weakest female character in the play is victimised by almost everyone except Dolly who is a mother figure to her. She is used and abused by her own brother Praful, whom she loves dearly and whose unjustifiable moral codes she wants to stand up to. She refuses to indulge in an affair with the cook even in fantasy just to prove her worth to Praful: “No-o! I can’t! . . . Praful, your sister is good. She’s good” (263). And near the end of the play when she is drunk, she blabbers about her victimization: “The Saint has another sister who is (*slaps her face*) bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better” (300).

This shows a mixed, confused response to the power wielded by authority in her life. She has admiration and awe for authority and she wants to mould herself to suit the dictums of authority and yet she despises it for being harsh on her and for victimizing her. She despises it, yet she cannot bring herself to refuse to conform to its standards. She simultaneously protests against and conforms to authority.

Her responses can be compared to Leela Benare of Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* who has similar feelings of awe as well as contempt for authority. Though Alka is not a rebel like Benare, she prefers to hide behind a comfortable veil of stupor provided by alcohol. She almost forgives Nitin for abusing her: “I know I haven’t

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

Alka is a subject of patriarchal discourses rooted so deeply in her psyche that she cannot bring herself to raise her voice against them. Dolly is probably the only character in the play who appears to be sane and strong despite being subjected to violence both mental and physical. She not only stands up for herself but also supports Alka when everyone is bent on torturing her. Even in fantasies, she is aware of reality. She has a reflective personality that can think outside her 'subjectivity'. She has created a space even in her subjectivity and this space manifests itself in the form of fantasies in which a subject may take her destiny in her own hands. Though the costume of *Jhansi Ki Rani* was to be made for Alka, (as suggested by Lalitha who was organising a masked ball party for the promotion of Nitin and Jiten's business) yet it is Dolly who deserves the title of the brave queen as she fights for her cause vehemently with all her might.

4.3 Interrogating the Norms of Heterosexuality:

A Muggy Night in Mumbai

A Muggy Night in Mumbai is Dattani's most performed play and has been very well received in urban India despite its unconventional theme. The play was also adapted by the author into a film called *Mango Soufflé*

which won accolades in film circles. The play is a celebration of freedom, but it also warns that the freedom is threatened the moment one steps out of the privacy of home.

Kamlesh, the protagonist of the play, has shared an unsuccessful relationship with Ed. The relationship flounders due to societal pressures of heterosexuality which make Ed believe that he is somehow wrong and should switch to the normal, heterosexual mode. Kamlesh is unable to come to terms with the broken relationship. He comes in contact with Sharad who is a very lively, intelligent and confident person. Both Kamlesh and Sharad live together for some time. But, unable to forget Ed Kamlesh dumps Sharad. Meanwhile, Ed starts seeing Kamlesh's sister Kiran on the advice of his psychiatrist. Their marriage is fixed and they plan to visit Kamlesh before the wedding. Kamlesh is, however, still unable to get over his relationship with Ed. He seeks the opinion of his queer friends who advise him to tell Kiran about his past affair with Ed.

When the play opens, we see that Kamlesh has invited some of his queer friends including Sharad to his place. There are Sharad and Deepali who are extremely frank and very comfortable with their sexuality and loyal to their partners. There is Bunny Singh, a TV actor, who clandestinely enjoys gay relationship while being happily married, and presents a macho, heterosexual exterior. There is Ranjit who thinks that India is not a good place for queer people; so he has gone abroad. All these people have found solutions to the societal oppression and

opposition in different ways. In other words, they have employed different survival tactics: Sharad and Deepali by being very upfront and honest about their identities, Bunny by hiding behind a veil of marriage and becoming invisible, and Ranjit by escaping to foreign lands. Over all, the play foregrounds the subjectivity of queer people in a country like India and shows a significant aspect of contemporary Indian subjectivity in terms of its metropolitan gay society. Gay subjectivity is relatively unacknowledged but is very much a fact as became evident in a recent media debate following a High Court Judgment and the subsequent agitation demanding amendments in the Constitution to legalise gay relationships and marriages.

