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MAHESH DATTANI'S *DO THE NEEDFUL*: A TUSSLE BETWEEN INNATE SEXUALITY AND IMPOSED IDENTITY

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Abstract: *Although the issues related to sexuality are of prime importance in the contemporary world, in the Indian society they are closeted and ignored even today. Several social injunctions are conceptualized against men with alternative sexualities. To avoid social stigma, men refrain from coming out of the closet and accepting their natural sexual identity and orientation. However, there are certain playwrights who have addressed this otherwise taboo subject of sexuality on the Indian Stage. Mahesh Dattani is one amongst them. His plays firmly assert that gender and sexuality are concepts that are not confined to one's biological orientation, but rather go beyond it. They are conditioned by socio-cultural norms and hegemonic practices. He elucidates how the socio-cultural determinants of gender and sexuality contradict one's own individual instincts, sexual preferences and lived experiences. With reference to his famous play* Do the Needful, *this paper gives a brief account of the condition of Indian theatre pre- and post-colonization and projects the camouflaging techniques adopted by the discursive identities of gay people, for example, in order to conspicuously feature as straight and normal. It outlines the social constructions associated with gays in India and how these formations compel Indian men to internalize and succumb to the conventional norms of heterosexuality as the only acceptable norms.*

Keywords: *patriarchy, effeminate, gender, heterosexuality, Indianness.*

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1. Introduction

The journey of modern Indian theatre began in the commercial cities of the colonial empire: Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (Chaudhuri, 2008, p. 47). People of these places had acquired their tastes, habits, prejudices and preferences on the basis of the Western education they received during colonization. Therefore, the theatre of this era solely encapsulated British plays not merely in terms of dramaturgical and architectural structures but also in terms of thematic performance. Pre-independence Indian theatres were primarily dependent upon the patronage of royalty and the elite class. As a performance did not take place on a proscenium stage, it was not dependent on the sale of tickets. It was merely a channel to entertain and a vehicle to communicate some information to the middle-class audience but post-independence, various playwrights felt the need to reject the canonical Eurocentric approach and carved out their own model of Indian theatre which would reflect Indian sense and sensibilities. Kavalam Narayan Panikkar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad were some of the prominent members of a group popularly known as the *Theatre of Roots* movement which focused its attention on the thematic constructions of folklore, folk art and regional dances like *Chhau*, *Kathakali* and *Yakshgana* (Chaudhuri, 2008, p. 49). As Girish Karnad (1989) writes,

> the attempt was not to find out and reuse forms that had worked successfully in some other cultural contexts. The hope, rather, was to discover whether there was a structure of expectations – and conventions – about entertainment underlying these forms which one could learn. (p. 101)

Primarily, their plays echoed values, cultures and ethnicity related to a plethora of issues such as Hindu mythology, the partition of India, atrocities encountered by women and marginalized groups during or post-partition, the caste system and untouchability amongst others. However, issues related to sex and sexuality were brushed under the carpet. In fact, issues related to the sexuality of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender or queer were discussed in hushed tones, if at all.

Theatre enables a three-dimensional picture. It acts as a cultural space that holds a mirror to the society and has largely been regarded as a laboratory where social issues can be studied and probable solutions to these issues can be discussed. But, what would it be like if we looked in that mirror and never saw ourselves? LGBTQs have struggled over the last century to gain representation in the mainstream Indian theatre. However, their representation had started in India quite early in other literary genres. Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* (1940) delicately portrayed the

relationship between two women. At that time, it was considered outrageous, coarse and obscene. From the late 1980s onward, writers like Vikram Seth, Suniti Namjoshi, Bhupen Khakhar, and Firdaus Kanaga drew global attention. Shobha De's *Starry Nights* (1991), Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) boldly broached homosexuality. Anthologies like *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999) and *Yaraana* (1999) have again stirred the homosexual mindset. *The Boyfriend* (2003) by R. Raj Rao is among the leading novels written on gay sensibilities in English in India. But Indian theatre sparsely touched on this subject. Vijay Tendulkar was one of the leading figures who dared to take the plunge. His Marathi play, *Mitrachi Ghoshta* (1980) was revolutionary. It had a lesbian protagonist. The play was written at a time when many people were not even acquainted with the word 'lesbian' or its meaning. Tendulkar weaved in intricate plotlines and complex characters that went on to create history and broke all taboos on lesbian identities three decades ago. Later on, in 2001 an English translation called *A Friend's Story* by Gowri Ramnarayan was published. It was described as "the first Indian play on same-sex relations" (Writing for life, 2008), "a play ahead of its time," which was "intense," "progressive," "highly controversial" (Joshi, 2015) and "path breaking" (Phukan, 2015). Mahesh Elkunchwar was another playwright who addressed the theme of homosexuality in his work. His powerful play *Holi* represented teen angst about homosexuality. This play is a campus favorite. It has been staged almost every year by different colleges. It was sensational and created ripples in the heterosexual zone. *Sannata* is an adaptation of the famous one-act Marathi play *Sonata* (2000) by Elkunchwar. It revolves around three gay individuals who lead an unconventional queer life. They were non-conformist, free from the shackles of society but also somehow discontented, lonely and not at peace with themselves. Their friendship, however, reflected a profound yearning for each other and a bond that could triumph over all odds and find love, happiness, and contentment. *Begum Barve* (1979), the seminal work of Satish Alekar, focuses on a woman trapped in a man's body. He wishes to experience motherhood and embody the female characters that he plays on stage to the full. The play was immensely popular and met with unprecedented success in its Hindi and Gujarati translations as well. *Ek Madhav Baug*, a beautiful drama in Marathi by Chetan Datar is about a mother who talks about her gay son. The poignant play elucidates the story of a twenty-one-year-old boy coming to terms with his sexuality. This play splendidly brings out the emotions, deepest fears, harsh realities, discrimination, conflict, the mother's and son's yearning for love, security and compassion. It leaves no stone unturned with its intensity and heartfelt content. New age playwright Neel Chaudhari has splendidly handled the theme of homosexuality in his play *Still and Still Moving*.

