

**Queer Identity and Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's
*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai***

Neha Rani¹, S.Z.H.Naqvi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak

²Professor, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak

Article Received: 05/06/2026

Article Accepted:06/07/2026

Published Online:07/07/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.07.180

Abstract:

This paper explores the complexities of same-sex desire within a heteronormative Indian society. Mahesh Dattani defines the psychological, social, and emotional struggles of queer individuals who navigate stigma, secrecy, and internalised conflict. Through characters such as Kamlesh and Ed, he exposes the tensions between personal authenticity and societal expectations, revealing how repression and denial lead to fragmentation of identity. The play challenges dominant cultural norms and questions the marginalisation of non-heterosexual identities. The study depicts resistance employed by queer subjects, including self-assertion, emotional solidarity, and the reclamation of space and voice. The narrative within an urban Indian context, drawing on queer theory, not only portrays the vulnerabilities of queer existence but also articulates a subtle yet powerful resistance against oppressive structures. The play emerges as a significant intervention in Indian theatre, advocating visibility, acceptance, and the right to self-definition.

Dattani's plays may reinforce the belief that India is a tolerant nation and that the urban middle-class Indian society, vividly depicted in his works, is inherently inclusive, albeit favouring heterosexuality within marriage. The superficial application of the term 'queer' overlooks its intricate meaning. The term queer, when used as a synonym for 'gay' or 'homosexual,' inadequately captures the political intervention it aims to achieve and ultimately reinforces the binary distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality that it seeks to dismantle. The rise of queer theory in Europe during the early 1990s represented both an expansion and a divergence from the gay and lesbian studies of prior decades. The queer movement, embodying a deconstructive ethos, advocates for the examination of gender and sexuality from perspectives that transcend patriarchal conventions. Queer theory is significant for its analysis of social spaces, historical conventions, and cultural institutions in the study of sexuality.

Keywords: Queer Identity, Resistance, Heteronormativity, Marginalisation, Sexuality, Identity Crisis, Urban Society.

Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani is a leading contemporary Indian playwright who has integrated marginalised perspectives, particularly about gender and sexuality, into the forefront of Indian theatre. His play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is considered as a seminal work for its audacious and nuanced depiction of queer identity in metropolitan India. Composed in the late twentieth century, the drama examines the emotional and psychological challenges faced by persons navigating same-sex attraction within a profoundly heteronormative culture. Set in the urban landscape of Mumbai, the drama depicts a cast of characters confronting themes of secrecy, internalised homophobia, social stigma, and the apprehension of disclosure. Dattani employs intimate dialogues, confessional tones, and nuanced characterisation to elucidate the intricacies of LGBT existence. The ‘muggy night’ serves as a symbolic backdrop, illustrating the stifling societal environment that constrains personal liberty and genuine self-expression. ‘Queering’ refers to the process of challenging and overturning the assumption of heterosexuality as the normative standard. Postcolonial theory contributes to this discourse by integrating queer studies into broader academic and cultural frameworks, thereby questioning dominant ideologies of identity and sexuality. As Pramod K. Nayar observes in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*:

Gay and lesbians share a common rejection by heterosexist society. Further, notions of family that circumscribe gay life in Asian nations are similar to those in European countries not very long ago. The literature of homosexuality in postcolonial South Asia does, however, show how expectations of ‘family life’ bind gay and lesbian identities. (Nayar 159)

This highlights how familial and societal structures regulate queer identities across cultures, particularly within postcolonial contexts. Similarly, Sudhir Kakar conceptualises sexuality as a complex system shaped by both conscious and unconscious forces. In his work, he notes: “Sexuality is a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies, arising from various sources, seeking satisfaction in diverse ways, and involving a range of excitations and activities that aim to achieve pleasure” (Kakar 241). Thus, both postcolonial and psychoanalytic perspectives reveal that queer identity is not merely a personal or biological condition but a socially constructed and psychologically complex phenomenon. These frameworks underscore how cultural expectations, especially those surrounding family and normativity, constrain and shape queer existence, while also opening spaces for resistance and redefinition.

