'QUEERING' INDIAN THEATRE: A STUDY OF QUEER REPRESENTATION IN POST-INDEPENDENCE, ENGLISH LANGUAGE THEATRE

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Centred around English language theatre produced in India after the country attained independence from colonial rule in 1947, this thesis studies queer representation by two Indian playwrights. Given that homosexuality was only decriminalized in 2018, nuanced queer representation through the popular medium of theatre emerges as an integral contributor to the burgeoning discourse on queer empowerment in India. By focusing on two plays, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1995) by Mahesh Dattani and *Frozen Fire* (2005) by A Mangai, I have attempted to capture the specificities of the Indian queer experience within the context of hegemonic silences, oppression, violence, marginalization, and discrimination. On one hand, the central argument posits that such intersectional queer reclamation and recentring—occurring within the discursive and critical framework of 'modern' theatre— challenges embedded ideologies of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and patriarchy within late 20th century nationalist discourses. In the contemporary Indian context, sexual and gender alterity are viewed as 'foreign' imports to traditional culture and an authentic Indian past interrupted by colonialism. On the other hand, global discourses within the academic disciplines of queer and postcolonial studies are analyzed as totalizing in their monolithic assumption and centralization of white, Western identities leading to the erasure of cultural and indigenous particularities of queerness. Through such an exploration, my work highlights the necessity for interrupting normative nationalist narratives through an interaction between postcolonial and queer frameworks of reading in theatre and drama. The two chapters in this thesis, each studying one of the two plays—both the text and its performance—written in English for the upper class, educated, urban population, build upon the fact that queerness in India exists, and has always existed, in a myriad of forms since the ancient past. The main hypothesis is based on the premise that the works of Dattani and Mangai provide a successful

mode of intervention and questioning in Indian theatre through queer visibility. My aim, through this thesis, is to produce one of the first critically comprehensive, detailed, and intersectional studies on both the playwrights' anglophone, queer theatre as found in these plays. Ultimately, the project attempts to emphasize that theatrical representation of uniquely Indian forms of queerness disrupts encoded meanings of gender, sexuality, identity, theatre, space, body, and history in the Indian nation leading to acceptance and integration of alterity.

Abstrait

Centrée sur le théâtre de langue anglaise produit en Inde après l'indépendance du pays de la domination coloniale en 1947, cette thèse étudie la représentation queer par deux dramaturges indiens. Étant donné que l'homosexualité n'a été décriminalisée qu'en 2018, la représentation queer nuancée par le biais du médium populaire du théâtre apparaît comme un contributeur intégral au discours naissant sur l'autonomisation des queers en Inde. En me concentrant sur deux pièces, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1995) de Mahesh Dattani et Frozen Fire (2005) de A Mangai, j'ai tenté de saisir les spécificités de l'expérience queer indienne dans le contexte des silences hégémoniques, de l'oppression, de la violence, de la marginalisation et de la discrimination. D'une part, l'argument central postule qu'une telle revendication et un tel recentrage queer intersectionnel – se produisant dans le cadre discursif et critique du théâtre « moderne » – remettent en question les idéologies ancrées de l'hétéronormativité, de la cisnormativité et du patriarcat dans les discours nationalistes de la fin du 20e siècle. Dans le contexte indien contemporain, l'altérité sexuelle et de genre est considérée comme une importation « étrangère » à la culture traditionnelle et à un passé indien authentique interrompu par le colonialisme. D'autre part, les discours mondiaux au sein des disciplines académiques des études queer et postcoloniales sont analysés comme totalisant dans leur hypothèse monolithique et leur centralisation des identités blanches occidentales conduisant à l'effacement des particularités culturelles et autochtones de l'identité queer. À travers une telle exploration, mon travail souligne la nécessité d'interrompre les récits nationalistes normatifs par une interaction entre les cadres postcoloniaux et queer de lecture au théâtre et au théâtre. Les deux chapitres de cette thèse, chacun étudiant l'une des deux pièces – à la fois le texte et sa performance – écrites en anglais pour la classe supérieure, éduquée et urbaine, s'appuient sur le fait que le queer en

Inde existe, et a toujours existé, sous une myriade de formes depuis le passé ancien.

L'hypothèse principale repose sur la prémisse que les œuvres de Dattani et Mangai offrent un

mode d'intervention et de questionnement réussi dans le théâtre indien grâce à la visibilité

queer. Mon objectif à travers cette thèse est de produire l'une des premières études

exhaustives, détaillées et intersectionnelles sur le théâtre queer anglophone et queer des

dramaturges tel que trouvé dans ces pièces. En fin de compte, le projet tente de souligner que

la représentation théâtrale de formes uniquement indiennes de queer perturbe les

significations codées du genre, de la sexualité, de l'identité, du théâtre, de l'espace, du corps

et de l'histoire dans la nation indienne, conduisant à l'acceptation et à l'intégration de

l'altérité.

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Introduction

The Indian, the Queer, the Postcolonial, and Theatre

In 2018, I was studying at Delhi University, one of the preeminent Indian institutes for academic explorations of the arts and humanistic disciplines as well as a major center of student-led queer activism. The legal debates for the decriminalization of homosexuality raged within the Indian judicial and political sphere during this period. Surrounded by my queer community, I watched in horror while the State argued for its continued criminalization. In their arguments, sexual orientation was often confused with gender identity, gender and biological sex were conflated, the heteronormative mode of life was unconsciously, inherently defined as 'conventional' and 'normal', the socio-cultural family unit was defined as consisting of a 'wife' and a 'husband', identity and sexuality were seen as conscious 'decisions'. Queerness was denigrated as an unthinking imitation of Western concepts and lifestyle choices.

While ultimately the Indian Supreme Court arrived at a ruling that decriminalized homosexuality, such general misconceptions and understandings about gendered, sexually nonconforming identities and queerness continue to circulate, are widely accepted, and largely unquestioned. That such homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia remains deeply embedded in the public consciousness was again made evident when similar arguments, reasons, and definitions regarding homosexuality were brought forward by the State in 2023. It argued against the legal recognition of queer marriages through a law dubbed the Marriage Equality Act. Beginning 18th April 2023, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court began hearing arguments in favour of and against the legalization of same-sex marriage. The queer petitioners argued that they should get the same legal recognition for same-sex marriage as heterosexual couples—a denial leading to an infringement of their basic constitutional rights

and liberties as citizens of a democratic country. On the other hand, the State and the
Hindutva ruling party argued that the court (as the country's apex judiciary body) cannot be
asked to "change the entire legislative policy of the country deeply embedded in religious and
societal norms" through such an interference with the 'sacred' institution of marriage (Logan).
The Bar Council of India even passed a resolution condemning Indian judiciary's efforts to
revise the societal institution of marriage, historically defined by heterosexual union; a matter
which should ideally reflect the will of the country's people, 99% of whom are opposed to
LGBTQ+ marriage (Scroll.in). Though the statistics involved in such an assessment by the
Bar Council have been challenged by various queer scholars and organizations, the
prevalence of queerphobia leading to LGBTQ+ stigma, oppression, and discrimination
cannot be denied. The judicial debate around the Marriage Equality Act continues with no
conclusive decision in sight as of 30th April 2023. In what follows, I argue that the
representation of nuanced queer identities, sexualities, bodies, expressions, and space in
Indian theatre and dramatic texts counters such disempowerment of the queer community.

     In contemporary India, queer marginalization can be equated with political
disenfranchisement. Simultaneously marginalized by the nation-state and mainstream socio-
cultural discourse, the figure of the queer citizen in India has been, by and large, written out
of history and visibility. Through my research, I have attempted to capture the uniqueness of
queer experience in India. In queer scholar Sucheta Choudhuri's words, this 'uniqueness'
refers to "a dilemma specific to the Indian queer subject, whose desire to be acknowledged in
the narrative of the nation is complicated by an anticipation of overt or insidious homophobia
(and general queerphobia), whose language of self-definition has been confounded by the
violence of colonization and the inadequacy of terminology borrowed from the West" (1).

     A key process of queer reclamation occurs within the discursive and critical
framework of 'modern' Indian theatre—plays written and produced after India attained

independence from the British colonial government in 1947. I examine two dramatic texts—
On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1995) by Mahesh Dattani and *Frozen Fire* (2005) by A
Mangai—and their subsequent performances. Their representations of queerness challenge
embedded ideologies of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and patriarchy within nationalist,
postcolonial, and global literary, historical, and theatrical discourses. The background begins
with a detailed characterization of the histories and politics that generated the category of
'modern' in Indian, English-language drama and theatre created post-independence. This is
followed by an analysis of the absences, fears, oppressions, and marginalizations within the
nationalist, as well as postcolonial, discourses surrounding the category of 'queer'—as a term
used to refer to alternate or non-normative sexual orientation, gender identity, bodies, spaces,
and a general state of being. In particular, I undertake a detailed analysis of the queerphobic
silence within the 'national' literary, historical, and theatrical oeuvres—and the criticism it
generates—through a postcolonial lens. At the same time, I analyze global queer discourses
as totalizing in their monolithic assumption and centralization of white, Western identities at
the expense of the erasure of cultural and indigenous specificities.

Borrowing from Foucauldian theory on discourses as outlined in *The Archaeology of
Knowledge* (1969), I read 'history', 'literature', 'language', and 'theatre' as ideological and
discursive institutions that govern and shape public perception or knowledge while producing
and maintaining the State ideology or the ideology of the ruling class at a given time and
culture. Through such an exploration, the thesis highlights the necessity for interrupting
normative nationalist narratives through an interaction between postcolonial and queer
frameworks of reading in theatre and drama. With a focus on two plays by Indian playwrights
who write in English for the upper-class, educated, urban population, this work builds upon
the fact that queerness in India exists, and has existed, in a myriad of forms since the
mythological past. However, instead of recuperating 'pure' forms of ancient, indigenous

queerness, I study those theatre works which reflect and respond to the discourses on Indian alterity of gender and sexuality in the past few decades; these, in turn, produce legislations such as The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019[i] and the legal protests to the Marriage Equality Act. The thesis posits that the two plays, through their representation of postcolonial queer identities, expressions, bodies, and spaces, challenge the dominant national, postcolonial, and global queer narratives which perpetuate the assumption that all expressions of queerness stem from -- and therefore look like -- Western expressions of queerness and as such are 'foreign' imports to India. I argue that these plays contribute to the larger conceptual debates around intersectionality in both queer and postcolonial studies by addressing questions of non-Western, non-White queer subjects as represented in Indian theatre.