But Kamlesh's problem is different. He is not ashamed of being a homosexual and is very honest about it, but Ed is ashamed to own the relationship publicly. Ed sees a psychiatrist who encourages him to adopt heterosexuality. Dattani uses this opportunity to criticise mainstream psychoanalysis for being status-quoist. As Foucault suggests with reference to "the techniques of the self", psychoanalysis should also open up spaces for allowing a person to be what he/she chooses to be (119).

However after consulting the psychiatrist, Ed starts seeing Kamlesh's sister Kiran who does not know about his relationship with Kamlesh. Kamlesh passively lets things happen as he thinks that Ed has changed and will keep his sister happy. When Kamlesh's friends come to

know of the situation, they ask Kamlesh to reveal Ed's secret to Kiran. But since Ed will not tell her and Kamlesh does not want to tell her, they decide that she should learn the secret herself through a photograph of Kamlesh and Ed taken together. While Kiran is shocked to learn that both Kamlesh and Ed have been deceiving her, Ed reveals another secret to Kamlesh that his real motive behind marrying Kiran is to remain close to Kamlesh and fulfill his homosexual desires clandestinely. This is how the matrimonial institution of heterosexual society is used for purposes which are entirely at variance with that institution. This leads to further complications causing psychic injuries to people, extracting a heavy price from them.

The play ends with Kamlesh rediscovering love with Sharad and a humiliated Ed trying to commit suicide. The social pressures are so overwhelming that he just cannot think of living normally. To him living according to the norms of the heterosexual society is a prospect worse than suicide.

It needs to be noted that the theme of alternate sexuality has been treated with delicacy in the play. Dattani tries to find out why the queer people seem to be hypocrites, escapists and introverts. Is it simply a strategy for surviving in a hostile environment? The incriminating discourse of the heterosexual world is always present in the play. According to Foucault, the dominant discourse constraints the free development of queer subjectivity and makes these persons a minority,

always protecting and defending themselves against the incriminating discourse of the heterosexual majority (119). John McRae, in the introduction to the play, writes:

It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectation society creates. . . . For the fault is not just the characters' – it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity. (45-46)

This society, in which the queer people have to necessarily live, does not accept them as what they are. It tries to make them what they are not, with often disastrous results. It brings about their self-alienation through a complex web of discourses, as subjectivity is colonised by forces with which they cannot see eye to eye. The typical reaction against the situation is that of Bunny Singh and Ed who get married to prove to the society that they are normal while secretly carrying with their gay relationships. Hypocrisy is, thus, a part of the damaging discourse. It demeans them in their own eyes by undermining their self-worth. Bunny Singh admits this when he says:

Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me – the real me – are present here in this room. And you hate me for

being such a hypocrite. . . . I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either. (102-103)

Bunny Singh continues to perform the role of a straight male to gain acceptance in his professional circle which expects him to be an ideal husband, a family man. Bunny defends his decision vehemently in Act I, but we can feel that he too is tired of this hypocrisy, of not being able to express himself honestly. Ed also, a victim of similar social pressures, decides to marry Kiran to secretly get Kamlesh's love. But he forgets the emotional harm he would be doing to Kiran. Kiran asks him, "What did you want from me? What did you want from me so badly that you could not care how much you hurt me for it?" (107). Bunny and Ed thus translate the oppression they receive at the hands of society into deception and victimization of their wives: the chain reaction begins, without any point in sight at which it would end.

Then there is Ranjit who leaves India in order to lead a life of his choice. There are others like Deepali and Sharad who are very honest about their sexuality and flaunt it openly. They are not afraid of what people would think about them, but go on to do their own thing. Deepali lives with her girlfriend Tina and is very comfortable discussing her femininity: "I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman" (66). But it is interesting to note her remarks on queer-men-relationships: "I'm all for the gay man's cause. Men deserve only men!" (60). Sexuality is one thing; but the gender war is also there to be seen.

When Kamlesh is accused of exploiting the guard sexually, Deepali comments: "Treat him like a sex object. Men should get a dose of their own medicine!" (63).