The drama emphasises the invisibility and marginalisation of queer people while simultaneously showcasing their resilience and resistance. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, via its frank examination of relationships, identity, and desire, contests traditional standards and initiates a critical dialogue on sexuality within Indian society. Dattani's oeuvre signifies a pivotal transformation in Indian English drama, rendering it an essential text for comprehending modern discourses on identity, inclusion, and human rights. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, first produced at the Tara Theatre in Mumbai on November 23, 1998,

adeptly anticipates the concept of being 'queer.' Its film adaptation, named *Mango Soufflé*, was released in India in February 2002. The play revolves with the notion that queerness is a reality for certain individuals in India, and the framework of Indian culture is not yet prepared to embrace those with alternative sexualities. The play delineates the mechanisms that render certain individuals invisible while also portraying the profound anguish experienced when they endure alienation, disdain, ridicule, and persecution for expressing their sexual desires within a patriarchal societal framework, or when they are compelled to conform to societal expectations. In his book, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner underscores the ramifications of identifying as 'queer' as delineated below:

Individuals pursuing queer self-understanding recognise, in various ways, that their stigmatisation is intertwined with gender, familial structures, concepts of personal autonomy, governmental influence, public discourse, consumption and desire, the interplay of nature and culture, maturation, veracity and trust, censorship, private life and social exhibition, terror and violence, healthcare, and profound cultural norms regarding bodily presentation. Identifying as queer entails consistently engaging in discussions regarding these matters, both locally and incrementally, yet invariably with repercussions. (143)

Dattani states the rigid classification of same-sex desire into distinct and frequently exclusionary identity categories such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'transsexual', 'kothi', and 'hijra' is a fallacy. He maintains that if sexual desire must be immediately codified or labelled, our comprehension of sexuality remains inadequate. The primary focus in the procedure is the codification or description itself. The play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* foregrounds the need for acceptance as a crucial condition for the well-being of queer individuals. Through the voice of Bunny Singh, Dattani challenges rigid social labels and advocates for freedom of desire: "I propose that we abandon the categorisation of individuals as gay, straight, bisexual, or otherwise, and allow them the freedom to pursue their desires" (*Collected Works* 3:88). This statement reflects a progressive vision that rejects binary classifications and promotes individual autonomy in matters of identity and sexuality.

The aforementioned comment critiques the prevailing inclination to foster divide among individuals based on sexuality, as if other criteria such as race, religion, and ethnicity are insufficient. Homosexuality has consistently been regarded as a contentious issue, often perceived as a Western construct. In India, although homosexuality has existed from ancient times and is referenced in numerous religious books, it has been entirely disregarded and excluded from consideration since the era of colonial administration. As Madhavi Menon, in her book *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*, notes, "In the West, these (queer) multiple desires are regarded as novel concepts, while in India they are increasingly perceived as foreign conspiracies" (Menon 10). India's historical treatment of homosexuality

and queer desires as integral to mainstream life was constrained prior to colonial authority, a period during which gay relationships flourished.

Dattani establishes that the genuine liberation is achieved through deconstructing limiting labels and promoting a culture of acceptance. The drama, via characters such as Bunny Singh, exposes systemic prejudice and proposes a more inclusive and humane social order where individuals can exist without fear or limitation. Evidently, Kamlesh identifies as gay, while Deepali identifies as a lesbian. Their dialogue suggests that only heterosexual marriage is sanctioned in Indian society, and both individuals are seeking partners prepared to reciprocate their affection. Dattani seeks to assert that same-sex love is a legitimate reality deserving of respect, as it is as natural as heterosexual love between consenting people. The play features several characters: Kiran, Kamlesh's sister and a divorcee; a closeted homosexual who is Kamlesh's lover as Prakash and Kiran's fiancé as Ed; Sharad, Kamlesh's new gay partner; Ranjit, a gay man residing in England and working as an HIV counsellor; Bunny Singh, a gay family man and a prominent television actor; and the Guard, who is involved in Kamlesh's sexual life. Collectively, they illustrate that despite the diversity among gay individuals, each one must conceal their sexual orientation due to societal disapproval.