1. 'Modern' Indian or 'National' theatre

Drama and theatre, in all their multifarious forms, are some of the most powerful and popular mediums of conveying social concerns in India. Focusing on 'modern Indian theatre' brings out the critical and discursive value of these three ideologically charged terms. In her introduction to the *Modern Indian Theatre* (2009), critic and scholar Nandi Bhatia argues for the growing urgency for critical scrutiny "of the highly pluralistic and diverse field" that is theatre practice and theory in contemporary India (xii). She notes the tendency of West-influenced, canonical academic and critical discourses to value the aesthetic dimensions of Indian theatre at the expense of critical analyses of its political role. While a wide range of socio-political issues have been explored through the ever-expanding creative corpus of drama, theatre criticism as a genre receives the least attention (xiv). And yet, Bhatia suggests theatre as a social institution not only holds a mirror to a nation's realities and truths, but also shapes and maintains the hegemonic ideologies which create them. Crow and Banfield too, in

An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre (1996) suggest that contemporary scholarship largely overlooks mid- and late 20th century secondary literature on theatre to the extent that it makes working on Indian drama difficult[ii]. Bhatia reads theatre in India as a site "that has the potential to question and contest authoritarian structures through the use of aesthetic forms…" (xii). Acknowledging this subversive potential of theatre, this thesis builds upon Bhatia's call for a critical study of Indian theatre and drama and its negotiations with issues of "class, caste, and gender, and the ways in which the nation came to be imagined from these varied perspectives at critical historical moments" (xiv). Echoing Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in their introduction to *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), I believe that the study of dramatic textual bodies provides one of the best opportunities for an ethical examination of concepts of 'otherness' and differences within the postcolonial context. However, going beyond a one-dimensional analysis of the textual body, this thesis undertakes a holistic exploration to study the narratives of gendered empowerment created during the actual production and the aesthetics of performance which reveal the agency of queer identities, expressions, histories, and bodies.

Given that the recorded existence of theatre in India goes back to the Vedic Age (1500-600 BC), it would be futile to try and historicize in this work the many traditions, conventions, and cultures of performance practices that function within such a geographically vast and culturally, as well as linguistically, rich place. Furthermore, reducing the complexity of all the cultural and regional differences in performance to fit within a monolithic, linear history of 'Indian' theatre would be problematic due to its totalizing/universalizing effect, leading to a loss in the diverse heritage that defines the country.[iii] Instead, this thesis focuses on English-language theatre and drama produced by Indian playwrights after the country attained independence (1947), towards the latter half of the twentieth century.

Indian anglophone theatre occupies a niche space as the vast majority of the population concentrated in rural India do not speak English as their first language. A key moment in the history of English usage in India was the colonial government's English Education Act of 1835 which made the language the official medium of education in the country. Initially, English wasn't introduced with a literary aim but rather to fulfill a particular political and administrative function. In the second chapter of his book, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Marxist-literary critic Aijaz Ahmad draws upon Thomas Macaulay's "Minutes of Education (1835)" to argue how the predominant, orientalist perspective of the colonial government sought to create a "class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 116). This class of metropolitan interpreters or intermediaries, with a firm grip on communicational English, formed the sophisticated, bourgeoisie, middle-class who produced anglophone literature after independence (Ahmad 77). And thus, Indian theatre in English emerged in the early nineteenth century as newly western-educated Indians started experimenting with the language after colonization.

Bhatia traces the influence of early British theatre—which was an integral part of the flourishing cultural life in the country under colonial rule since the 1750s—on the development of urban, anglophone theatre in India (xv). Similarly, in the Oxford companion to Indian theatre, edited by Ananda Lal, the entry titled 'English Theatre' begins with a historical overview of British theatre (122). The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the growth of proscenium-style theatre of realism which developed into a broad-based entertainment in colonial centers of power such as Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, and attracted the largest middle-class audience (Chatterjee 7-8). However, Lal is quick to reject the assumption of English theatre signifying British theatre. He notes that the first English play to be written by an Indian—Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjae's *The Persecuted* (1831)—

preceded the English Education Act of 1835. The first English dramas to flood the Indian markets were translations of Rabindranath Tagore and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's works, produced by the writers themselves (Lal 122)[iv]. Until the middle of the 20th century, the anglophone dramatic corpus was chiefly populated by plays on mythical and religious subjects; T.P. Kailasam, Sri Aurobindo, and Harindranath Chattopadhyay were some of the main contributors[v]. After independence, original theatre and drama pieces were slow to develop prominent political and social voice with a reformist perspective, some notable exceptions being the works of playwrights such as Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, Pratap Sharma, A Mangai, and Nissim Ezekiel. These playwrights exposed, critiqued, and protested against cultural, economic, traditional, patriarchal, and other societal structures that perpetuate oppression and discrimination by exposing the overall hypocrisy of the 'common Indian experience'.

Often applied to the oeuvre of anglophone literature and drama produced after independence, 'modern' is a highly contested categorical term. Theatre scholarship started emerging from the 1950s and initiated inquiries into what constitutes the 'modern' in Indian theatre by locating its relationships within a context of colonial, post-colonial, and nationalist pasts. Within non-English theatre, some notable studies include Aparna Dharwadker's analysis of urban drama in different regions against their colonial histories in *Theatres of Independence* (2005) and Vasudha Dalmia's study of nineteenth century Hindi theatre in *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006).[vi] A similar study was executed by Rakesh Solomon, in "Towards a Genealogy of Indian Theatre Historiography" where he provides detailed insights into the contradicting forces shaping 'modern' Indian theatre as it developed since the middle of the twentieth century. He calls this era the postcolonial 'nationalist' era (4). Solomon argues that this grand nationalist enterprise of the Indian intelligentsia consisted of inventing a pan-Indian nation-state that was 'modern' i.e., influenced and developed through

European contact while simultaneously attempting "to bring about an 'imagined' nation into existence through a return to ancient Hindu traditions" (Bhatia xvi). As such, the 'modern' Indian playwright was concerned with reconstructing an 'Indianness' after imperialistic influence and Oriental praise, triggering a return to and revival of the 'classical' theatre of the ancient Indian past of refined purity.[vii] Bhatia and Aparna Dharwadker also argue that the colonial influence of Victorian theatre and sensibilities led to the revival of Sanskrit traditions and performance, or the 'theatre of roots.'[viii] This theatre emphasized performance's connection to the ancient past of the "two-thousand-year-old Sanskrit drama, production methods and 'natyashastra'" as an important aspect of 'national' theatre "for restoring an 'authentic' Indian tradition, which, in the nationalist, postcolonial imagination, had been interrupted by colonialism" (Bhatia xxi).

The return to traditional, classical, and vernacular theatre further marginalized English language drama at the expense of Sanskrit and Hindi theatre (Bhatia xxviii). Bhatia identifies "lack of patronage" by the State institutions and "the rejection of English as a colonial import that was therefore not 'Indian' enough" as the reasons for the lack of socio-cultural and critical attention paid to English theatre and drama within the discourse of the nation (xxix). Nilufer Bharucha, through her analysis of playwrights Cyrus Mistry and Gieve Patel's works, also argues that original drama in English remained in the margins during the 20th century as it was not seen as being commercially viable and was often ignored by the press in favour of Broadway imports and Shakespearean plays put up by visiting theatre companies (207). Such discussions show how English-language theatre came to be overlooked in dominant discourses of literature, criticism, and performance in India.

2. Queer discourse in the Indian 'nation'

In exploring the reasons and intellectual arguments behind this recourse to 'tradition' while defining the 'national', not only in modern theatre but also within other societal institutions and discourses, I study the ideological politics and contradictions inherent in the discursive understanding of 'Indian' in the contemporary era. I start by building upon Gyanendra Pandey's subalternist arguments in *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (2005). In chapter two, while discussing the hegemonic ideologies of nationhood as they emerged in post-independent India, Pandey points to "the highly centralized state power that now goes by the name of nation-state as representing the interests of a get-rich-quick, consumerist 'middle-class' and its rural ('rich peasant') allies" (17). Predictably, the identity and discourse of the 'nation' was shaped by what Pandey goes on to call the "Brahmanical, Hindu" majority faction; their idea of 'India' has become the 'national idea' (18). In furthering the ambition of the right-wing, conservative ruling-class, Pandey argues, the state has shown a willingness to designate all opposed to their nationalist ideologies as "antinational" (18). Rohit Dasgupta, a gender scholar, describes how the Indian notion of fundamentalist Hindu or 'Hindutva' nationalism—emerging dominantly by the 1970s—is framed within the concept of 'imagined communities' (665). He writes, "The term 'imagined community' suggests a source of identity that is bigger than oneself. It rests on the assumption of 'imagining' and creating'. The national integration of India was possible by imagining this concept of a common history and thus creating a common citizenship" (665). By drawing links to an ancient, pure past of traditions and histories, nationalist rhetoric in India emphasizes political participation for the 'common good' of the majority before individual desires and interests of the minority. These smaller 'minority' cultures and practices—expected to fall in line with the 'mainstream' national culture—include, but are not limited to, the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, and activist women's groups (18).

As is clear from this discussion, the majoritarian idea of 'nation', as well as the discourse on 'otherness' that emerged in opposition to it, did not recognize or consider gender and sexual alterity or queerness as a pertinent distinction for citizenship. My usage of the term 'queer' follows that of Michael Warner in his 1993 work *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, where "queer" is a general, destabilizing term used to refer to non-normative gender and sexual identities, expressions, desires, bodies, spaces, and lifestyles[ix]. Before Gayatri Spivak's paradigm-shifting intervention in the 1980s, even critiques of dominant national discourses and the Hindutva imaginary of the Indian nation challenged class, caste, economic, and cultural basis of violence and oppression, but often failed to address the double-marginalization of bodies marked by gender and sexual alterity (Batra, "Introduction" 11). M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* that Hindutva[x] politics conflates the idea of nationhood and citizenship with cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Such a conflation produces a class of loyal heterosexual citizens and a "subordinated class of sexualized, nonprocreative, noncitizens, disloyal to the nation" ("Introduction" xxiii). Similarly, Dasgupta writes, "From a historical perspective, middle-class critics of post-independence India maintained the ambition of reforming the Indian public in their own image. Through internalizing colonialism, the new elites of post-independence India attacked non- normative sexuality as nationalist critique" (664). Gender and sexually alternate communities and individuals thus remain stigmatized today and are not granted the same social recognition or political, legal space as other caste, class, or religious communities (Batra, "Introduction" 11). Indeed, same-sex relations were proscribed in India until 2018 and the judicial discussion around the adoption of the Marriage Equality Act is raging on even as this thesis is being written.