Set in 2008-09 in New Delhi, the play presents the fractured love of two individuals. It is about geographical and emotional distances, posing poignant questions about the likelihood of gays being together in a tube train in New Delhi or in any public place for that matter or to merely touch hands in such places. Shiv Subrahmanyam's *Clogged Arteries* is a crazy farce. It has a moment of dramatic pause and poignancy when the son's identity is revealed to his father. Anuvab Pal's *The President is Coming* highlights the bias and emptiness of the modern intellectual society where a gay contestant is eliminated from the competition because of his sexual orientation. However, if we adopt a larger perspective, it is in the Marathi theatre, that LGBTQ issues feature prominently. Indian theatre in English mainly dealt with the translations and was not concerned with novel and virgin things.

It was only in the last decade of the twentieth century when Mahesh Dattani, a multi-dimensional figure and an eminent writer, director, actor, and playwright, arrived that "fringed" subjects moved from periphery to "center stage" (Chaudhuri, 2008, p. 47) for visual representations. With his innovative use of theatrical space, he broke away from the stereotypical limitations of the proscenium and restructured the existing model of English writing in India. His plays "are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concerns for world drama" (Rae, 2000, p. 45). He problematizes and challenges the notion of identity as fixed and rigid. His drama reverberates with Foucault's concept of non-fixed identity; identity is not fixed, rather, it is framed by hegemonic socio-cultural institutions and gender is merely a subject that is positioned within the rims of discourse and ideology. The primary as well as secondary characters embody Butler's idea of "performativity" (1999). They vacillate between their real sexual identity and guised gendered identity to gratify the social needs of the family.

Dattani was born in a Gujarati family in 1958. As they resided in Bangalore, his parents made sure to take him to local theatrical performances so that he remained connected to his roots and culture. At the age of ten, he first saw an acclaimed regional Gujarati play, *Koi Pan Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo To* (*Tell the Name of a Flower*), written by the distinguished playwright Madhu Rye in Bangalore. In his book *Me and My Plays,* Dattani writes that it was a major family thing for him, as he was fascinated by the loud voices of the actors, their costumes and not just by the plot but by the effect the play had upon the audience. He asserted "I had to be part of this magic!" (Dattani, 2014, p. 7). Initially, he never thought theatre could ever be his career. It was only after his direction of Woody Allen's *God* that he decided to invest his energy and talent into this performative art. The plays of Dattani dwell upon the sub-urban Hindu family and its treatment of gender and alternative sexuality. Irrespective of caste, class,

creed, sex, religion or region, the Indian family is not yet free from the traditional notions of gender and sexuality. This tendency is not clearly marked but heteronormativity is still dominant. The traditional Indian family gives particular importance to familial ties and to preserving chastity or celibacy before marriage and, in a way, it becomes an important prerequisite for being an Indian: although post-independence, due to Western education, industrialization, liberalization and migration, the socio-economic conditions have changed, "the inner imagery of individual men and women" remains unchanged (Kakar, 1978, p. 68). Psychologically, patriarchal ideology still pervades the Indian mindset. Masculinity is still guarded within a definite construct where the figure of the ambivalent, weak, irresolute Indian man is subject to mockery and open criticism. Through his representation of the Indian family, Dattani basically highlights two major proponents of the urban middle class family. Firstly, he puts forth the argument that family is the product of the socio-cultural upbringing of sexes and not the other way round, which implies that the shaping of the family is largely contingent upon how society is shaping it. Secondly, he highlights the latent effects of the joint family system in India, generally regarded as a very benevolent and supportive institution. It actually tends to restrain the freedom of an individual in both public and private spheres. He explores how within the matrix of patriarchy, a person is shaped and conditioned by socio-cultural norms and then becomes a mere perpetuator of the same binary roles. His family drama hinges on the politics of power, communal violence, construction of heteronormativity, idealized gender roles, rigid identities and their universal acceptance, which Judith Butler (1990, p. 581) calls the "hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman'." His plays give voice to the segregated sections of society such as men with alternative sexuality, transgender and women who mostly face the onslaught of patriarchy with its duplicity and prejudiced behavior. In an interview, Dattani recollects,

> you can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted. But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian, [that] doesn't happen here. You can't talk about a middle-class housewife fantasizing about having sex with the cook or actually having a sex life – that isn't Indian either – that's confrontational even if it is Indian. (Mee, 2000, p. 319)

Thus he brings unconventional and taboo subjects on the stage for open discussion, issues which would otherwise remain suppressed within the ambit of Indianness. With reference to his famous play *Do the Needful*, this paper analyzes the concept of Indianness from the perspective of the segregation practices inflicted upon men with alternative sexualities and it

identifies the socio-cultural domain that compels an individual to internalize heteronormativity as the only acceptable system of socio-cultural norms, directly or indirectly. But in order to understand the dynamics of this concept of Indianness, it is important to analyze what the term actually signifies.