The homosexual dynamics of this play, a nuanced hierarchy, persists: Kamlesh exploits his guard to satiate his sexual desires and relies on Sharad to fulfil his needs when Prakash is unresponsive; Bunny Singh demonstrates that his popularity among the masses affords him preferential treatment; Ranjit illustrates the heightened oppression faced by homosexuals in India relative to their counterparts in England. Dattani has introduced a novel perspective on gender and sexuality, while illustrating how religion, biology, and medicine seek to constrain individuals with alternative sexualities. In the current play, Kamlesh seeks medical aid after his unsuccessful attempts to forget Prakash. However, what he receives from the psychiatrist is a recommendation shaped by the heteronormative framework:

KAMLESH. I recognised the necessity for medication. I selected the psychiatrist from the Yellow Pages. He feigned comprehension. Until he commenced discussing aversion therapy. For a period, I had faith in him. The drug improved my ability to manage depression. Until he asserted that I would never attain happiness as a homosexual individual. He stated that altering society is unfeasible, although it may be possible for you to realign yourself. (Dattani 69)

This represents overarching struggle of gays in India, with homophobia being ingrained in the mindset of the majority of Indians. According to Kamlesh, “He attends church weekly now. They referred him to a psychiatrist. He believes his affection was the result of malevolent forces. The demon has now departed from him” (85). It will soon become evident that Prakash/Ed seeks to exploit his marriage with Kiran as a convenient

facade to engage with Kamlesh. Irrational and inhumane social stigmatisation of homosexuality receives endorsement from religion. Dattani's portrayal of the lives of gay and lesbian individuals reflects our comfort with the perception of sexuality as a biological imperative, prompting little inquiry into the necessity for all bodies to conform to the binary of male or female. Dattani has demonstrated that there is no direct correlation between a specific sex and a particular gender; individuals may not identify with conventional gender classifications, and diverse identities and realities necessitate a compassionate environment, space, and rights.

The play concludes with Kamlesh rekindling his love for Sharad, while a humiliated Ed attempts suicide. The societal constraints are so overwhelming that for an individual like Ed, it becomes unfeasible to lead a regular life. The drama explores the underlying reasons behind the hypocrisy, escapism, and introverted tendencies of queer individuals. Society prohibits queer individuals from living authentically and compels them to conform to false identities. It engenders self-alienation in their existence. Bunny Singh and Ed marry to present themselves as ordinary individuals to society, while clandestinely maintaining their homosexual interactions. Ed experiences similar social pressure and resolves to marry Kiran in order to covertly obtain Kamlesh's affection. Ranjit departs from India to pursue a life of his choosing. Others, such as Deepali and Sharad, are candid about their sexuality and express it openly. The heterosexual world intermittently intrudes upon the play, asserting its existence. The external world, unfamiliar to the inhabitants of the dwelling, continues to exert its influence. The wedding, the youngsters pursuing Bunny for an autograph, and the neighbours discovering the compromising photos of Kamlesh and Ed represent external influences. The cacophony of the external environment symbolises the oppressive situation in which a queer individual must exist. The existence of external diverging forces engenders a language of antagonism to homosexuality.

Dattani seeks to examine the plight of homosexuals in the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, illustrating that they, as social entities, hold no esteemed position within society. He meticulously reveals their concealed worries and emotions within the confines of the dramatic structure. Homosexual relationships are a significant source of social marginalisation in many societies, with particularly severe implications in our society. This leads to hypocrisy, resulting in abnormal psychological personality or schizophrenia in the affected persons. Thus, an analysis of Dattani's play from a socio-psychological perspective reveals that the distinctive identities of his protagonists are the source of their anguish. His characters experience uncertainty, isolation, and instability in their lives as a result of the society's degrading attitudes towards them. His play has numerous episodes and scenarios in which he sensitively illustrates the struggles of the gay community. These individuals endure psychological pain due to a need for social acceptance. They attempt to conceal their homosexuality beneath the facade of heterosexuality. The play primarily centres on the psychological pain experienced by characters such as Kamlesh and Prakash, the latter of

whom uses the alias Ed. Ed, who was in a fervent sexual relationship with Kamlesh, terminates his association with him and initiates an affair with Kamlesh's sister, Kiran. He wishes to maintain contact with Kamlesh via his sister to avoid arousing suspicion regarding his identity. He states, "No one would know, no one would care... I will attend to Kiran. And you provide for me" (105). The irony lies in the fact that the unfortunate girl was unaware that the man she intended to marry was a homosexual and a former lover of her brother. However, upon discovering this, she is astounded. Ed perceives no prospects in an open homosexual relationship and is unwilling to be publicly identified as gay. He conceals his goals of feigning 'straight' in an argument, stating, "Observe your surroundings" (Dattani 45). Genuine men and women exist in the world. Consequently, isolated on their own island, they await a return to normal social life.