And yet, homosexuality and gender alterity have existed in India since time immemorial.[xi] Though sexual alterity was considered a punishable offence within ancient Indian codes of morality and law, it was never a matter of life and death[xii]. Notable Indian queer historians Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai claim that it was under colonial rule that a minor strain of homophobia in Indian traditions became the dominant ideology ("Introduction: Modern Indian Material" 195-96). They argue that in colonial India the subalternity of queerness— sexualities and gender identities positioned outside the heteronormative, cisnormative binary pattern—was an implicit part of the political agenda of the colonizer. Homosexuality in particular was consciously constructed as a specifically "Oriental vice" that validated colonial intervention and control (Dasgupta 660). Dasgupta writes, "there was a lot of anxiety by the British administrators about the sexual freedom India posed for its people and homosexuality was blamed on Indian customs" (660). Raj Rao performed a similar analysis in his counter-hegemonic work of critique, *Criminal Love?: Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India*. Rao traces a history of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code—the anti-sodomy law—originally introduced by the British government in 1861. With the passing of this law, homosexuality was officially condemned by the state and framed as a criminal activity.[xiii] Anti-colonial, Hindutva nationalism replicated this queer oppression after independence through its attempt to reinvent the nation as a space free of these alleged vices: procreative heterosexuality became a prerequisite for sexual citizenship in decolonized India. Batra has argued that whenever efforts were made by the queer community to collectively assert their identities and lifestyles they were "dismissed as mimicking the divisive identity politics of Western societies and cultures" ("Introduction" 11). Indeed, several Indian critics and intellectuals, hidden under the guise of 'postcoloniality' and a call for indigenous or native discourses end up subsuming notions of gender and sexuality as concerns that only the 'westernized, educated' bourgeoisie have the privilege to

address and discuss. A famous example is that of Madhu Kishwar, editor of what was one of

the most prominent feminist magazines in India in the late 20ᵗʰ century—*Manushi*. Kishwar

adopted this watered down ostensibly postcolonial rhetoric and viewed the notion of queer

identities and desires through the lens of 'western otherness'. In an essay on the Indian film

Fire (directed by Deepa Mehta), Kishwar wrote about its 'un-Indian' theme of same-sex

desire. To quote her, "Such issues (lesbian desire) are not as important in a third-world

context since Indians face more crucial, more economically basic life-and-death issues" (11).

Such a theoretical framework ends up reinforcing a certain kind of fixity or rigidity as it

"ends up 'Othering' already marginalized subject positions" (Shahani). For the most part, the

dominant discourse in India reflects such homophobic sentiments. Queer identities and

expression continue to be assigned the category of 'foreign' and 'western' as opposed to the

'traditional Hindu culture and practices' supported by the dominant political powers and

networks. In the introduction to the final section of *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from*

Literature and History (2001), Vanita and Kidwai argue that this prevalence of homophobia

in the post-independent era was also, to some extent, a response to the homosocial

relationship and interactions between the English colonizers and the native, Indian

nationalists (191). The intervention of Western ideas, thoughts, and practices due to

colonization was seen as effeminizing to the Indian culture and the masculine idea of

nationhood within the nationalist discourse (Dasgupta 661). In response to this process of

emasculation, the new-born Indian nation saw a need to assert its manliness by reinforcing

and exaggerating the heterosexual structure of society[xiv]. Dasgupta comments, "Nehru, the

first Prime Minister of independent India went so far as to claim that 'homosexual behaviour

was an aberration introduced into India in the British colonial period' (Vanita 269). Vanita

argues that "this desire to re-write India's past as one of normative purity, is in part, the result

of defensiveness against Western attempts to exoticise that past as one of unbridled

sensuality" (666). Thus, both colonial agendas as well as the anti-colonial 'nationalist'

discourse have obscured Indian queerness and led to the marginalization of gender and sexual

dissidents—an absence which carries over to the realm of drama.[xv]

Feminist and queer politics in India have emerged in opposition to this idea of the

nation-state framing queer identities and desires as an import from the West. Particularly, the

third wave of feminist activism in India, emerging in the 1990s, shows a specific concern for

homosexual and transgender lives. It highlights the political relevance of gender and sexual

difference in the consideration of citizenship and ideas of nation-state (Batra, "Introduction"

9-10). Since the law of the state had the upper hand in deciding matters concerning private as

well as social spaces occupied by alternate gender and sexual identities, it created a subaltern

subject position to which the queer individual becomes tied or associated. Choudhuri too

highlights the regulatory influence of the Indian state in ordering gendered and sexual

identities, and the multiplicity of selves that queer subjects are forced to inhabit as a result

(16).

Indian society has traditionally recognized gender alterity—individuals considered

neither male nor female—under the category of 'hijras.' In English language publications, the

hijra community is often referred to as a community of eunuchs, intersex, and transgender

individuals. Such a conflation of global linguistic frameworks and categories to encapsulate

and describe uniquely Indian expressions of queerness has often been criticized, as explored

in chapter 2 of the thesis. The hijra community was legally granted voting rights in the

country only in 1994, while the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill was passed

by the Indian legislature in 2016. However, the bill has been widely condemned for its

underlying assumption that gender identity is based on biological determinism. Indeed, as is

clear from legal and political discourses still prevalent in 2023, the marginalization of queer

sexuality and gender is a legacy endorsed by the Indian State and reflected in the message of

misogyny and homophobia propagated through popular cultural media of the 21st century. Thus, to be queer in India is to occupy a position of stigmatized abjection. Such stigma is produced through the constant reiteration of the heteronormative, cisnormative discourses and practices by the mainstream society which perpetuates the 'subalternity' of the gendered, sexed bodies and contribute towards the intolerance of queer communities and subcultures.

3. The Postcolonial, Queer in the global context

The contextualization of the nexus between nationalism and queerness, as discussed so far, is crucial to my research which seeks to investigate the variety of expressions of queer identities in postcolonial contexts. In using the term 'postcolonial', I have borrowed from Choudhuri: "The definition of a 'postcolonial' identity premises itself on a sense of nationhood that is distinct from the concept of an ex-colony therefore, an investigation into the expression of queer sexualities in a decolonized space must take into account how the nationalist discourse represses these expressions" (15). But even beyond the nationalist discourses, critics have highlighted the silences around gender and sexual alterity within the field of postcolonial studies which crystalized as an interdisciplinary discourse in academic institutions of the West in the 1970s.

The term gained currency as a method of historical classification to signify newly independent nations of the Third World. In this sense, the 'postcolonial' initially referred to erstwhile territories that had been decolonized and was a periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept (Lazarus 2). However, the discipline of postcolonial studies itself does not hew to such static historicization. Benita Parry asserts its destabilizing ideological potential: postcolonial studies facilitate an "understanding of colonialism and its legacies different from the narratives handed down either by colonialism or anticolonialist movements, thus throwing the claims of both the official and dissident historiographies into

disarray" (67). Thus, the postcolonial critic assumes a deconstructive philosophical position around questions of class, labour, race, and even caste in the Indian context, vis-a-vis the logocentrism and identarian metaphysics underpinning Western knowledge. In her seminal work, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak provides commentary on the discourse around postcolonial criticism as it has developed in India, and globally, in the 20th century. She notes the patriarchal and cisnormative ideologies which undergird the majority of debates within postcolonial studies and highlights how postcolonial subjectivity remained ungendered (278). She argues that postcolonial criticism presumes a patronymic family and community mode of life and societal arrangement. The basic unit of human society in post colonies i.e., the masculine frame of the family structure with its patriarchal and heteronormative foundational assumptions, remains unquestioned.

I work to extend Spivak's argument, applying it to queer identities. This thesis reiterates John Hawley's arguments in the Introduction to the collection of critical essays *Postcolonial, Queer* (2001). Hawley comments on the dearth of meaningful intersectional analyses that locate and study queerness within the subaltern, postcolonial context. As he explores the challenges that scholars face while attempting to combine the insights of the two fields, he highlights how a majority of postcolonial critics are averse to queer studies and theoretical concepts because of its "white" and "elitist" discursive underpinnings (1). Parry too, asserts that though the plurality of postcolonial theoretical production has facilitated an interconnection with many discourses against oppression or marginalization —such as feminist and disability studies—its encounters with sexual and gender non-normativity remain largely underdeveloped. Even in the field of postcolonial literary criticism, very few scholarly works have produced nuanced representations of postcolonial 'queerness' in Indian anglophone theatre which are irretrievably linked to issues of race, gender, and the creation of a globalised ideology. My project is one of the first critical studies to build upon Hawley's

conception of theoretical intersections to aid a more sophisticated comprehension of issues of gender and sexual alterity in the Indian theatre context. By locating my work within this framework, I seek to appropriate the "urgent opportunity", as William Spurlin delineates in his contribution to Hawley's anthology, "not only for comparative studies of sexual (and by extension, queer) identities, but for a critique of the *heterosexist* biases of postcolonial studies" (186).