2. Sexuality in India pre- and post-colonization

In the context of Indian culture and tradition, the study of what is acceptable and what is a clear deviance is completely dependent upon Indianness, and Indianness in its turn is measured in qualitative terms. Every conventional practice, historically sound opinion and conservative identity are accepted as Indian. Adherence to familial bonds, absolute reverence or submission towards elders, loyalty to partners, celebration of chastity and celibacy before marriage are the most important prerequisites for being an Indian. Tolerance, brotherhood, peace, harmony and inclusion have been expounded by Hinduism as the identity of an Indian society. In spite of the prevailing rigid monolithic heterosexual norms, unity in diversity forms the core content of Indianness because it is based on the presumption of inclusion of multifarious identities. However, this representation of Indianness can be viewed as a political stunt, which is reductive and a conception based on the requirements of a particular political ideology at some turning point in history. In general, men with alternative sexualities and androgynous behavior are unacceptable in the context of Indianness because they do not have any role in procreation. Hoshang Merchant (1999) writes on *Samlingan* (homosexuality), stating that it "does not exist in India where the practice is not codified, [it is] only quietly condoned and above all, not talked about" (p. xi). Indians have identified homosexuality as a Western import and therefore outrightly rejected the very existence of it. They have developed a self-sufficient closet to keep themselves immune from such western influences and uphold heterosexuality as the only acceptable norm for their idealization and celebration of Indianness. However, they fail to recognize that homosexuality and androgyny existed in India since the very beginning of Hinduism. Several mythical stories feature androgynous characters and several homo-erotic sculptures can be seen engraved on the walls of ancient Indian temples. Lord Shiva's *ardhnarishwaraswaroop* (presence of masculine and feminine selves in the same body) is the most explicit example of androgyny. *Shikhandi*, a character from the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*, is analyzed by scholars of mythology like Devdutt Pattanaik as an embodiment of queer identity. He was addressed as "gay," as "transgender," as "bisexual" and also as "hermaphrodite" (Pattanaik, 2012, p. 19). At Khajuraho [a town in Madhya Pradesh, a

central state in India, which has been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO], we find women erotically embracing each other and men showing their genitals to each other. These examples indeed speak volumes about the existence of homosexuality and androgyny in India since times immemorial. In pre-colonial India, love for the same sex was not a punishable offence; rather, it was encouraged as an aesthetic act and celebrated as an individual's freedom of expression (Vanita, 2008, p. 19). According to Ruth Vanita, Hindus had adopted a wide spectrum of attitudes to issues of sexuality and gender which dated far back to the ancient Vedic period around 4000 B.C. Their religious text, the *Rig Veda*, mentions stories of same-sex associations and gender-morphing figures. She writes, "[t]he pattern of praising male-female couples is scarcely visible in the 'Rig Veda'." (Vanita, 2008, p. 20) In their texts from 1500 B.C. we even find reference of the existence of the *hijras* (third gender). Although they did not fall into the specific categories of 'man' and 'woman,' their participation in India's socio-political script was very significant (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000, p. 27). The character *Svairini* is described in India's famous erotic guidebook the *Kama Sutra* as a liberated woman who either lives alone or in union with another woman (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008, p. 58). According to Sudhir Kakar (1990),

> the *Kamasutra* can be seen as an illustrative account of a 'psychological war' of independence that took place in India some two thousand years ago. The first aim of this struggle, [was] the rescue of erotic pleasure from the crude purposefulness of sexual desire, from its biological function of reproduction alone, [as] has been shared by many societies at different periods of history. (p. 72)

Even in the Indian Islamic literature "male-male attraction" was a common theme found in the "pre-colonial Urdu poetry" (Vanita, 2008, p. xxix). According to Hodgson (1974),

> Despite strong Sharia [an Islamic religious law that governs not only the religious rituals but also aspects of day-to-day life in Islam] disapproval, the sexual relations of a mature man with a subordinate youth were so readily accepted in upper-class circles that there was often little or no effort to conceal their existence. Sometimes it seems to have been socially more acceptable to speak of a man's attachment to a youth than to speak of his women, who were supposed to be invisible in the inner courts. The fashion entered into poetry, especially in the Persian one. […] the person to whom lyric love verse is addressed by male poets was conventionally, and almost without exception, made explicitly male. (p. 146)

Madhavi Menon, the director of the Centre for Studies in Gender and Sexuality at Ashoka University, in her book *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*, writes that India has a rich history of desire that did not make any rigid distinction between different desiring

categories. All types of sexual desire that were criminalized till recently in India, had existed side by side in India in every social class for several centuries. In the very first chapter, she writes about the *Dargah* [shrines of revered figures in *Sufism*] of *Jamali* and *Kamali* to describe the history of *Sufi* desire in India. She calls it a "hermaphroditic" architecture (Gambhir, 2020) because it has a flat-roofed structure, which on the inside has a dome ceiling. The flat roof structure on the *dargah* is made for a female saint, while the dome shape is constructed on the graves of male *sufi* saints. Indians were therefore very liberal as far as sexuality and its different connotations were concerned. She asserts that the English were disturbed by India's extreme openness on the topics of gender and sexuality. They could not digest that *Draupadi*, a character from the *Mahabharata*, had five husbands. They were horrified on hearing the stories that *Lord Krishna* entertained fourteen thousands *Gopis* (female cowherds and lovers of Hindu deity *Lord Krishna*) at once and the *Nawabs* (rulers) of *Awadh* (a region in Uttar Pradesh, a northern state in India) dressed like women to dance and celebrate the feasts of *pirs* (saints). They looked aghast at the erotic Indian sculptures, the rich iconography, and the classic romantic poetry. They termed it all "promiscuous" (Gambhir, 2020). Such explicit illustrations and depictions of love were taboo for them.