The heterosexual world peeps in time and again and makes its presence felt. There is a wedding taking place in the compound whose noises and sounds disrupt the peace of the cosy flat. Then there is the neighboring couple making love, seen through a window. The couple becomes a tool for exposing and even deconstructing the reality of heterosexual marriage in the play. Sharad comments, "Oh my Gawd! Those heterosexuals are at it again!" (53). By using a condemning tone, Sharad hints at the way queer people are talked about in heterosexual world. His comments are almost like an expression of feelings of revenge: "Of course he is her husband! He is too fat and bald to be her lover. . . . She is gritting her teeth. She might throw up any moment" (53).

Sharad seems to be exposing the unhappiness and compromises that a 'normal' marriage usually involves. Probably that is the reason he is averse to paid sex, as it involves sexual exploitation of the one being paid. The neighboring woman can be compared to the guard, who is sexually exploited by Kamlesh in return for money. Sharad comments, "Only men who are fat, bald and forty pay for sex" (63). The parallel between Kamlesh and the husband in the neighbourhood is apparent.

The outside world which is alien to the insiders keeps on exerting its pressure. First the wedding, then the children chasing Bunny for an

autograph and finally the neighbours finding out the incriminating photograph of Kamlesh and Ed. John McRae remarks on the relationship between the outside and the inside worlds:

The outside world's always pressing in – the heat, the sounds, the people pestering Bunny, the kids who find the photo. Very few dramatists are able to give this sense of a whole society touching the participant in the on-stage drama – it recalls Ibsen at his social best. (45)

The outside world is a metaphor of oppressive ambience in which a queer person has to live. It appears as both a metaphor and reality. The presence of the opposing force in the form of the outside world creates a discourse of opposition to homosexuality. By constraining and suppressing, it shapes the subjectivity of queer people, making them what they are. The suppression of homosexual culture is a result of the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, which has been fed to society for centuries, blocking the minds of people to anything other than it.

Nietzsche questions the validity and authenticity of such discourses in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and avers that these work by hypnotizing the entire nervous and intellectual system (61).

These discourses damage the vitality and energy of human beings. As a result the subjects of such discourses create around themselves a cocoon of cultural codes and institutions which further increase their subjection. Gay subjectivity is shown to be constructed as an

oppositional subjectivity against an oppressive discourse of normative heterosexual behavior. These discourses construct an idea of the subject, so that people start seeing themselves as normal/abnormal. When a queer person sees himself as a hypocrite, he/she has internalised the discourse, not being critically conscious about it. In this context, Chaudhuri remarks:

Looking at how the society creates stereotypes and behavioral patterns that devour any aberration from the expected format, the play builds up tension within this context and ends in . . . pulling apart the given norms that the audience has begun to expect. (42)

The ending of the play is not on the expected lines. Conventionally, it could have ended in Ed's suicide; but Ed is saved and is shown to get up, although with some help. He starts walking towards the people he earlier dreaded facing. The playwright, though not very loudly, makes a plea for an atmosphere of acceptance and acknowledgement for the queer community and also brings out the gay issues out of the closet into the open. The play stands on the side of gay emancipation, as Chaudhuri also notes:

Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make to his audience. But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatises and peoples the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with, facing genuine, real-

life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India's "queer culture". (51)

Dattani projects through the play the problems faced by the Indian urban queer community. He deals with a variety of queer sensibilities, including men and women, showing how they react to societal pressures. The play also raises serious questions as to whether homosexuality is an unnatural aberration. Are people homosexuals by choice? In other words, can one choose one's gender and sexuality? And can homosexuals convert to heterosexuality?

It is difficult to answer these questions with certainty, but contemporary theory suggests that gender is performative. According to Judith Butler, it is possible to make a choice since we become the gender we perform. In other words, gender identity is not fixed and permanent. It is a sequence of acts and utterances and there are ways of doing one's identity which may upset the conventional binary oppositions of masculine/feminine or straight/queer. Butler remarks in *Variations on Sex and Gender*, ". . . [T]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms" (131).