At the same time, as I uncover and explore queer narratives and identities unique to the Indian context, my research interrupts the global framework of queer studies which is "uniformly Eurocentric in its focus" (Choudhuri 20). Through my research, I highlight the inadequacies within global discourses on queerness to read/articulate queer experience in postcolonial Indian context. In his theorization of the nexus between queer and postcolonial studies in "Rupture or Continuity?", Dennis Altman studies globalizing trends of capitalism and its resulting influence on post/modern identities in third world countries as responsible for the uncritical adoption of Western discourses in the consolidation of a universal queer identity. He highlights how Western discourse on alternative sexuality has been internalized by non-Western cultures leading to a reconfiguration of gender and sexual organization prompted by the desire to emulate "universalizing" lifestyle trends (77). However, Altman warns against the pitfalls of such an indiscriminate adaptation of this discourse for defining queer identities in non-Western communities; such universalization leads to marginalization and ignorance of culture-specific forms and expressions (87-89). Furthermore, Altman studies how the essentially Western binary of male/female and homo/heterosexuality sits uneasily when projected on to non-Western contexts (81).[xvi]

Gayatri Gopinath and R. Raj Rao bring this debate into the specific context of South Asian studies with their studies of the queer discourses in India. Gopinath emphasizes the need for an alternative theoretical model to articulate non-Western queer experience which

often gets subsumed under the disciplinary framework of Western queer theory. The presumption of a monolithic queer identity and range of experience across cultures, she contends, is an essentialist move that implicitly hierarchizes indigenous queerness below western categories. Similarly, in the preface to his work, Rao begins by acknowledging a research gap in this field— a queer theoretical structure to study indigenous dynamics remains to be developed in India. Addressing such a gap, my work interrogates the hegemony of western assumptions by paying attention to the nuances of historical and cultural contexts which frame Indian notions of queerness and its related identities.

4. Hypothesis

Western assumptions underscoring queerness as a global identity in national and postcolonial discourses are propagated, perpetuated, reproduced, and maintained through the 'ideological state apparatus' (Felluga, "Althusser"). For Althusser, the symbolic order of reality, as a culture understands it, is defined through the 'ideologies' supported by its social institutions of religion, literature, arts, theatre, and performance amongst others. Literature and theatre's role in both the expression and construction of material reality is undeniable. Borrowing from Foucault's theorizations in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this thesis recognizes the dramatic texts and theatre, within specific academic and institutional contexts, as important centers of political power that legitimize their own systems of knowledge and meaning. As discursive and ideological narratives, Foucault posited that they shape everyday behaviors and 'specialist' discourses within academia through "cultural reproduction and the passing on of traditional values and practical knowledge" or by being accorded a "subversive status" during this process (Freundlieb 318). I take as given that literary and theatrical expressions as cultural modes not only reproduce hegemonic Ideology but also resist queer marginalization and discrimination of Indian identities in national, postcolonial, and global

contexts. I have done a detailed study of the challenges posed to the dominant literary, theatrical, and historical discourses by the two playwrights' dramatic texts and their productions. I have argued that through their representation and recentering of queerness in their works, they contribute to the empowerment of queer communities in the postcolonial nation. My analysis of the plays of Mahesh Dattani and A. Mangai focuses on their articulation and representation of gender and sexual alterity in English through the introduction of queer, Indian themes and characters. Writing in the late 20th century, the two playwrights' works are influenced by their academic and theatrical background in traditional and Western drama—Mangai is a professor of English literature and drama in India, while Dattani was exposed to theatre since early childhood. In their topicality, their plays reflect the reality of queer desire, sexuality, and identity in India by delving into the psyche of ordinary characters that survive in a culture that struggles to create any space for them.

The underlying argument of this work posits queer visibility as a mode of questioning and restructuring the cisnormative and heteronormative ideologies. Chapter 1 recognizes the immense social popularity and critical acclaim enjoyed by Mahesh Dattani's dramatic oeuvre in seeking to investigate the politics of queer representation in his work. The first chapter builds upon the works of criticism produced by theatre scholars such as Ananda Lal, Erin Mee, John McRae, and Jeremy Mortimer, and goes on to explore the nuances of queer representation in Dattani's play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1995). The play revolves around a group of affluent, English speaking, queer Indians who are friends and the conversation they have one evening in an apartment in urban Mumbai. In 1996, the Prime Time Theatre Company produced the play for the first time in Mumbai. During my personal correspondence with Dattani in 2023, he informed me that it premiered with a full house at NCPA's Tata Theatre which has a seating capacity of a thousand. Dattani attributes the performance's success to its substantial production value.

Paying special attention to the modes of communication employed by the queer group of friends in the play, I explore in this chapter how language is marked by—and lends to the perpetuation of—hegemonic heteronormativity in the postcolonial context; even as Dattani appropriates the colonizer's language (i.e., English) to articulate 20th century postcolonial consciousness, queerness remains uncommunicable. I suggest that Dattani's use of Brechtian *Gestus* to supplement English in the articulation of uniquely Indian expressions leads to the construction of what Jack Halberstam calls 'queer space'. Such visibility of Indian queer identities, expression, and space not only challenges the assumption that homosexuality is a 'foreign import' but also interrupts the homophobic nationalist and postcolonial discourses by recentering queer agency and space through theatre and drama. Ultimately, I argue that Dattani's recognition and representation of uniquely Indian experiences of queerness through his characters and plot engenders not only a reorientation of nationalist narratives but also a re-evaluation of the western foundations of global postcolonial and queer discourses themselves.

Chapter 2 further problematizes 20th century attempts to historicize 'national' theatre in India by reading A Mangai's play— *Frozen Fire*—as a revisionist, mythological recentering of a queer character. The experimental play foregrounds the voice of Shikhandi, a gender fluid character marginalized within the immense mythological, literary, and theatrical traditions and discourses surrounding the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Beginning *in media res*, the retrospective life-narration by the protagonist resembles a musical monologue and takes the audience through the journey of gender transformation that the character and the actor simultaneously undergo on stage. As I was still writing this thesis, I got the opportunity of interviewing Mangai who informed me that the first production of the original Tamil play was staged in Chennai under the aegis of the M.S. Swaminathan foundation in 2002. It was part of their 'Voicing Silence' project that sought to collaborate with all-women, professional

theatre groups who practiced traditional performance forms across the Tamil Nadu region. Since then, the Tamil version has been produced over twenty times; Mangai herself seems to have lost count of the exact number of productions but confesses that they were all well-received by critics and audiences alike. The production soon caught the attention of the State Department of Education in Tamil Nadu and was given some funding, a production crew, as well as free access to a fully-equipped studio to film the performance. The translation of the play by V. Geetha was made possible as the recording of the Tamil performance required English subtitles to be universally accessible to all audiences on YouTube. Mangai remarked how she went back to the same transcript of subtitles and edited them into a play when Tutun Mukherjee approached her with the idea of publishing the English translation in the collected volume of dramas by women. Since then, *Frozen Fire* has been produced by various student theatre groups in South India.

My thesis chapter on *Frozen Fire* explores the assumptions of nationalist cisnormativity and patriarchy within dominant histories of national theatre—produced during the latter half of the 20th century—due to their silence on issues and questions of gender alterity. I study the politics of Mangai's recovery of a gender alternate character from India's mythological past, and a retelling of their story through a contemporary queer lens in the play, as a challenge to these hegemonic national and postcolonial narratives. Borrowing from Aparna Dharwadker's theories, I read myths as embedded forms of history appropriated by Mangai to recuperate and represent complex, Indian expressions of queerness. At its core, this chapter argues for a reading of Mangai's theatre as a site of resistance through performance—the playwright locates and recenters gender queer identities and desires through the body in 'spectacle', a concept building upon Amy Hughes' work. Ultimately, I have shown how through a layering of aesthetic and theatrical conventions borrowed from a variety of Western and indigenous practices, Mangai's representation of the 'spectaclized'

queer body destabilizes encoded meanings of space, history, performance, nation, and tradition. Her recentering of subaltern agency and gender queer identities within the narrative of history and theatre in India interrupts western categories of queerness, exposing their inability to articulate such cultural specificities.

The motivations behind these playwrights' works no longer occupy a traditionalist position of seeking a return to and replication of a 'pristine precolonial past'. In her characterization of the counter critique to modern traditionalism, Dharwadker writes, "The desire for cultural autonomy and wholeness (in theatre) does not translate in any simple way into the possibility of inserting a pristine precolonial past into the postcolonial present…Just as Western influences are indigenized, indigenous performance traditions are hybridized…" ("The Critique" 65). Indeed, chapter 2 explores such hybridity of Mangai's performance practices as she consciously intertwines Tamil performance traditions with elements of Boalian social theatre and Brechtian epic theatre in her play to recenter queer agency. In chapter 1, Western theories on non-realist theatre explore how Dattani's play grants cultural and social visibility—on the stage and within popular imagination—to indigenous expressions of queer sexualities. The exploration in this chapter centers around the inability of postcolonial language and space to accommodate queer articulation and existence, "revealing the fissures…the drawbacks of cultural nationalism" (Bhatia xxiv). Both the chapters provide an analysis of how each playwright negotiates the tensions between the nation's cultural and colonial past, and between the Western influences and traditional forms, to disrupt the nation's hegemonic discourses and their ingrained fear for the 'queer' in the present. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins note, these playwrights' works "…developed in conjunction with Brechtian, feminist, and cultural studies criticism, have much to offer post-colonial debates about language, interpellation, subject formation, representation, and forms of resistance" (9). My thesis takes up this call and analyses the elements of

representation as forms of resistance in their plays on queer Indian lives of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Both Dattani and Mangai are apt representatives of the vibrant phenomenon that is the Indian anglophone theatre. As residents of India metropolises, both choose English as their linguistic medium of communication in theatre; they write in the language used popularly by the Western-educated audience which frequents the venues of urban, proscenium drama. In their use of a hybrid Indianized English on stage, the postcolonial playwrights 'speak back' to a discourse that fails to read sensitively the different ideas of queerness explored on stage. Their modern theatres which reflect a culturally diverse society require "a pluralistic approach that moves away from the conventional way of defining by linguistic and regional divides" (xxix). Echoing Aijaz Ahmad on "Language of Class, Ideologies of Immigration", these inheritors of the newly independent nation found it difficult to imagine India's civilizational complexity outside the legacy of the colonizer's language. Indeed, by the time India attained independence in 1947, English was assimilated so deeply into the political and socio-cultural fabric of the country that its rejection as a language of "colonial insertion" would be "ahistorical" (Ahmad 77). The colonial language is appropriated by Dattani and Mangai precisely to reflect the postcolonial sensibility -- to insist "the quintessentially Indian" no longer necessitates a recourse to vernacular languages and theatre forms (Bhatia xxix). Rather, by inserting the social realities of the urban, Indian ethos in national narratives, they make English language theatre reflective of the postcolonial, queer condition. Mangai and Dattani, through their queer themes and unconventional performance practices as employed in these English language plays, redefine modern theatre "in ways that recognize the Western and the traditional, the urban and the rural, and the classical and the folk as being mutually influencing and inseparable" in its reflection of the postcolonial Indian reality (Bhatia xxiv).