The noises of festivity are distinctly audible. The wedding signifies the affirmation and validation of a heterosexual partnership, as "the entire world recognises two individuals who enter a union pact, thus they are obligated to adhere to it" (72). The society endorses heterosexual relationships while predominantly disapproving of homosexual ones. Kiran is the sole character in the play who embraces her homosexual identity, stating, "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry, to which Ranjit responds ironically. They do. Only not to individuals of the same sex" (98). Several homosexual individuals, including Sharad and Deepali, while at ease with one another, exhibit distinct expressions of their sexuality. They are all intricate people whose complexities cannot be comprehended solely by their external gender preferences. They possess their own fears and fantasies, care and concerns, conscience and consciousness, emotions and desires as integral aspects of their personality, similar to others, and exhibit diverse expressions of their individuality. Kamlesh is not a repressed homosexual seeking to conceal his authentic identity. He asserts it himself, "For how long shall we persist in concealing ourselves? We cannot conceal ourselves indefinitely" (91). He was increasingly fixated on the recollection of Ed, which continually resurfaces in his mind 'like herpes.' Kamlesh is unable to adapt despite engaging in homosexual relationships, although Ed at least feigns success in starting anew, aided by the church and a therapist in convincing him that his affection for Kamlesh was "the work of the devil. The devil has now departed from him" (85). Not only does the social circle disapprove and condemn such relationships, but institutions like the church also reject and do not sanctify them, as same-sex relations are perceived as carnal and contrary to the natural blueprint of evolution due to their non-procreative nature.

Dattani aims to demonstrate that homosexuality is embedded in the human psyche, as exemplified by Kamlesh's life, and that it constitutes an irresistible passion that leads him to flawed judgements. This perspective is crucial for understanding queer identity in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. The play demonstrates how societal norms, family expectations, and cultural institutions construct and regulate sexual identities, forcing individuals into silence, denial, or concealment. At the same time, the characters' struggles and acts of self-

expression become forms of resistance against these controlling structures. As Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check... It is the name that can be given to a historical construct... a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, and the strengthening of controls are linked to one another. Sexuality is thus shaped by systems of power that define what is normal and what is deviant, producing identities that must constantly negotiate their place within society. (105–06)

The drama concludes with the fragmented remnants of a photograph of Kamlesh and Ed, symbolising that reality will persist regardless of any attempts to hide it. Kiran, initially stunned by the image, subsequently substitutes the photograph of herself and Ed in the frame with that image, indicating her preference for an open gay relationship over a concealed one. The image serves as the most potent and essential emblem representing their distinct identity, which culminates in a crisis. Sharad and his companions propose to Kamlesh to conduct a symbolic funeral by incinerating the images. The scene in which they execute it becomes somewhat ludicrous and exaggerated for stage presentation. At the end of the play, Ed and Kiran's engagement is terminated. Each character in the play ultimately embarks on a quest for personal identification, striving to discern their accomplishments and shortcomings in life. Finally, Sharad articulates his own sentiments, which encapsulate the emotions of all the characters, stating, "I enquire within what I have acquired. And what I am and what I am not" (*Collected plays* 113). Despite progress in human life, the past remains entrenched in the Indian mindset. It would be advantageous for gender studies to extend beyond the delineated roles of males and females to emphasise the social imperative for humanism. The prevailing gender paradigm in society must be altered to foster humanistic empathy among individuals of diverse sexes.

The play serves as a profound analysis of queer identity within the confines of a heteronormative Indian society. It reveals the psychological distress, societal stigma, and internal conflict faced by LGBT individuals and also emphasises their tenacity and ability to resist. Dattani illustrates how identity is formed, repressed, and eventually restored through characters like Kamlesh, Ed, and Bunny in response to societal pressures. This paper illustrates how resistance does not solely appear as explicit revolt; instead, it frequently assumes nuanced forms such as self-acceptance, emotional solidarity, and the affirmation of personal truth. Through contesting strict binaries and interrogating normative frameworks of gender and sexuality, the play fosters a place for discourse and visibility. Dattani's work ultimately emphasises that LGBT identity represents both an area of conflict and strength. It advocates for a more inclusive social framework that acknowledges variety and upholds individuals' rights to self-identify beyond forced labels. Consequently, *On a Muggy Night in*

Mumbai is a notable addition to Indian English drama and gay discourse, promoting dignity, acceptance, and the transformational potential of resistance.

Works Cited

- Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. Vol. 3, Penguin Books, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1990.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford UP, 1978.
- Menon, Madhavi. *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*. Speaking Tiger, 2018.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2008.
- Warner, Michael, editor. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. U of Minnesota P, 1993.