But by choice Butler does not mean that the subject is entirely a free agent who can select her/his gender because the choice of gender is limited from the start. The subject can, however, do its gender

performatively like Ed does in the play, as he tries to become ‘manly’ through certain acts while trying to convert to heterosexuality on the advice of his psychiatrist. He says, “I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest” (92). He adopts certain mannerisms which make him look more aggressive and manly. Sharad remarks jauntily on the mannerisms such people adopt:

All it needs is a bit of practice. I have begun my lessons. Don’t sit with your legs crossed. Keep them wide apart. And make sure you occupy lots of room. It’s all about occupying space, baby. The walk: walk as if you have a cricket bat between your legs. And thrust your hand forward when you meet people . . . And the speech. Watch the speech. No fluttery vowels. Not ‘It’s so-o-o hot in here!’ – but ‘it’s HOT! It’s fucking HOT!’ (101)

It is a performance one puts up before the world to gain acceptance, power and authority. Ed plans to put up this performance before others, so that they should see him as a normal, straight, heterosexual man. As a result, Kiran remarks about him, “he is so . . . male. So protective, so caring and yet so assertive” (104).

But in reality Ed admits before Kamlesh that he wants to remain a homosexual and continue his relations with him. But he forgets the harm he is causing to Kiran. He realises it later, “I am . . . sorry. I didn’t mean to harm you. I only wanted to live” (110). He asks Kamlesh, “Where

do I begin? How do I begin to live?” (111). It is difficult for a queer person to decide about putting an end to hypocrisy and begin life afresh.

Ed is so confused by the expectations and pressures of society that he cannot decide for himself. But the question remains whether one can choose his/her gender/sexuality. Ranjit asks: “Aren’t we all forgetting something? Does Sharad really have a choice? Can he become heterosexual?” (100). Kamlesh agrees with him, when he advises Ed not to deny himself his real identity: “Please! Don’t turn your back on yourself. You are wrenching your soul from your body!” (93).

The play attempts to pose several questions while affirming also that any definite answers are not possible. Dattani’s play thus raises a host of rarely addressed issues and places them in the forefront. The constant movement of action across time and a multi-level stage are recurrent technical devices in Dattani. He uses the same devices in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*. He fuses the past into the present and oversteps the limitations of time by two methods. The first is the flash back method (when, for instance, Kamlesh goes back to the time when he first met Ed) and the second is the simultaneous action in a particular scene at one time but with different characters in different parts of the set, juxtaposing the two conversations to achieve either comic or ironical effects. Sometimes it is also a case of history constructing a subjectivity through the memory of one character and the oblivion of another. Through this method, Dattani plays with the

temporal layers of subjectivity. The theatrical techniques used by Dattani reinforce the multi-layered perception of subjectivity. Dattani thus achieves a decentralization of subjectivity, granting the subject the freedom to make himself/herself, the freedom of self-invention.

4.4 Scarred and Silenced Subjectivities:

Thirty days in September

Thirty Days in September treats the sensitive issue of child abuse. The play was commissioned by an NGO (Non Government Organisation) called RAHI (Recovering And Healing from Incest) that helps survivors of child abuse. The play endeavors to lift the veil of silence which surrounds the issue of incest. It builds on the trauma of Mala who lives with the haunting memories of her abused past. Her past damages her natural growth; it scars her soul, making her unable to pursue serious relationships with men beyond an ominous thirty-day period. She has become a woman who perversely enjoys being taken advantage of.

The present play is the study of a very important aspect of the experience of a very wide but little discussed segment of society. This is a part of subjectivity which has generally remained largely unanalysed in literary and critical studies. Mala's is a tortured subjectivity through which the play brings into focus similar subjectivities which remain twisted and wrongly interpreted.

The recuperation of Mala from her state of shock is presented through her taped conversations with her psychiatrist. From a very insecure, shy and diffident girl at the beginning of Act I, we see her transforming into a confident woman ready to face the world. The insights afforded by psychoanalysis and other disciplines enable her to analyse her own subjectivity and pinpoint the root of her problem. Rather than blaming herself or her mother for her woes, she points her finger at the real culprit, her maternal uncle who had abused her for a period of six years.