Amongst his anglophone contemporaries, Dattani's theatre follows the lead of Asif Currimbhoy in his experimental use of non-realist tropes and conventions including the use of music and songs, insertion of dance sequences, imaginative uses of space, as well as the disruption of linear chronologies (Lal 92)[xvii]. However, while Currimbhoy's works discuss political and social issues of war, violence, race, and decolonization within the context of India[xviii], their thematic intersections with queer identity and sexuality remain unexplored. Mangai's theatre politics, on the other hand, has similarities to Girish Karnad's dramatic recuperation of ancient mythological and folk tales within an amalgamated framework of traditional and Western theatre conventions (Lal 197).[xix] Likewise, playwrights Saoli Mitra and B. Jayashree provide a successful mode of feminist intervention and questioning in theatre by reworking ancient Indian myths (Lal 173). However, unlike Mangai, the literary corpus of these playwrights simply recovers and recentres the marginalized voices; a true questioning and challenging of the cisnormative and heteronormative ideologies which frame society, through a foregrounding of queer identities and bodies, remains absent.

On the other hand, by locating the 'modern' within the context of alterity—through queer recentering by theatrical and textual representation as it functions in Mangai and Dattani's works—, my thesis also foregrounds the necessity for a sustained dialogue between the fields of postcolonial studies and queer studies. The lack of analysis of queerness within postcolonial discourse along with dearth of analysis of colonial structures which undergird much of queer studies impedes both discourses' aims of questioning normativity upon which Western hegemony is founded. Drawing upon Spivak's foundational feminist theory, I use the term 'subaltern' to signify the postcolonial voice that remains untranslatable within the generalized discourse; the intersectional queer lens I propose gives voice to the gender and sexually subaltern. In their specificity, the representations of postcolonial queer subjectivities in both the plays trouble universalizing models of queerness. Extending Altman's argument, I

study the two playwrights' portrayal of the multiple ways in which gender identity and sexuality intersect with different societal paradigms in India that don't necessarily fit into the globalized conception of queerness. I explore how 'queerness' exists in forms that lie beyond the scope of western and therefore, globalised notions of queerness. Through my research, I seek to challenge this perception of queerness as a 'foreign import' that is opposed to the traditional Hindu culture. At the same time, I also disagree with the classical history of 'queerness' in Indian discourse as it would simply lead to a problematization of modern queer desires. I undertake this investigation—informed of the relative biases of both theoretical positions which are indispensable for understanding global regulation of power—to address the neglect of multiple expressions and forms of Indian queerness.

5. Research Methodology

The study is based on a structured, qualitative analysis which is hypothesis oriented. The research methodology begins with a close reading and in-depth analysis of the primary sources of literature, i.e., the written scripts of the plays in question. Such a descriptive reading of plays enables a study of the aesthetics of language, dramatic conventions, as well as plot and character development to reveal how the playwrights navigate the dynamics of queer representations otherwise ignored or marginalized in mainstream discourses and narratives. This is supplemented by a contextual understanding of critical material about postcolonial concepts such as Benita Parry's reflections on its development as a discipline and as a critical position, Aijaz Ahmad's analysis of the dynamics of linguistic hegemony as they function in post-colonies, Aparna Dharwadker's arguments on postcolonial, national histories, as well as Gayatri Spivak's theorizations on 'subalternity'. For my exploration of the nuances of articulation and representation of queer identities and bodies in the postcolonial context, I borrow from Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of queer space, Amy Hughes' work on

'spectacle', and the scholarly theorizations of Brecht's theatrical practice of *Gestus* and study them in tandem with the works of Indian queer theorists such as Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, A Mangai, and Kanika Batra. To contextualize the Indian dramas within a global—as well as indigenous—postcolonial theatre discourse, I will look at the discursive approaches vis-à-vis dramatic writing, theatre and performance as locuses of change and sites of theory. Bruce King, John McRae, Jeremy Mortimer, Soyica Colbert, as well as Harry Elam's work on counter hegemonic theatre will provide the theoretical foundation for this research. Nandi Bhatia and Asha Chaudhuri are some of the Indian theatre critics whose histories of and arguments about modern Indian theatre will supplement my exploration of queer dramas.

6. Conclusion

The following two chapters unpack the possibility of queering the 'Indian' citizen and nation in two plays by Dattani and Mangai, thereby revealing the shared concerns of queer and postcolonial critique. The chapters highlight how the playwrights' representation of queer Indian identities and narratives neither partake in a globalized queer identity nor make recourse to a nativist rhetoric of precolonial authenticity under the guise of postcolonial nationalism. Consequently, their plays lead to an acceptance of queerness beyond binaries of 'foreign' and 'traditional', creating a counter narrative to the invisibility and disenfranchisement in the dominant discourses. In such an arrangement, queer and postcolonial analyses do not represent two distinct sites of inquiry; instead, they constitute a productive re-mapping of two established areas of academic scholarship and research. Such a re-mapping questions both their underlying biases and assumptions through an exploration of localized forms and expressions of gendered and sexual subalternity as articulated in Dattani and Mangai's 'modern' theatre. This thesis ultimately argues that queer representation in Indian, anglophone theatre and drama challenges the Western bias in global queer paradigms

while also questioning the absence of sexual and gender non-normativity in postcolonial and

national discourses. As such, it aims to articulate queer and postcolonial sites of intersectional

reading as truly destabilizing.

Chapter 1

Queering Language and Space

An analysis of Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

Dattani—an Indian, queer, professional dramatist—writes in English for primarily an urban, national as well as international, audience. His theatre is popularly known for pushing the boundaries of normativity by exploring unconventional issues of alternate sexuality and gender identity, incest, sexually transmitted diseases, religious tensions, and societal hypocrisy in post-independence India. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, a play written by Dattani in 1995, is amongst the first in modern, proscenium theatre to extend the concept of secularism—beyond its religious and cultural meaning—to encapsulate themes of queer identities and sexual orientations within the ambit of the much-celebrated diversity of the nation (Batra, "Queering the Subaltern" 100). Broadly, in this chapter, I will explore Dattani's representation of homosexuality—usually ignored, suppressed, or discriminated against in mainstream Indian society—in the play and study theatre as a site of recovering queerness from the margins within the national context. Queer refers to both alternate sexual orientations as well as non-normative modes of existence. Inclusivity and acceptance for the queer community in India are the ideological aims Dattani wishes to achieve through his theatre.

The dramatic text of *OAMNIM* portrays the number of ways in which Indian homosexuals choose to exist, communicate, form queer communities, and pursue same-sex relationships. I undertake a close, textual reading of the theatrical conventions and ideas that Dattani borrows from to flesh out the personalities of his characters, their motivations, as well as their friendships with each other to depict the sheer variety and complexity of the uniquely Indian experience of homosexuality in the postcolonial context.[xx] By examining the different

modes of communication employed by a group of queer characters, I analyse Dattani's successful implementation of the Brechtian concept of *Gestus*—supplementing his use of English—to articulate queer identity and desire. English with its colonial legacies— influenced by Victorian moralities dominant in British society of nineteenth century—and their heteronormative underpinnings is unable to articulate postcolonial Indian identities and expressions of sexual alterity. As an ideological institution, it produces and perpetuates the silence and absences around queerness in the nation; Dattani fleshes out his characters' inability to express or communicate their alternate identities and desires in contemporary urban society in the Western language. Borrowing from theatre scholars Sean Carney's ideas in *Brecht and Critical Theory* and Elin Diamond's views in *Unmaking Mimesis*, I study Dattani's use of *gestus* as a political and aesthetic supplement for filling in the gaps within anglophone verbal and linguistic discourses while representing queer expressions on stage where it had previously been ignored. *Gestus*, in this thesis, becomes a reference to both the dominant understanding of it as specific, physical gesticulations of characters on stage and to the overall interrogative politics of socially conditioned behaviours of postcolonial, queer subjects (as portrayed by Dattani) in their entirety. I suggest that Dattani's '*gestic*' theatre becomes a site of destabilization not only to the dominant ideology of heteronormativity but also foregrounds a new mode of articulating the nuances of Indian homosexual desire and identity. The central argument posits that Dattani's theatre communication—understood only by the queer community—contributes to the creation of an alternate queer space of acceptance, inclusivity, and safety. In Dattani's play, queer space, as theorized by Halberstam, comes to encompass alternate forms of relationships, alliances, language, and subcultural practices dedicated to capturing this eccentric mode of being. I have taken up Halberstam's call to examine late 20th century literature within the framework of 'queer space' to critically explore the social and cultural visibility granted to Indian experiences of

queerness and subaltern spaces in Dattani's play. In the larger context, this chapter is an examination of Dattani's queer representation in theatre as not only an interrogation of the urban—upper and middle-class—Indian milieu's perceptions but also as an interruption to the predominantly homophobic national and postcolonial discourses; performance becomes a site for recognizing and foregrounding queer agency.

1.   Dattani's postcolonial, anglophone theatre

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (or *OAMNIM* as it shall be referred to henceforth) is an English language play that resembles a "sitcom like parody" (Chaudhuri, "The 'Invisible' Issues" 50) divided into three acts with complex characters who represent the varied faces of homosexuality in India. It tells the story of Kamlesh, a queer fashion designer living in Mumbai and his love affairs with other men. The main plot follows the events of one evening when Kamlesh invites his community of queer friends over to his apartment to talk about his suffering and pain after separating from his partner, Prakash. Their conversation continues until it is interrupted by the arrival of Kamlesh's sister, Kiran and her new fiancé, Ed who everyone is shocked to discover is no other than Kamlesh's old flame, Prakash. The interactions of this larger group lead to a build-up of dramatic tension until the truth about Ed/Prakash's sexual orientation is revealed to Kiran during the climax; she ultimately ends up breaking her engagement.