Therefore, post-colonization, out of fear, several laws like *Section 377*, which will be discussed later in the paper, and *Criminal Tribes Act* in 1871 were enacted to wipe out and criminalize India's rich socio-cultural heritage. For example, the ancient *hijra* culture was erased in India by implementing the *Criminal Tribes Act* in 1871. According to this law, any man who dressed like a woman and danced or sang in public could be arrested in North India. The *hijras* were reduced to begging to earn their livelihood (Menon, 2018, p. 141). Thus, it was only after the advent of the British Empire and their increasing dominance over the subcontinent that the ancient Indian culture lost its rich cultural heritage and became susceptible to the Victorian ideals and Judeo-Christian model of sexuality. Homosexuality was not an illegal offence before the arrival of colonial discourse (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000, p. 124). At present, however, any discourse related to alternative sexuality and androgynous identity is condemned not merely by common men or women, but it is also shunned by highly educated intellectuals and elite writers. These people have distanced themselves from the topic and have actively participated in the politics of invisibilization, representing society as a harmoniously straight and heterosexual world. Even if someone wants to come out of the hetero-normative cocoon of patriarchy, one retreats in fear of being witch-hunted or rejected by the hetero-patriarchal milieu.

3. Mahesh Dattani voicing the unvoiced

However, Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who has attempted to lay bare such restricted and boycotted topics for the largely heterosexual Indian population. He has remarkably handled the theme of gender and alternative sexuality in his play *Do the Needful*. Although thematically the play is similar to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, its structure has been subverted in *Do the Needful*. In the latter, Dattani does not follow the conventional pattern in his portrayal of homosexuality, and it advocates a dissimulation of homosexuality under the veil of an ideal man-woman marriage. In "A note on the play" Sally Avens writes: "whilst the play may be set in India within the conventions of arranged marriages, its wider themes are universal" (Dattani, 2000, p. 115). It is a radio play that was broadcast in 1997. Being a radio play, it gave an opportunity to Mahesh Dattani to make exquisite use of space. With the help of cinematic leap, he could effortlessly shift from one place to another, from abstract ideas to concrete behavior, from exterior descriptions to the interior conflicts of the characters and from apparent dialogues to their real, hidden meanings. Its setting keeps on changing fluidly from the hustle and bustle of cosmopolitan Bombay to the quieter rural landscape of southern countryside in Bangalore, from the public sphere of streets, roads and the farmhouse, where Indian gay man Alpesh is compelled to hide his sexuality behind the straight curtain of heterosexuality, to the inner sphere of the gym, cowshed, and bedroom where he has the liberty to express his sexual orientation in its true homoerotic form with masseur Trilok and with Mali, the local boy. In the play, there are two sets of families, belonging to different communities and different regions. Although these families have their own culture and tradition, and are skeptical of each other, they have accepted, nevertheless, the unconventional norm of inter-caste marriage for their children.

The families of Patels (the Gujarati, i.e. natives of western Indian state Gujarat) and Gowdas (the Kannadigas, i.e. natives of southern Indian state Karnataka) are arranging a possible match between their offspring, i.e. between Alpesh Patel, who is a divorced man in his early forties, and Lata Gowda, a young lady of twenty-four. On account of his homosexuality, Alpesh's first marriage could not be a harmonious one. Therefore, he wanted to live his life on his own terms, enjoying his liberty and exercising his will power. His counterpart, Lata, loved Salim who lived in Mumbai. In our contemporary society, approval of inter-caste marriage is not so common. Their parents were facing a problematic situation as Alpesh was divorced and Lata loved a Muslim; both these conditions were considered taboo for Hindus. Yet they were negotiating in order to make their children appear straight and acceptable in consonance with the norms of Indian society. However, this marriage association sounds extremely bizarre in

the Indian context because in India endogamy monitors and controls matrimonial alliances. The act of negotiating a probable match between Alpesh and Lata clearly indicates the desperation of the parents, who want to get their wards settled at any cost, so that they could bring them on the so-called ideal social track. Although Alpesh and Lata have already expressed their unwillingness towards the marriage proposal, their parents move ahead with the nuptial preparations. Alpesh's parents accompany him on a visit to Lata's home to finalize their wedding. Here, with ostentatious dialogues, Dattani remarkably presents various frivolities associated with arranged marriages. Neither Alpesh nor Lata had any significant educational qualifications but their parents, in order to make them eligible and perfect marriage material, boast that both Alpesh and Lata have remarkable educational achievements and bright wealth prospects. This, indeed, speaks abundantly about the pseudo-reality of our society where external criteria become significant determinants of a person's identity rather than his/her real identity. In the present case, Alpesh's homosexuality and Lata's affair with Salim are deliberately invisibilized and their false achievements are celebrated.