I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There's nothing to hide. Not for me. After all, it is he who must hide. He should change his name not me. . . . I wish he were here now, so I could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn't my fault. . . . Now, I know now. (8)

But Mala is not so confident earlier when the play begins. She is afraid to even utter her name. She hesitates to tell anyone what is bothering her and she does not even know that she is a victim. She stammers out her sentences:

I – I don't know how to begin . . . Today is the 30th of September . . . 2001, and my name is . . . I don't think I want to say my name . . . I am sorry. I hope that is okay with you . . . I am unsure about this . . . and a lot of other things .

. . . I know it is all my fault really . . . It must be. I must have asked for it . . . Somehow, I just seem to be made for it. Maybe I was born that way, maybe . . . this is what I am meant for. It is not anybody's fault, except my own. (9)

Mala is not intellectually equipped to understand the root of her suffering. She is undergoing a crisis of self-identity due to which she begins to see herself through the eyes of others and begins to blame herself. She is a common woman, not a cultural theorist or a psychoanalyst. She believes that the self is an entity fixed and given. She has no idea that the self is a socio-political and cultural construction. As we have noted in Chapter 1, according to Lacan, the response and recognition of others are needed in order to arrive at what we experience as our identity. In other words, our subjectivity is constructed in interaction with others. Mala too forms an image of herself on the basis of how others treat her and think of her. She compares herself to other girls of her age and passes judgement on herself. A person becomes himself/herself under the gaze of the other, by way of other perspectives and other views of who he/she is. Both Sartre and Lacan suggest that this "Other" – the center from which the question of existence is posed – is not a concrete individual, although it may be represented by one (father or mother, for instance), yet it stands for the larger social order (Bowie 82).

For Mala, the other locus of self-identification is her uncle Vinay whose approval she desires in everything. This misrecognition, to use a Lacanian term, becomes incorporated in her identity. And since others see her as guilty or spoilt, she too begins to think of herself as such. But for her, this misrecognition becomes the basis of her identity. As a result, Mala is unable to connect positively with men. She meets men and enters into relationships with them. But she times it in such a way that the relationship ends within a period of thirty days. She admits to Deepak that she likes it when she is being abused in a relationship. Her obsession with thirty days seems to suggest her desire to remain in control of the situation, yet she is unable to get the abuser out of her system which makes her compulsively want to be abused. It is a case of the ambivalent pathological subject in control and dependent at the same time, a subject both free and unfree in her actions.

When she meets Deepak, she tries to end the relationship after thirty days, but Deepak likes her and insists on knowing why she is avoiding him. He goes and meets her mother Shanta who is of little help. But from some names, ticks and crosses jotted on Mala's calendar at her home, Deepak guesses what Mala is going through. He wants to help her and sends her to see a psychiatrist. Through Deepak thus, the dramatist allows us an insight into Mala's real inner situation. Mala does not understand herself, so she is unable to examine her problem. Hence the

omniscient author has to disclose Mala's inner world by means of Deepak and the psychoanalyst.

Dattani depicts the change in Mala's state after the treatment through the tapes of Mala's recorded conversations; he thereby hints that Mala's subjectivity can be understood through the discourse of psychoanalysis. The symptoms of her problem are read through Freudian and Lacanian perspectives. Dattani himself locates the play in these perspectives. As it is apparent from the earlier conversation, Mala is very hesitant, unsure and guilty. She feels that she is the one who is to blame for whatever is happening to her.