Writing in English was a bold and unconventional choice for popular theatre in the 1990s for Dattani, as Nandi Bhatia notes in the introduction to *Modern Indian Theatre*. His reflections upon the issue of the niche nature of anglophone theatre reveal that English—as the language of the colonial masters which was accessible only to a small percentage of upper class and caste, educated Indians—was not spoken or understood by most of the Indian population. As such, it was not the most successful form of communication within the context

of the popular form of theatrical entertainment (Bhatia 10). Theatre critics such as Asha Chaudhuri have noted how little influence Mahesh Dattani's primary and secondary education—in institutions where English was the primary mode of instruction for a Western curriculum—had on his choice of language while producing his own creative work. Instead, it was his background in theatre which prompted him to write and produce anglophone drama in the Indian context. Born in a Gujarati family, the playwright has spent the majority of his life in the southern metropolis of Bangalore in India. He was introduced to theatre early in life and grew up watching Gujarati and Kannada plays (Chaudhuri, "Introduction" 16). While working as a copywriter or helping with the family business as a young adult during the early 1980s, Dattani pursued his passion in theatre by joining the Bangalore Theatre Group. It was here that he was introduced to a variety of dramatic traditions within the Western oeuvre— names such as Neil Simon, Sartre, Euripides and Woody Allen (De). His experience with his own theatre company Playpen (established 1984) led to the exposure to anglophone translations of Indian playwrights' works—such as Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence* and *The Court Is in Session*, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq,* and Badal Sircar's *Baki Itihaas.* He found these translations to be lacking because of their incapacity to bring about the same socio-cultural impact as they did in their original language (De). His political voice emerged due to his interactions with theatre—as a site of performance and as a genre. Dattani articulates in his interview with Erin B. Mee (August 1996), "What's interesting to me ….is that I was attracted to the form first, and then I discovered my content. My own political stand came because I started doing theatre, not because I had something political to say and I used theatre as a platform—just the reverse" (Mee 20).

Even though English may have rung false on Indian stages during the 20th century, in the following decades of increasing globalization and consequent growth of English usage, the situation has changed. Dattani's anglophone theatre—interspersed liberally with Hindi

dialogues—has now become a commercial and literary success spawning multiple highly-acclaimed and popular theatre productions, radio-plays, cinematic pieces, and books.[xxi] The text of *OAMNIM* has also been adapted into a movie called *Mango Souffle* (2002), written and directed by Dattani himself. Marking Dattani's directorial debut (he went on to direct several movies, some based on his plays), the movie was billed as "Indian cinema's first serious treatment of male homosexuality" (Harvey). The continuing popularity of Dattani's theatre in the 21st century—whether in terms of critical recognition or in terms of public outreach—is undeniable. In her *Man's World* magazine article, Aditi De calls Dattani "the definitive voice of modern urban India" and labels him "the country's most lauded contemporary playwright in English" (De). Theatre critics and commentators— notably John McRae in his introduction to Dattani's collected volume *Final Solutions and Other Plays*— compare the Indian playwright to literary personalities such as Ibsen and Chekhov for his unique ability to portray nuanced experiences of the Indian subject within a universally relatable framework. Against this backdrop of cultural influence and impact, it becomes imperative to explore the social dynamics of Dattani's identity politics as employed in his English-language works of the 1980s and 1990s. Especially, since Dattani himself recognized the limited reach and appeal his theatre would have in Indian society when recognized and spoken exclusively within frameworks of 'anglophone' drama.[xxii]

Dattani's culturally conscious usage of Indian-English—a form of the colonial language that has been appropriated by the 21st century, educated, urban milieu to express themselves—enables him to articulate the complexities of a modern, postcolonial identity in his plays while challenging what it means to be 'authentically' Indian in the global context.[xxiii] He asserts:

> I would say, first of all, what in your opinion is Indian? I have lived all my life in
> India, I have learned the English language in India, and I have learned it from Indians,

so the way I speak the English language is Indian. I am Indian: this is my time, and

this is my place, and I'm reflecting that in my work, and that makes it Indian. (Mee

24)

English, he claims, allows him to encapsulate the experience of the contemporary urban

milieu; he finds the non-English, traditionalist theatre inspired by classical conventions—held

in high-acclaim and funded better by the Western world—to be unrelatable in the 21st

century. His plays portray the newly developed perspective of the middle class residing in

centers of State power post-independence; fluent in the language of the colonial masters that

they appropriate and wield to articulate their subjugated position. McRae comments,

"…Dattani has created images, characters, and plots which reverberate with the reality of

India today. They use… Indian English and Indian social problems…. This is theatre at the

cutting edge, holding the mirror up to the society it depicts, showing the form and pressure of

the time" ("An Introduction" 11). The Indian subject, as represented in Dattani's theatre, uses

English to speak back to the 'empire' which in this context is the colonial legacy of

homophobic ideology which continues to dominate and shape national discourses and

spaces.[xxiv]

English, he says, lets him—and citizens of contemporary, urban India—discuss issues

and challenges in society which are confrontational in nature, in so far as they do not fit the

image of the nation with 'right' values and moralities being peddled by conservative voices

within the country. He is aware and outspoken of his own queer positionality and draws upon

his experiences of alterity to represent reality (Chaudhuri, "The 'Invisible' Issues" 48).

Dattani's plays address stigmatized issues surrounding gender and sexual minorities and how

these communities are denied their claims of political, legal, and social recognition.[xxv] A few

of his plays, such as *Where There's a Will* (1988) and *Dance like a Man (1989)* critically

examine patriarchal codes and conceptions of masculinity. *Do the Needful* (written sometime

between 1993-98) and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998) explore themes of alternate gender and sexual identities like *OAMNIM* while *Thirty Days in September (2001)* engages with the reality of incest. Bruce King, one of the earliest commentators on postcolonial drama, argues that Indian playwrights such as Dattani provide a critique of conservative nostalgia politics with their roots in Hindutva paradigms that marginalize queerness as a foreign import meant to "corrupt the 'dharmic' structures of society as well as its past of moral superiority and purity" (16).

His representation of homosexual individuals and queer agency in *OAMNIM*—the nuances of their fears, anxieties and desires, their friendships, their entire way of existence in India—counter mainstream taboos and stereotypes, pushing the boundaries of what is considered normative and 'modern' in Indian theatre. The play challenges the societal marginalization of alternate identities pushed to the peripheries of society. Kanika Batra, in her work "Queering the Subaltern", reads Dattani's theatre as a primary contributor to the politicization of gender and sexuality in Indian discourses of the late 20th century before the discussion gained urgency in the mainstream (92). While contextualizing his work, she notes, "In postcolonial India, subaltern is most often understood as corresponding to the overly generalized categories 'women', 'lower castes', and recently 'lower-caste women', but often ignored and misunderstood if marked by shifting gender affiliations and alternative sexual preferences" (94). In opposition to this, Dattani's plays complicate the subaltern categories that form the basis of third wave feminist politics in India, especially the reluctant acceptance and recognition of alternate expressions of sexuality. The use of English is intrinsic to the politics of his plays which try to recover and resignify these categories while portraying the 'presenteness' of the Indian, modern, postcolonial experience.[xxvi] As such, his language itself is marked by gender and sexual alterity as discussed in the next section.

Just like Dattani's ideological concerns influence his choice of language, so too do they impact the form and aesthetics of his theatre. In choosing to portray the marginalization of queerness in India, Dattani deliberately challenges the normative ideologies of urban society that he himself is a part of. It is then, no huge surprise, that the form and content of Dattani's plays—which address a proletariat population with the hope of acting as a pedagogic tool in cultivating practical attitudes and behavior of critical understanding "…towards changing the world" (Brecht 57)—borrow from Brechtian aesthetics of the non-naturalistic, Epic theatre. I will explore how Dattani successfully uses the Brechtian conceptualization of *Gestus* to supplement his use of English in the facilitation of queer communication in his play *OAMNIM.* Such a non-naturalistic form of his plays defines and affirms the postcolonial identity of his plays—in the face of continuing legacies of economic, political, and cultural subjugation—free from the narratives of both, the colonial history as well as the rhetoric of a nostalgic, pure past.[xxvii]

2. *Gestic* theatre and Indian, queer representation

Inclusion and acceptance of the queer community in India requires a critical discourse within the socio-cultural national imagination where indigenous queerness has been recognized and integrated. Dattani's theatre not just anticipates but rather contributes to this vision.[xxviii] Such recognition and integration of alterity requires a language for its expression and for social understanding. Dattani's use of English in his play *OAMNIM* functions on two levels—it is not only an appropriation of the colonizer's language to represent the postcolonial subjectivity but it is simultaneously an exploration of how an uncritical, unquestioned use of English is incapable of capturing the nuances of the uniquely Indian experience of being queer. Through his other anglophone texts too, Dattani often foregrounds the limitations of western categories and colonial language to describe or articulate same-sex

relations and desire in India. For instance, his radio-play commissioned by BBC to commemorate 50 years of Indian independence—*Seven Steps Around the Fire*—explores the unique experience of violence, criminalization, and general discrimination of the Hijra community. The Hijras of India—referring to communities of transgender, intersex individuals, and eunuchs—are unlike any queer group in the western context. They are bound together not only by their alternate sexual identities but also their traditional occupations as ritualistic performers and prostitutes (and the subsequent caste positionality) as portrayed in the play. Ruth Vanita's work—"Dosti and Tamanna"—on same-sex love and the Hijra community in Hindi cinema provides similar commentary on the narrowness of the Western feminist and queer discourses to understand or articulate the particularities of the alternately gendered experience in India.[xxix]

For my analysis of *OAMNIM* in particular though, I wish to highlight Rohit Dasgupta's commentary on the heteronormative underpinnings in the postcolonial use of English to articulate Indian experiences as seen in his review of Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire* (1996). The movie became famous as one of the earliest and most controversial cinematic portrayals of lesbianism in India, condemned by conservative intelligentsia and popular audiences alike. Dasgupta writes:

> In the film Sita, remarks to her lover Radha, 'There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other.' Whilst Mehta does not provide a clue as to which language she is referring, her intentions are explicit—to disown English as an Indian language and to show that queer sexuality is not visible within the culture of India, so much so that it does not even have a name! (Dasgupta 651)

Dattani similarly uses English which, though opposed to Mehta's complete disavowal of it, foregrounds the heteronormative silences in the unquestioned use of the Western language, its categories, and its underlying assumptions.