4. The plight of homosexuals and the way out

Alpesh is a muted subaltern in the play. Although a homosexual, he was compelled to indulge in a bisexual relationship so that he could be in agreement with the norms of society, by none other than his own parents. He tries hard to convince them; he pleads, "Is it…is it very important for me to get married?" (Dattani, 2000, p. 125) but fails miserably. In the very beginning of the play we get to know who Alpesh actually is, and what his sexual orientation is; he asks, "when will Trilok be free? He knows exactly where my tight spots are" (Dattani, 2000, p. 119). These are clear indications of his homo-erotic desires. We find him oscillating between his chosen homo-erotic association and compelled heteronormative association that is idealized by his parents and society at large. The failure of his first marriage acquainted him with the fact that living with a woman is nearly impossible for him, yet he was forced by his parents to get married. The opening scene projects Alpesh talking on his phone amidst traffic noise. He contacts a "slim gym" (Dattani, 2000, p. 119) to make an appointment with Trilok (a masseur). On one side, "slim gym" becomes the closet, the inner space where he could express his sexuality in its true homoerotic form with Trilok, and on the other side, traffic noise is the symbolic representation of a chaotic situation where homosexuals are marginalized or denied a proper place and voice, individuality and identity in society. Patriarchy has given rise to a generation of wounded men and women. Due to its codes and behavioral norms, men are tricked

into believing that heterosexuality is the only legitimate option. Any heterodoxy becomes punishable offence as far as the social constructs are concerned. People are hardwired or presupposed to speak in a particular fashion and designed or trained to behave in a certain manner. Alpesh's own anger and dejection at the aforementioned patriarchal constructs is symbolically related to Mariappa's (a coconut vendor) anger. He says: "Mariappa beats that drum when he is angry with the whole world. Which is quite often" (Dattani, 2000, p. 142). This clearly throws light on the claustrophobic situation where men are compelled to blindly pursue the hetero-patriarchal norms silently. In fact, they have developed a self-sufficient technique through which gay identities could create their own discourse and thrive latently beneath the apparent rigid monolithic heterosexual norms.

A theory of homonormativity has been propounded by Lisa Duggan. According to it, homosexual identity takes recourse to "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan, 2004, p. 50). Similar views are expressed in the writings of two Indian queer writers R. Raj Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma. They too write about the negotiating tactics of gay men with the hegemonic heterosexual world in their book *Whistling in the Dark: Twenty-One Queer Interviews*. Raj Rao writes that "heterosexism" is an irrational opinion. The precondition for any sexual inducement is the presence of the opposite sex, i.e. the body of a male and the body of a female. However, "heterosexism" fulfills the purpose of "homo-erotically inclined men" predominantly in all non-western countries including India, by providing them with the ambit where, under the veneer of heterosexual marriage or relationships, they can practice their homosexual liaisons without any fear of arousing suspicion in the minds of their family and society at large. Their homoerotic associations appear normal and casual to the hetero-patriarchal and heterosexual milieu of our society because same sex-associations form closer and deeper "yaari" (friendship) (Rao, 2009, p. xix). Also, due to the fear of *Section 377* of the *Indian Penal Code* [*IPC*], the Indian gay community was compelled to remain latent under the veneer of formal friendship. *Section 377* of the *IPC* criminalized any form of intercourse that was non-penile and non-vaginal. It not only made all types of homosexual behavior a criminal offence, but also other kinds of sex that are practiced by heterosexuals and are regarded as "unnatural" such as oral, anal, and "non-procreative sex like mutual masturbation" (Gupta, 2006, p. 4815). It was only after a long struggle of more than twenty-five years, which was started in 1991 by Aids Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), taken forward by Naz Foundation in the next decade, and supported by eminent figures like journalist Sunil Mehra, celebrity chef

Nitu Dalmia, writer and historian Aman Nath (Gay in India, Where progress has come only with risk, 2018; Section 377: The famous and fearless 5 who convinced SC, 2018), that this section of *IPC* finally got abrogated in a landmark judgment given by the Apex Court of India on September 6, 2018. The court ruled that "homosexuality is not a crime in India and that the members of the LGBTQ community should have the same sexual rights as any other citizen" (Kidangoor, 2018). It diluted *Section 377* and excluded and decriminalized all kinds of adult consensual sexual behavior. The bench of five judges was headed by the then Chief Justice of India, Dipak Mishra. The court stated that criminalizing consensual sex between two adults is "arbitrary" and "irrational." Therefore, "it is liable to be partially struck down." This decision was hailed by Anjali Gopalan, executive director of the Naz Foundation Trust (India), which was the leading NGO to file a petition against *Section 377*. She said,

> We started over 20 years ago and today there has been some positive change. It takes time for people to change the way they think. Look at something like *sati* [a traditional practice in which wife of the deceased would sacrifice her life by jumping onto the husband's funeral pyre] practice, it was popular but today it is looked at in a very negative way. Change does happen but it takes time to change the mindset. (Section 377: It takes time to change mindsets, says Anjali Gopalan from Naz foundation, 2018)