I have been so bad. I can't tell you where to begin! It's not just the men in the office I told you about, but before . . . much before! I – Oh God! I – I seduced my uncle when I was thirteen . . . No, there is nothing to tell about my uncle, forget all that . . . (33)

The subject is here both victim and victimiser. She thinks that she is a seducer. But the significance of the analysis lies in the ambiguity of the situation which further complicates the real problem of the subject. The uncle is the Freudian father figure whose approval Mala desperately desires to the extent that she is sexually exploited at his hands at such a tender age. In fact, the institution of patriarchy is so deeply internalised by Mala that she exclusively holds herself responsible for her victimization. And she is afraid to raise her voice against her

victimization in spite of the heavy price she has to pay for it. She cannot bring herself to believe that it is she who is the victim and her uncle, the father figure, her persecutor. So she hides behind a veil of unruly sexual conduct, lack of moral values and sometimes silence, like her mother does. These are her survival tactics meant to keep herself sane by forgetting reality. But she does not realise the psychic damage she is causing herself by creating a cocoon and hiding in it.

She has learnt to remain silent from her mother. She sometimes blames her mother for not listening to her when she complained of sexual abuse to her:

. . . I came to you hurt and crying. Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food. I couldn't speak because I was being fed all the time, and you know what? I began to like them. I thought that was the cure for my pain. That if I ate till I was stuffed, the pain would go away. Every time I came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. You knew. Otherwise you wouldn't have been so prepared. You knew all along what was happening to me, and I won't ever let you forget that! (24)

The mother's complicity in the crime through her silence makes Mala a victim without hope. The metaphor of silence in the play can be compared to that in Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session!* The silence in these plays is used in order to be deconstructed; the silence is

not an absence of sound; rather it is full of violent noises. As such, it is an insidious formative force. Mala is made to suffer time and again doubly, first through the abuse and then through the silence of her family. She is shattered by her experience and withdraws herself completely from the family. She feels that her mother could have prevented all that from happening if she had intervened: "The only person who can, who could have prevented all this is my mother. Sometimes I wish she would just tell me to stop. She could have prevented a lot from happening" (18).

In an interview quoted from Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, Dattani says that he was deeply moved to hear the accounts of the abuse victims whom he met at RAHI. But he adds:

It's the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It's this silence that makes the abused feel betrayed. (1)

Mala too feels shaken, when both her parents do not listen to her but ask her to keep quiet:

I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation when we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You were busy in either the pooja room or the kitchen. I

would go to papa and cry. Before I could even tell him why I was crying he would tell me to go to you. You always fed me . . . that I should eat well and go to sleep and the pain will go away . . . But it comes back. It didn't go away forever! (26)

Mala's parents could have prevented her abuse. Uncle Vinay is Shanta's brother who used to help her financially when Mala's father had abandoned them. It could be the financial angle that prevented Shanta from heeding Mala's pain. She accuses Mala of cooking up stories at one time and at another of dreaming and at yet another of inviting sexual exploitation: "No, no Mala. Just forget all these bad dreams" (25).

She accuses Mala of having seduced a cousin of hers when she was thirteen and even says that she enjoyed what was being done to her:

But Mala, I have seen it with my own eyes. You enjoyed it. You were an average child but you had my brother and your cousins dancing around you. That is what you wanted. Yes! How can I forget? I am trying to forget, please help me forget. (28)

Her accusation could be her unconscious strategy of facing the situation that her conscience is unwilling to accept. But Mala cannot forget however hard she tries. She feels her abuser's presence everywhere, in every relationship with men. She desperately seeks the approval of her persecutor: "I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am not so sure I want to be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone . . . else" (54).

Both Deepak and Shanta advise Mala to forget her past and begin her life afresh. But Mala is unable to lead a normal life after having suffered so many scars on her psyche: “By staying silent doesn’t mean I can forget! This is my hell. This hell is where I belong! It is your creation, Ma! You created it for me. With your silence!” (54).

The mother signifies for Mala the site with which she identifies and also misidentifies. As Lacan has remarked, a child encounters himself/herself by looking into the eyes of the mother. When she accuses her mother, she is in a way accusing herself and in this way trying to evade the responsibility of her own complicity in her violation. This brings the play to its climax as Shanta discloses that she too had been a victim of child abuse at the hands of the same man causing her to keep quiet, although she knew everything. It is a moment of negative enlightenment for Mala, a knowledge which liberates as well as oppresses.