As explored in the Introduction to the thesis, English was first introduced by British education reformer, Thomas Macaulay in India during the nineteenth century to wield control over a linguistically heterogenous population by creating a class of educated Indians, English in taste and thoughts. It is important to note here that it was Macaulay himself who also introduced the first homophobic law in India, the anti-sodomy law of 1861 (Dasgupta 662). Dasgupta explores how literature in colonial India was censored for its depictions of homoeroticism and attacked as 'filthy' leading to expurgation through legal and educational reforms. He argues that the "fanatical" Victorian campaigns of "purity" in nineteenth century Britain translated into such criminalization and marginalization of queerness even beyond literature in social imagination as well as the political and legal discourses (660).[xxx] Both the introduction of English and legal reforms such as the anti-sodomy law were structural steps taken by the Britishers to introduce Victorian sensibilities and implement its accompanying moralities of sexual control and regulation in the Indian colony. As such, English as an ideological structure falls short when it comes to the expression and articulation of Indian alterity since it's still reflective of such homophobic, colonial sentiments even today.

I borrow from academic and theatre scholar, Sean Carney's reflections on language to read it as an ideological structure or "rhetoric" that determines the "symbolic order into the human psyche" (11). He locates language's phenomenological activity to be the production and propagation of ideology as recognized in Marxist thought. While reflecting on the Lacanian theory of language as a mode of communication and expression through the use of visual, linguistic 'signifiers', Carney comments, "Structuralism argues that our psyches are fundamentally shaped around linguistic activity; the consequences of this mark of the signifier on human thought" (10). Within the Indian context then, the structures of Victorian homophobia and sexual regulation as embedded in the absences and failings of Western signification and English—when it comes to the articulation of queerness—contribute to the

creation and maintenance of normative ideological legacies. Carney rightly suggests, "It is the function of ideology…to present itself to the human mind as unmediated, the bare 'common sense' facts, transparent and concealing nothing" (10). Heterosexuality, I suggest, presents itself as normalized ideology through the postcolonial use of English which remains unable to articulate sexual alterity. English, even now, remains intertwined with the Victorian, colonial systems of control and regulation which framed homoerotic love as "unnatural" (Dasgupta 662); there was no need for naturalized western signifiers to identify and articulate Indian alterity. The very existence of queer sexuality in India is distorted and made invisible through its continued use while the homophobic silences and absences remain unquestioned. This idea of queer erasure is also an elaboration upon the Foucauldian understanding of language as elaborated in the Introduction to this thesis. The uncritical use of English is inherently reflective of Western presumptions of heteronormativity that undergird contemporary global and national discourses—in academia, theatre, literature, as well as popular imagination—founded upon colonial systems of knowledge and understanding. As such, a simplistic use of the language is unable to articulate or communicate the traditional Indian expressions of queerness as opposed to the global understanding.

Dattani's play, *OAMNIM,* envisages performance as a site where queer concerns can be delineated by foregrounding linguistic absence in the anglophone articulation of Indian homosexuality and the queer experience. The play shows that homosexuals are left with two options: either the anxiety of being misunderstood—by their partner as well as society—due to the lack of a language of expression or to leave themselves unexpressed. It is through his use of *Gestus* or *Verfremdung* (the German name*)*—a theatre technique that emphasizes a combination of physical gestures and verbal communication—that Dattani reveals the

frustrations of communicating homosexuality in a societal structure where heterosexuality has been normalized.

The queer group of Kamlesh's friends consists of upper class, urban individuals living in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai who fall back upon the medium of their education, i.e., English, as their primary language of talking with each other. While sharing his grief with them, Kamlesh tries to find words to communicate the feeling of experiencing a 'void' when his partner, Ed/Prakash, left him. His frustration at his own inability to verbally articulate his pain and suffering is obvious through his dialogue with Sharad, a flamboyant personality who is also Kamlesh's ex-partner.

> SHARAD. I mean, oh no, you don't change the subject now.
>
> KAMLESH. *(Going through his CDs)* I am going to play some music that I like.
>
> SHARAD. Oh, come on! You have to talk about him!
>
> KAMLESH. I am sick and tired of your Hindi movie kitsch.
>
> SHARAD. Throw up, man!
>
> KAMLESH. Where's that Chopin album?
>
> SHARAD. You've got to throw up and get it all out.
>
> KAMLESH. *(Losing control for a moment)* I can't! I tried! I can't! (*Regains his composure as quickly as he lost it*) Why don't you take back what you bring in. (gives him a pile of cassettes). (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 55)

Unable to give voice to and deal with his feelings of anger and resentment, Kamlesh confesses to growing distant from all his family and friends. At his wit's end and self-isolated in his pain, he had sought professional help from a psychiatrist to deal with his feelings. Upon revealing this to Sharad, the response he gets is, "Why didn't you *tell me*? I would have *talked you out* of it!" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 69, emphasis added). In a heterosexual relationship, being 'talked out' of his pain would have been a possibility for Kamlesh—he would have been able to find the

words to express his feelings for another man and his family/friends would have had access to the language required to understand and comfort him. Carney comments that such psychological alienation of the human subject from society is often a result of the introduction of hegemonic ideology through language which has no space for alternate expression and its understanding (11). Kamlesh's estrangement from his family, and the society at large, is fleshed out through the lenses of such linguistic heteronormativity and its inherent silences around queer expression.

Kamlesh's experience with seeking psychological therapy further shows how verbal communication, even when it occurs in mainstream society, is rendered problematically homophobic and traumatizing. Kamlesh confesses that his "straight homophobic psychiatrist" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 69) tried to counsel him into seeking the harmful aversion therapy and behavioral modification programs. The psychiatrist asserted that reorienting himself through medication was the only way available to Kamlesh to live a happy life since "it is impossible to change society" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 69). Such counselling leaves Kamlesh deeply troubled and wishing that he was not gay to begin with. Another character, alienated from his country itself, is Ranjit. Ranjit is "the coconut" of this queer group, teasingly called so for being "brown on the outside and white on the inside" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 71). Unable to find the language to articulate his sexual alterity, he had chosen the easy way out—according to his friends—in escaping India to start a new life in a foreign country.

Similarly, Bunny—a traditional, closeted homosexual who hides his identity behind the façade of a heterosexual marriage—is unable to communicate his sexual orientation to his family. His overtly 'macho' personality is an attempt to hide his homosexuality, often associated with effeminate characteristics. Bunny's idea of leading an ordinary life is through deceit and deception. It is the only choice which allowed him to attain his celebrity stardom—he is a popular television star and plays the role of an "ideal husband and father"

(Dattani, *OAMNIM* 74) in an Indian family soap opera. Being openly queer—or a "politically correct gay" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 70) would have meant flouting the conventional molds created for public figures, leading to not only ostracization in one's profession but also social rejection at large. On the surface, the lack of emotional fulfillment of this lifestyle choice does not bother Bunny—he believes that a side effect of queer survival in India is complete disregard for emotional and psychological well-being. Dattani, however, challenges such a perspective by revealing Bunny's inner turmoil when he exclaims, "What about me? I exist too, you know! Why doesn't anyone *ask me* whether I am happy or not?" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 84, emphasis added) Bunny's anxiety and frustrations are a result of the double-life of impersonation that he leads but also his inability to express himself in a language where he can be understood and accepted by society. Such heteronormative ideological failings of language construct the human subjectivity of the postcolonial, Indian queer as "split or divided in the core" (Carney 11) as represented in Bunny's self-repressed, anguished character. It becomes clear from Dattani's text that Kamlesh and Bunny's psychological suffering is not an exception amongst the queer community of India, most of whom are unable to express themselves. They are either convinced or forced into putting on masks of 'normalcy' in lieu of acceptance and understanding. Thus, Dattani's play reveals how colonial legacies of heteronormativity have been internalized in the modern use of English—the play's language circumscribes what can't be said i.e., expressions of queer alterity. This contributes to the lack of discursive development around indigenous queerness within the nation as well as globally.

In the absence of a conventional mode of communication, Dattani's homosexual characters find various ways of articulating themselves through *gestus*. Dattani uses Brechtian theatre as an ideological and socio-cultural institution to fill in the discursive gaps where queerness has linguistically remained silent or marginalized before. Weber reads

'*gestus*' as one of the paradigmatic pillars of Brecht's Epic theatre. He defines it as "…the total process, the "ensemble" of all physical behaviour the actor displays when showing as a "character" on stage by way of his/her social interactions" (41). *Gestus* includes all bodily movements and gestures, the face and its mimetic expressions, the voice and its sound and inflections, speech with its patterns and rhythms, the costume, the makeup, and everything the actor employs to complete the image of the role they are portraying. The main function of *gestus* is to convey a social and cultural position through the character's status and function in society. It yields an image of socially conditioned behaviour that in turn throws light on the condition of society.

Carney's arguments on language too are used to frame his understanding of the Brechtian politics of *gestus* in theatre. He argues that "any single moment of *Verfremdung* or *gestus* is in isolation, less important than are Brecht's plays, which, as aesthetic objects, function as *Verfremdungseffekte* or as sites of *gestus*" (10). Carney criticizes the ubiquitous theory and understanding of *gestus* today that "...is often figured through isolated theatrical gestures and techniques" and claims that it renders Brecht's theatre and its politics ineffective and obsolete (14). He instead argues for the recognition of "*gestic*" theatre as a whole that carries ideological potential to both represent ideology and subvert it. Borrowing from Marxist deconstructive readings, Carney comments, "The ultimate function of Brecht's aesthetic is to work upon ideology, whether thought or embodied, and through representation, to estrange or disturb the ideological, to allow us to see it *as* ideological" (9). Dattani aims to do something similar: during our personal correspondence in 2023, he remarked that his aim in using such "Brechtian" representation was to engender a "psychological distancing" in the audience from their heteropatriarchal realities by providing a queer frame of reference on stage that "didn't suck you in emotionally."