But before its abrogation, homosexuality was regarded as a disorder. LGBTQs were seen as people suffering from some sort of mental illness. Society refused to accept their sexuality as something innate to human beings. NGOs like Naz Foundation, ABVA, Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues (TARSHI), and the Nigah Media Collective, working for sexually marginalized communities, were targeted not only by the masses but sometimes also by the police. For instance, in Bangalore in 2002, in the case of Sangama, an NGO working for sexual minority communities, the police prohibited people to seek any help from this NGO and ordered it to hold their meetings outside the city (Ramasubban, 2008). In 2001, in Lucknow, activists of Naz Foundation and Bharosa Trust were arrested by the police under *Section 377* and were accused of running a gay "sex club" when they were in fact imparting information related to health issues to gay men by distributing condoms and educational pamphlets. After huge public protests, they were released from police custody after forty-seven days (Gupta, 2006). The earlier 2009 judgment of Delhi High Court to amend this section was met with severe backlash from religious personalities. Ahmed Bukhari, the head cleric of India's largest mosque Jama Masjid, considered it as "absolutely wrong." He remarked that the "veiled attempt to legitimize the concept of homosexuality is unacceptable," and that it

would destroy the country's social fabric. "We will not accept any such law" (Gay sex decriminalised in India, 2009). Yoga guru (preacher) Baba Ramdev said "Homosexuality is not genetic. If our parents were homosexuals, then we would not have been born. So it's unnatural." He added that it is a bad addiction, "I invite the gay community to my yoga ashram (hermitage) and I guarantee to cure them of homosexuality" (Baba Ramdev welcomes SC's verdict on Section 377, 2013). The Hindu fundamentalist group, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, asserted that "it is against the culture and family system in India. It will result in the spread of a number of diseases" (Religious leaders oppose repeal of Section 377, 2009). Father Dominic Emanuel of India's Catholic Bishop Council said that "the church does not approve of this behavior. It doesn't consider it natural, ethical, or moral" (Gay sex decriminalised in India, 2009). So, acceptance and depiction of homosexuality invited sharp criticism from all channels of society.

Even in the Indian film industry, films like *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *Margarita with A Straw* (2014), *Kapoor and Sons* (2015), *Aligarh* (2016), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga* (2019), and *Shubh Mangal Jyada Sawdhan* (2020) were explicit in homosexual content. These were screened before the largely heterosexual Indian population without any fear of being brought down from the theaters or the artists being abused publicly. But, before the abrogation of *Section 377* of *IPC*, a film premiere related to this issue, *Fire* (1996), was openly vandalized by fundamentalist groups like Bajrang dal and Shivsena. The director and the artists had to face the huge wrath of the audience (Bearak, 1998; City theatre puts lid on 'Fire' again, 1998; Presse, 1998; Ramasubban, 2008, p. 28). In fact, homosexual characters were introduced in the movies only to bring some comic relief and "to titillate the audience" (Bhugra et al., 2015, p. 457). Bhugra et al. (pp. 457-458) cite the example of movies like *Mast Kalandar* (1991), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008) to support their argument because in a largely conservative country like India, homosexuality is seen as a "taboo" and homosexual individuals are regarded as "effeminate" and an object of disgust likely to be ridiculed. Therefore, gays in India found no better option than continuing their homo-erotic association behind the garb of formal friendship. They also led a pseudo-heterosexual life with all its prevailing ideology of marriage and reproduction. They mingled with the hetero-patriarchal society by conforming to the norms of masculinity, that is, acting as straight by fathering their children and loving their wives like true Indian family men. But it has certain repercussions. Apparently, they had to wear the garb of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine body to negate their chances of being looked down upon as effeminate and, covertly, they had to deal with the pressures of hegemonic performance to hide their homosexual identity. Sometimes, in order to protect themselves from becoming an object of mockery for their own "sissiness" or womanishness, they took refuge in "sissy-

phobia," a social strategy that derides the effeminacy of gay men and guises all sort of socio-cultural norms that are set for heterosexuals like flaunting their aggression and resoluteness to invigorate their masculine performance. They developed these invisibilizing techniques because if they did not follow the heteronormative conventions, it would limit "gay love to thrive or rely [only] on chance and casual encounter" (Rao, 2009, p. xxix). It cannot flourish into stable relationships on account of its low acceptance and odd prejudices attached to it. Here homophobia and straightness become a performance for gay identities through which they mark their existence.

This pseudo-straight performance of gay men can also be understood in Erving Goffman's (1959, p. 124-126) concepts of "front stage" and "backstage." They are concepts derived from dramaturgy based on the idea that life is a perennially never ending play in which people are performers. Goffman opined that when a person, i.e. the social agent is born, s/he has to lead a larger section of his/her life on the "front stage," i.e. in society or the social setting. In this public space, social agents are given certain roles and lines to perform in a particularly designed communicative setting in front of a particular audience (society). The "back stage," on the other hand, is the private space where they do not have to act or perform. They have the liberty to be their real selves. On the "back stage" social agents are present but the audience (social setting) is missing. Therefore, straightness or heterosexuality in this respect is the masquerade kept up by homosexual men on the "front stage" in the presence of heterosexual communities, but covertly, on the "back stage" gays remain deviant. They have the liberty to depict their sexuality in its true homo-erotic form. Thus, homosexuals have developed an alternative technique of resistance by employing self-invisibilization, i.e. residing latently beneath the norms of conventional heterosexuality.