Yes. Yes! I only remained silent. I am to blame . . . I remained silent not because I wanted to but I didn’t know how to speak. I – I cannot speak. I cannot say anything . . . My tongue was cut off years ago. I did not know how to save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself? (55)

Shanta is herself a victim of exploitation. She is afraid to divulge her pain to anyone. This probably keeps her from listening to Mala when she comes to her crying. She knows all along that Mala is being

exploited, but she is too powerless to stop the victimization. She turns a blind eye to everything and pretends not to know anything. She accuses Mala just as she has always accused herself. She believes that one has to bear the pain when one is powerless to remedy the situation. She silently bears her pain and tries to forget all about it, although it makes her a “frozen woman” in the words of Mala’s father. But her disclosure makes Mala understand her pain, and she now empathises with her:

While I accused you of not recognizing my pain, you never felt any anger at me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive but I never acknowledged your struggle. Ma, no matter where I am, I always think of you. I want you to know that I am listening. Waiting for you to speak. (58)

After her treatment, Mala is finally able to kill the shadows that haunt her. She grabs the shadow of the man by the throat and strangles him. She is now free of his influence. She fights free of him and is now able to lead a life free of his memories. Mala thus acts at the level of the symbolic to tackle patriarchy, since patriarchy also functions at the level of the symbolic through the collective psyche. She says: “I wish he was here now, so I could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn’t my fault . . . Now. I know now” (56).

She believes that she can start her life afresh: “I can smile again. I can be a little girl, again. Not again, but for the first time. At thirty plus I am the little girl, I never was” (33). Shanta’s disclosure also helps Mala to

come to terms with her situation. The feeling of betrayal by her mother goes away and it now becomes easier for her to rearrange her life.

Shanta, on the other hand, remains closed to any opportunity for healing and rejuvenation. Her only help is prayer and silence, which help her maintain her sanity.

Both Mala and Shanta are seen as behaving ambivalently towards their persecutor. They pay him proper respect and need his advice and approval, yet they despise him for what he did to them. The uncle is a representative of ugly authority in both their lives, though it is through Mala's subjectivity that Dattani depicts the complexity of possible attitudes towards authority. The discourses available to Mala to understand her predicament are psychiatry and the social/familial/moral/religious discourses. But is Mala able to see them as discourses and thus to free herself? In fact, Dattani himself uses and analyses indirectly these discourses in order to depict Mala's subjectivity.

Mala is a subject formed by complex socio-cultural and psychological forces. In her ambivalent attitude towards authority/father figure, she can be compared to Leela Benare of *Silence! The Court is in Session*, whose maternal uncle and, later, Damle exploit her physically and emotionally. She abhors them, yet she needs their approval. She simultaneously revolts against and submits to their authority.

Mala too craves for her uncle's attention and approval. The power he wields even in his absence hints at the hidden power of the discourses

that lie behind the cruelty of gender-based exploitation. He appears to wield the authority of the Freudian father figure, which Mala both spurns and finds fascinating. He first uses his authority to exploit Mala and later passes judgment on her conduct: “You like it! You enjoy it. After four years, you have become a whore! At thirteen you are a whore!” (44). He tells Shanta, “If only you had controlled her from the beginning. She has always been wayward” (45).

But Mala’s persecutor himself remains aloof and sane. He first exploits his younger sister Shanta and then her daughter. He uses force as well as emotional blackmail to achieve what he wants: “I won’t hurt you I promise” (43) and “See, I love you even though you are so ugly. . . . Nobody will tell you how ugly you are. But you are good only for this” (44). He hammers into Mala’s mind that she can get approval only in return for sexual favors. Why he does so, or what makes him do so, or what he thinks about all this, remains unknown as the dramatist does not let us have a glimpse into the interiors of his subjectivity. So, we do not know whether he is haunted by some guilt or just feels repentant for Mala’s and Shanta’s condition. In Dattani’s dramatic world, there is hardly anyone who does not have at least a bit of the playwright’s sympathy, but we do not notice any for this child abuser. Dattani does not usually paint black or white characters but varying shades of gray, which are conspicuous by their absence in the case of Vinay.

