



Mahesh Dattani.  
Image courtesy Mahesh Dattani.

## Dattani, Mahesh (b. 1958)

by Niladri R. Chatterjee

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Except for Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play *Mitra's Story* (1982), which is regarded as the first Indian play with a lesbian protagonist, there was not much queer presence on the Indian stage until Mahesh Dattani's English-language play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991). Since then Dattani has written eight screenplays and twelve other plays; one of these screenplays and four of the plays feature at least one gay character. His recurrent depictions of homosexual characters make him an important figure in South Asian gay culture.

Dattani was born on August 7, 1958 in Bangalore, where his parents settled, although they are from Gujarat and have also lived in Mumbai. His education was at a Christian institution, Baldwin's High School, where the language of instruction was English. He graduated in History, Economics, and Political Science and has a postgraduate degree in Marketing and Advertising Management.

While growing up Dattani learned the classical south-Indian dance of Bharatnatyam, which subsequently helped him to develop skills in managing space on stage. It was not until he finished school and watched some Gujarati and Kannada theater that he identified his calling. However, at the time he was a copywriter at an advertising agency.

For a brief period he worked in his father's business before forming his theater group, Playpen, in 1984. Initially they performed Greek tragedy and modern classics, under Dattani's direction. He often acted in his own productions.

Dattani's entire opus may be seen as a relentless assault on Indian patriarchy. He struck his first blow by empowering women characters in his debut play *Where There's a Will* (1988). In a line rich with queer suggestion, a mistress says of her benefactor, "He saw in me a woman who would father him." In his next play, tellingly titled *Dance Like a Man* (1989)--turned into a film of the same name in 2003, directed by Pamela Rooks--queer presence is signaled when a male Bharatnatyam dancer's father hints at a dance instructor's non-normative sexuality by commenting on the latter's long hair and style of walking.

Gender also holds center stage in his next play *Tara* (1990) before yielding some discreet but significant space to sexuality in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. This play, about two brothers trying to run an advertising agency, is the first example of a male character vocalizing, if not performing, his homosexuality on the Indian stage.

In the play, Nitin Trivedi is apparently happily married to Alka, but is uncontrollably attracted to men. The first instance of his homosexual expression occurs during his narration of an incident. Nitin's brother Jatin had once knocked over a parked rickshaw because he was drunk and had lost control of his car. Nitin was with his brother when it happened. Remembering the incident Nitin relishes his own description of the rickshaw driver as "violent-looking" and remembers his "strong black arm."

Although it is not stated explicitly, the audience is given to understand that Nitin subsequently begins to enjoy the rickshaw driver's sexual services, meeting him either at the office in the absence of Jatin or at

home in the absence of his wife. The play ends with a monologue by Nitin in which he says that before marriage he was sexually involved with a young man named Praful, who had convinced Nitin to marry his sister Alka by lying to Nitin that she knew about their homosexual relationship and that she did not mind.

Gay presence in Dattani's work increases with the play *Do the Needful* (1997). Written for BBC Radio 4, the plot centers on the negotiations for an arranged marriage between Alpesh, a Gujarati man, and Lata, a Kannada (i.e., belonging to the south-Indian state of Karnataka) woman. As the play progresses it is revealed that the woman is not agreeable to the marriage because she loves Salim, a Muslim man, while the prospective groom is in love with a man named Trilok. Although she tells Alpesh about her love for another man, Alpesh keeps quiet about his homosexual relationship.

Alpesh's homosexuality is revealed to Lata when she surprises him and the gardener of her family having sex in the cowshed, just as she is about to run away to Salim. At first horrified, she subsequently decides that the best way to deal with the situation is to marry Alpesh, so that they can lead separate sexual lives yet keep up the appearance of a happy couple: a common compromise in a society that has criminalized non-procreative sex since 1862!

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998)--subsequently turned into the film *Mango Soufflé* (2002), which Dattani directed from his own screenplay--places homosexuality at its center. It is not inaccurate to suggest that all of Dattani's previous work leads up to this play: from concerns with gender, to a hint of homosexuality, to its partial presence, to a complete engagement with it. Of the eight characters in this play, five are gay men and one is a lesbian.

The plot hinges on Kamlesh's trying to hide from his sister Kiran the fact that he was in a relationship with the man she is about to marry. The play samples a wide range of male homosexual presence in Indian society. Kamlesh is a well-adjusted, straight-acting gay man. His ex-boyfriend Sharad is intelligent and campy. Ed is in denial and is about to enter into a heterosexual marriage after having an affair with his fiancée's brother, Kamlesh. Bunny is a celebrity and in the closet.

Whether or not *Night Queen* (1999), published in *Yaraana*--an anthology of Indian gay writing--was written before or after *Muggy Night*, it covers almost the same area as the previous play. But *Night Queen* is a one-act play and has only two characters: Raghu and Ash, two young men who pick each other up in a park and come to Raghu's home for sex. Ash is to be engaged to Raghu's sister Gayatri the following day and is not aware that Raghu has already recognized him as Gayatri's soon-to-be fiancé.

In another play written for BBC, *Seven Steps around the Fire* (1999), Dattani focuses on the plight of the *hijra* (or transsexual) community by fashioning a plot that involves the killing of a *hijra* because she was having a relationship with a government minister's son. Representing the *hijra* community on stage further adds to the spectrum of queer characters created by Dattani and underlines his abiding interest in non-normative, marginalized sexualities.

Mahesh Dattani has also written plays on a variety of other subjects. Incest and child abuse mark *Thirty Days in September* (2001). The Hindu-Muslim divide is examined in *Final Solutions* (1993), *Clearing the Rubble* (2002), and *The Swami and Winston* (2000). AIDS may be seen as the central subject of *Ek Alag Mausam* (A Different Season, 2005) and maternal love is the theme of *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* (2000).

In *Morning Raga* (2004), a film he directed based on his story and screenplay, Dattani uses the contrast of traditional and contemporary music to delineate character and contrast generations.

In 1998 Dattani became the first playwright in English to be awarded India's most prestigious literary prize,

the Sahitya Akademi Award. Bestowed on him for a collection of his plays, *Final Solutions and Other Plays*, the citation described his work as "a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English."

Dattani's plays are often shaped into their final stage-ready form by means of the workshop performances to which they are subjected at Playpen.

Dattani regularly organizes workshops around India and also teaches during the summers at Portland State University, Oregon. Among his workshops and classes are "Yoga for the Performer," "Indian Cinema," and "Meditation, Movement, and Music for Creativity and Growth."

Dattani has repeatedly used what may be called the split-stage technique, which involves dividing the stage into two halves or two levels, one beside or above the other. Then he gives lines to characters in the two spaces in such a way that there is constant intercutting between the two actions. This not only makes for a tighter narrative but also a richer visual effect.

The technique can also be interpreted as Dattani's way of signaling that in India, as elsewhere in the world, multiple realities co-exist, resolutely and cheek-by-jowl, but that often only one reality--the heteronormative and patriarchal--is visible. Dattani's plays are a sustained effort at highlighting the otherwise invisible by situating it where it belongs--alongside the visible normative reality.

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## **About the Author**

**Niladri R. Chatterjee**, who was born in Kolkata, India, has published on Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, and Christopher Isherwood, among others. He has held a Fulbright Pre-Doctoral Fellowship and the British Council's Charles Wallace Fellowship. He is co-editor of a volume of Indian short stories entitled *The Muffled Heart: Stories of the Disempowered Male*.