Although heteronormativity as a social construction compelled the issues of gays to remain invisible, their own involvement in practicing the politics of silence regarding their sexuality cannot be negated. Silence acts as a strong means which facilitates their same-sex encounters behind the façade of formal friendship. This is referred to by Ashok Row Kavi (1999) as a "contract of silence" (p. 2). Foucault (1990) asserted: "There are not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (p. 127). This silence becomes a panacea to confront all forms of societal taboos. The Indian gay community thus opted for a convenient form of silent marriage, in which their partner had a different sexual orientation. She could either be heterosexual, asexual, or even bisexual. This helped the community members to control their performance and pose as straight husbands and caring fathers. Thus silence becomes a strong means through which they could find

opportunities for survival. Also, because of the aforementioned reason, even after realization that patriarchy and heterosexuality are their biggest challenges, they are compelled to develop a tryst with hegemonic masculinity and mandatory heterosexuality.

5. Marriage and sexuality under the regime of patriarchy

Marriage forms the backdrop of Mahesh Dattani's play, leading from an imposed, overt heterosexual concordance to covert, homoerotic unification. Heterosexuality is emphasized in our society not only for its socio-cultural or socio-religious implications, but also for its economic dimension. Since the purpose of marriage is procreation and homosexuality cannot contribute to reproduction, it is legally and culturally banished. The title *Do the Needful* very efficiently foregrounds this concept of production through marriage both in biological and economic terms. Since Alpesh is the prospective groom in this play, the words of the liftman – "Tell Alpesh bhaiya [elder brother] to just say yes. Arre, he should be having two children by now!" (Dattani, 2000, p. 123) – clearly underline the idea of doing the needful in the given situation, i.e. marriage and procreation. He also emphasizes the significance of heterosexuality when he asserts "I also want to see Alpesh bhaiya's happiness!" (Dattani, 2000, p. 124). Therefore, satisfaction and well-being here are synonymous with marriage. In order to be happy, one has to be straight and married. No sooner had the liftman found out about Alpesh's matrimonial alliance, then he sang happily: "Le jayenge, le jayenge, dilwale dulhaniyan le jayenge!" (Dattani, 2000, p. 124), which means "the lover will take away his beloved." Even Chandrakant Patel, Alpesh's father, prays for his happiness, i.e. his son's marriage, before meeting with the Gowdas and he requests the priest to "Put fifty-one, no, hundred and one rupees for a special prayer for my son … (*Louder.*) A special prayer! For my son! Alpesh Patel! Al-pesh! One hundred and one! I will come back later for the prasad! [religious offerings]" (Dattani, 2000, p. 124). Some vernacular Hindi words are used without translation into English in the narrative by the dramatist to maintain the indigenous fragrance and to enhance the flavor of the situation. So economically, socially and religiously, marriage and heterosexuality are of prime importance here. Any heterodoxy leads to delegitimization.

Marriage is a significant institution in the patriarchal construct, which leads to disempowerment and suppression of both men and women, as it is based on the concept of one woman to one man. This kind of union cannot be fruitful if one of the two is unwilling to live with the other, but such is the domain of patriarchy that it does not accept any deviation from ideal and set patterns. It hardly matters even if the person is crumbling beneath its crippling

effect. The social construct regards homosexuality as a sin and as an unethical practice. In order to make his relationship palatable, it becomes mandatory for Alpesh to give his approval to the institution of marriage. Although a person can never attain any conjugal bliss if s/he is not emotionally, psychologically and physically compatible with his/her partner, s/he has to give her/his consent in order to satisfy the pseudo needs and norms of society. Anupriya Singh (2013) writes "[…] these hegemonic categories which reduce identities to heteronormativity […] as the normal sexual orientation […] in turn keep the patriarchal matrixes of society in place" (p. 13). Beneath this umbrella of pseudo-marriage, everything is deemed fair even if the very basic features of a relationship are missing. In general, the story of Alpesh is actually the story of every man whose sexual orientation runs counter to the heterosexual norms laid out by society.

In the play, Dattani negotiates the concept of sexuality in both its connotations of usefulness and uselessness. Useful sexuality is equated with heteronormativity because it is economically productive and biologically procreative. Thus it has immense social and economic utilitarian value associated with it. On the other side, homosexuality is regarded as useless sexuality because it is not only non-procreative but also not viable economically. Although one's sexuality is a matter of chance and it is one's own prerogative, its performativity is subjected to the norms conditioned by society. In this respect, there are certain codes of performance associated with men and women by which their productivity is measured. Men are expected to be the masculine bread winners and women the reproductive feminine. Thus, a feminine man and a masculine woman are aberrations to the hetero-patriarchal society. This aspect has been highlighted by Dattani: when Lata's cow gives birth to a male calf, Mali (the local boy) comments, "Oh, oh, oh. Poor Gauri [cow's name]. Having a male calf. If he were a female, he would be worshipped, like his mother. But now, he is useless" (Dattani, 2000, p. 146). Since a male calf cannot produce milk it has no economic utility and is therefore counted as useless. Similarly, masculine men and feminine women are respected as useful beings because they can fulfill their purpose of productivity in terms of economic benefits and procreation in terms of biological benefits. Here the reification of sexes is clearly evident. On the contrary, a man like Alpesh who is born male but has a non-normative sexual orientation cannot fulfill the purpose of procreation; therefore, his sexuality is useless. Lata, too, like his first wife, detests him for his unnatural sexuality. It is no problem for Lata to be with Salim who was allowed to have four wives (Dattani, 2000, p. 126) but it is condemnable for her to be with Alpesh, a gay. It is so ironic that a heterosexual man who indulges in polygamy is negotiable, adjustable and useful to Lata but a homosexual man who would take care of her is called a useless "lout," "that

thing," and a "filthy beast" by her (Dattani, 2000, p. 151-152). Alpesh is commodified here and his sexuality is considered useless.