In this play also, as in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani uses the techniques of flashback and juxtaposition of dialogues in two simultaneous scenes on two different parts of the stage. Both these methods throw light on the layers of subjectivity acquired by a subject over the course of time. For example, in one scene Deepak is comforting an exasperated Mala in one part of the set and in the other part Shanta and uncle Vinay are discussing Mala. But after some time Vinay moves on to the other part of the set and haunts Mala by reiterating the process of her abuse when she was a child. Now only Mala can see him but Deepak cannot, which means that it is a figment of Mala's imagination. But this method lets us see the contrasting behavior of two men towards Mala and how she cannot get rid of the shadows from the past in every new relationship.

Another technique which Dattani uses is the multiple-role playing by one person. For example, there is only one person called "the man", who plays the uncle, the Paperwallah and the other two men who bother Mala. All these men are shown as abusing Mala in one way or another. Moreover, one character suddenly starts performing the role of another to deepen the contrast. For example, when Deepak visits Shanta, he pleads with her to help him. When she refuses, he suddenly steps into the shoes of the Paperwallah and assumes the latter's body language. Dattani describes it through a stage direction: "*Deepak looks at her for a while,*

then takes charge by putting on the posture of the man, pelvis thrust forward, taking charge of the space” (13).

This multiple role playing by Deepak suggests that he performatively assumes the most effective role that will help him in a particular situation. Deepak can be very persuasive, caring and charming with Mala, pleading and understanding with Shanta, but he can also assume the role of “the man” when required. His multiple performance can be better understood in the light of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity which suggests that identity is constructed and constituted by language and that there is no identity outside language, meaning thereby that actions or speech are not performed by a subject, but these constitute the subject. According to Butler, the gendered body has no ontological status apart from the acts performed by it and these acts constitute its reality (*Gender Trouble* 136).

The speech and actions of a person thus constitute his/her identity, which is true in the case of Deepak, Shanta and Mala. In other words, there is no subjectivity without performativity. A new subjectivity is formed when there is a new performance. But there is something essential about patriarchy which transcends subject formation. This is the reason that the man, the uncle, Paperwallah and Deepak can melt into each other. Each of them is equally an abuser and the distinctions between the normal and the abnormal crumble.

Thirty Days in September thus successfully depicts the trauma of the victims of child abuse. The play explores the silence, the feelings of betrayal and the psychological instability that are characteristic of a victim of sexual abuse. On the other hand, the play offers no help by way of analyzing the subjectivity of the abuser. Questions such as what makes a person an abuser, what his psycho-social circumstances are, or how his actions affect his psyche remain unanswered. Yet the play continues Dattani's attempt to explore the hushed-up issues in Indian society.

We have noted that hitherto unexplored and marginalised subjectivities are exposed to light bare in Dattani's plays. He consciously chooses to bring to light those strands of subjectivity whose mention and discussion have remained a taboo in Indian society. Dattani's subjects generally represent urban subjectivity. While Tendulkar explores the socio-political matrix of subjectivity and Karnad analyses subjectivity in terms of history, myth and folklore, Dattani's subjects are constructed in oppressive discourses of gender and sexuality. Dolly and Alka, for example, are victims of patriarchal oppression and exploitation, while Mala's subjectivity takes shape on the basis of her childhood experiences of sexual abuse. On the other hand, Ed, Bunny, Nitin and Kamlesh struggle against the incriminating discourse of heterosexual normativity. His special focus, one can say, is on problems centered on gender and sexuality.

Nearly all characters in Dattani come from a particular stratum of society: they all belong to urban upper middle class. Unlike Karnad, almost all of Dattani's subjects come from the religion of the majority in India, that is Hinduism. Significantly, there is no representation of the religious minorities in his plays. The characters are primarily seen from the point of view of gender and sexual preferences. Those subjectivities whose mention and portrayal have been unexplored in literature, have found their voices in Dattani's plays.