Moreover, the actual predicament of a gay person appears when his true sexual identity is revealed. Throughout his life he remains captive to his own soul due to the pressures and stigmas associated with homosexuality. While Alpesh's parents are busy sealing the deal, Lata and Alpesh have ample time to know each other. Lata reveals her liaison with Salim to Alpesh and her unwillingness towards the marriage proposal. When tension and turmoil seize Lata completely, she finds no better option than to run away. At this juncture, she hears a faint groaning sound coming from a distance. Moving closer to the source of the sound, i.e. Alpesh's room, she finds Alpesh locked with Mali in a compromising situation. Mali yells in embarrassment: "Aiyo!" and Alpesh in a state of shock asks Lata:

> What are you doing here?
> Lata: You!
> *(Thought.)* They were…doing it!
> *(Speech.)* You are a homo! (Dattani, 2000, p. 153)

Mali feels deeply ashamed and tries to justify his association with Alpesh as the outcome of abuse. He cries:

> I didn't want to do it. He made me do it…Please don't tell appa [father]. He forced me to do it.
> Alpesh: Stop crying....
> Lata: You filthy beast! How could you force him to do that?
> Alpesh: Wait a minute! He was enjoying every minute of it. (Dattani, 2000, p. 153).

Later, Lata understands the situation and his paranoid behavior. She understands that societal pressure associated with such homosexual relationships is the real cause behind Mali's reaction. Mali, the local boy, fears that his marriage will be called off. He thinks: "Mariappa won't give his daughter to me now. Who will marry me? I will kill myself." (Dattani, 2000, p. 154) This shows that men with alternative sexuality plunge into a state of self-denial because acceptance on their part would turn them into culprits.

Although this revelation is like a bolt from the blue for Lata, she quickly manages to take control of the situation. She becomes aware of the reason behind Alpesh's unwillingness to marry. She reassures Mali and Alpesh that they should not fear anything as everything will remain a secret and then reveals to them her plans to run away. Mali starts pleading with Lata.

He says that such an action on her part would bring immense shame and would ruin the reputation of her family. Lata sees sense. She realizes that even if Alpesh won't make her happy, he won't make her unhappy either. She feels that Alpesh, being a homosexual, won't make her lie with him. Also, he will provide her with the smokescreen behind which she could continue her liaison with Salim. She immediately hatches a brilliant plan to solve this complicated situation, in Alpesh's words "teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup (your silence and mine as well)" (Dattani, 2000, p. 142). She plans a pseudo-arrangement or marriage of convenience that would work splendidly for both of them. They are superficially unified, but internally both seek to preserve their individual identity and exercise their free will. Hence, under the regime of patriarchy what we think or we take as the "internal essence of gender" is actually "manufactured through a sustained set of acts," and "posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler, 1999, p. xv). It acts as a binding power that controls the performance of an individual. It becomes an enforced discourse, "a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler, 1999, p. xxxi), and "an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates" (Butler, 1999, p. xiv). Thus although compulsive, it succeeds in formulating, maintaining, and emphasizing the hegemonic patriarchal constructs as natural and normal.

6. Conclusion

Although the play ends on a lighter note, with the couple getting married and leaving for an outing to meet their respective lovers, it fails to provide any insight into the complexity that would plague the life of its protagonists later on. However, the dramatist successfully depicts the plight of men with alternative sexuality. The sole concern of Alpesh's family was to get him married in spite of being aware of his closeted homosexuality. Alpesh too could not muster courage to wear his sexuality on his sleeve because of the deep-seated ideals of heteronormativity. With Lata's help, he devised a brilliant technique of invisibilization that served his purpose. But the question whether he could achieve true freedom to exercise his will is a matter of deep concern and further analysis. His actual sexual identity is grotesquely concealed in order to gratify the needs of his family. This shows how the compulsion to conform to the socio-cultural determinants of gender and sexuality clearly contradicts one's individual instincts, sexual preferences and lived experiences. The assertive individual choices made by men lead to the formation of their real identity, whereas the suppression of their innate desires and tendencies is bound to have terrible, even lethal, consequences. How societal norms can be

constricting and stifling to someone who wants to break free from the conventional pattern is essentially displayed in the play discussed in this paper. Here an important question arises: whether the relationship between Alpesh and Lata is immoral because under the apparent cover of marital bliss, they continue their extra-marital affairs. Both Alpesh and Lata have to pay a heavy price for their liberty and deviation from the regular norms of society. These norms are merely the outcome of a narrow, conventional mindset which prohibits parents from offering liberty to their children. If patriarchy could accept and permit such deviations, homosexuality would never have been seen as a crime or an object of disgust and disparagement; rather, it would be celebrated as an individual's choice and his freedom of expression. Appositely, the dramatist asserts that one's sexuality is one's own prerogative, a natural choice that can neither be governed nor inculcated.

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