Dattani's use of *gestus* in *OAMNIM* emerges as both an aesthetic category—as seen in physical, embodied gestures—as well as a politically category—inherent in the socially conditioned behaviour of characters in general—to locate his play as ideologically destabilizing to hegemonic linguistic and discursive heteronormativity. The language of the play, in such a variegated interaction with *gestus*, seeks to "produce a spectator/reader who is not interpellated into ideology but is passionately and pleasurably engaged in observation and analysis" (Diamond 44). Dattani's play hopes for a response that actively interrogates the ideological homophobic silences and absences that propagate through uncritical articulation and communication in English. McRae, while commenting on the play's politics of performance, notes, "Very few dramatists are able to give this sense of a whole society touching the participants in the onstage drama—it recalls Ibsen at his social best" ("A Note" 46). Indeed, society's normative ideology infringes on Dattani's theatrical world and moulds not only all that can be—and has been—articulated and represented in the play but also all that has been purposefully kept silent or suppressed.

In *OAMNIM*, Kamlesh stoops down in front of the guard—who he has sex with—to tie his shoelaces.

KAMLESH. Jaldi aana.

The guard makes to leave

Ek minute.

The guard stops. Kamlesh goes to him.

Aapki shoelace…

Kamlesh kneels before him. He is about to tie the guard's shoelace. The guard moves away quickly.

GUARD. *(aghast)* Yeh aap kya kar rahen hain, saab? Ji, main kar loonga.

> *The guard moves away and is about to put his foot on a stool, but decides against it. He looks around, foot in the air, and decides to attempt tying his shoelace as he is.*

KAMLESH. *(rushing to him)* Let me do that for you. Please…

GUARD. *(resisting feebly)* Rehne do, sir. Please….men kar loonga apni lace.

> *Kamlesh ignores the guard's plea and places his foot on his thigh. He looks up at him while he slowly ties his laces. The guard looks at him. Kamlesh moves to the stereo. The guard is touched by this gesture and isn't quite sure whether he ought to leave. (*Dattani, *OAMNIM 50-51)*

The act of bending down—with all the sexual connotations that the position itself suggests—can be read as a *gestus* that compensates for Kamlesh's inability to convey his homosexual desire and concern for the guard through words. Intimacy in this dialogue is expressed through the action of tying the other's shoelaces, portrayed bodily by the actor. Furthermore, the differences in the physical levels of their respective positions in this moment—the guard towering over Kamlesh who is literally kneeling in front of him to tie his shoelaces—are reflective of a reversal of class hierarchies as embedded in their casual/social relationship. Kamlesh is the owner of an apartment in the building where the guard performs menial labor. By bowing down in front of the guard, Kamlesh extends the intimacy of their 'taboo' or 'disruptive' sexual relationship beyond his bedroom, to the slightly more public space of the living room. The guard's uncomfortable awkwardness in this moment is representative of not only the larger society's perception of such openly homoerotic displays between two men but also the queer disruption of dominant class hierarchy. At the same time, the fact that the guard is at Kamlesh's disposal to provide sexual services whenever needed in return for payment highlights how indigenous sexual alterity continues to exist as a lucrative trade for the petty working-class on the margins of contemporary, capitalist Indian society. Sexual

labor, even non-normative, is obtainable for money to the upper, elite class from the proletariat masses in urban spaces, otherwise dominantly marked by queerphobia. The potential of such a *gestus,* I argue*,* is exploited by Dattani to not only articulate both the homosexual characters' desires and relationship with each other but also to depict such homosexual interactions within the intersecting framework of queerness and class-consciousness unique to India. Such dynamic, intersectional energy of Brecht's theatre is particularly noted by theatre scholar Elin Diamond while developing her theory of *gestic* feminist criticism. She remarks:

> The gestic moment in a sense explains the play, but it also exceeds the play, opening it to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production. Brecht says that the scene of the *gestus* 'should be played as a piece of history' (86) and Pavis elaborates: *Gestus* makes visible (alienates) 'the class behind the individual, the critique behind the naïve object, the commentary behind the affirmation…[It] gives us the key to the relationship between the play being performed and the public… '
> (Diamond 53)

Reading Diamond's concerns into Dattani's play foregrounds how this *gestic* scene between Kamlesh and the guard signifies a moment of theoretical insight into the complexities of sexual identities as they function not only in the play's 'fable' but also in Indian culture, which the play—at the moment of reception—is dialogically reflecting and shaping.

Another moment exploiting the physicality of such visual representation as *gestus* comes later on in the play. Sharad gestures towards Kamlesh's unvoiced pain of losing his previous partner, Ed/Prakash, by playacting stereotypical actions that convey this emotion within the heteronormative, Indian context.

SHARAD. *(with a drunken slur à la Meena Kumari)* Prakash! *(Rubs off his sindoor)*

Prakaash! *(Breaks his bangles on the wall.)* Prakaaaaash! *(Slides down the wall,*

sobbing uncontrollably). (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 57)

Dattani's directions between the dialogues highlight how Sharad mimics the 'breaking of

bangles' as well as 'rubbing off of *sindoor'* (a red powder applied to the top of a female's head

to depict her married status)—symbolic gestures that depict the loss of a partner, especially a

male partner by a female individual in a heterosexual relationship. In this *gestic* performance,

the actor playing Sharad "alienates rather than impersonates" the character of a heart-broken,

heterosexual lover thus, revealing the "fable" of normative ideology through his queered

demonstrations (Diamond 45). Diamond further comments that "...by alienating (not simply

rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender

[and sexuality] is exposed and thrown back to the spectator" (46). Weber traces the influence

of notable performers such as Charlie Chaplin and Karl Valentin on Brecht's formulation of

gestus and notes two important aspects: it needs to be memorable or quotable to be successful

on stage (43). Whether it be Sharad's ostentation or Kamlesh's intensity, Dattani successfully

wields *gestus* to leave a lasting impression of his characters' homoerotic expressions on his

audience.[xxxi]

Furthermore, the comprehensibility of such gestural conversation remains confined to

the homosexual community. In *OAMNIM*, Kamlesh reiterates multiple times his dependence

on his non-biological, queer family in times of crisis (67). He confesses to moving away from

Bangalore, away from his family who could not understand him, to Mumbai where he sought

help from his friends.

KAMLESH. Please! I am afraid! I need your help! I need you all. I am afraid.

Frightened…. For the first time in my life, I wished I wasn't gay. (Dattani, *OAMNIM*

68-69)

Kamlesh's queer community form his pillars of strength and support—they are his greatest confidants. He believes their shared experience of being queer in India allows them to communicate, understand, and empathize with each other; something that his 'normal' family just cannot. Similarly, Bunny might remain a mystery for his family but his queer friends understand him and are able to read between the lines to decode what he means. This is clear through the conversation between the group of friends when they discuss their reasons for remaining closeted or hiding their identities by escaping from the country (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 88-89). Deepali, the only lesbian in the group, acknowledges the root cause of 'fear' defining and guiding Bunny's actions—she notes that it is not the shame over being homosexual itself but rather the fear of being ostracized that motivates Bunny to hide himself in a heterosexual marriage. Bunny's extreme psychological turmoil is made apparent in an emotional monologue later on in the play when he confesses to being homosexual for the first time to someone outside his group of friends.

> BUNNY. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me—the real me—
> are present here in this room… I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I
> do not exist in either. I am sorry, Kiran, I lied to you as I have lied to the rest of the
> world… I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now…
> Everyone believes me to be the model middle-class Indian man… I believed in it
> myself. I lied—to myself first. And I continue to lie to millions of people every week
> on Thursday nights. There's no such person…" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 102-103)

Bunny's character, especially as reflected through everything that was said in this monologue—and also all the remained unspoken for so long—is a prime example of Dattani's *gestic* theatre. *Gestic* theatre in Brecht's theorization is "not supposed to mean gesticulation; it is not a matter of explanation or emphatic movement of the hands, but of overall attitudes. A language (and theatre) is *gestic* when it is grounded in a *gestus* and conveys particular

attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men" (104). In a classic deconstructionist

move, Carney and Diamond further suggest that hegemonic ideology as embedded in

language undoes itself as *gestus* interacts with it during the meaning-making processes on

stage through the depiction of characters and their overall behavior or stance. Bunny's

monologue is an ideologically destabilizing performance that conveys the failings of

dominant heteronormativity and its queer silences as embedded in language. Bunny's actions,

sentences, and expressions in this moment communicate his sense of not 'truly' existing at all.

It is a result of the public denial of his homosexual identity. His socially conditioned behavior

and speech have been founded upon a negation of his sexual orientation and Self revealed in

this moment of 'coming-out' as his façade of heterosexuality crumbles. Whatever Bunny was

not able to do or express throughout his life is contained in this operation of the *gestic* theatre

that Carney identifies as a dialectical strategy of representing a "constellation of social

attitudes" encapsulated in the phrase, "Not…But" (29). The monologue can be summarized as

Bunny confessing that he is 'not' homosexual only for the rest of society…. 'but' he actually

is. In Diamond's words, "The audience is invited to look beyond representation—beyond

what is authoritatively put into view" through Bunny's performance in this moment "to the

possibilities of as yet unarticulated motives, actions, or judgments" (49). Thus, using English

as seen in this monologue, Dattani highlights the queer absences constitutive of the

language's heteronormative, postcolonial structure. Within the contemporary Indian context,

these gaps center predominantly around non-normative sexual orientations, identities, and

experiences. In his friends, Bunny found the only acceptance of exactly who he was—even

when he continued denying his own identity in public. It is through such portrayals of

communication that Dattani devises the social language of *gestus*—non-exclusionary and

non-abusive in nature—which is understood only within the alternate communities of

sexuality.

Through such scenes and conversations, Dattani foregrounds a new mode of articulating Indian sexual alterity which would have otherwise remained invisible,[xxxii]thereby supplementing language in postcolonial anglophone contexts. This is an extension of Carney's ideas as he argues for the recognition of *gestus* as "an entire theory of socialization, subject formation and the ongoing judgement of reality, tied to the ability of the human subject to be estranged from given or ideological thinking" (15). Furthermore, Dattani's play as a site of *gestus* invites speculation, provokes critical thinking, and results in a specific conclusion which then activates the audience to form a particular opinion or attitude which influences their future behaviour in opposition to societal expectations. Weber notes that through the deployment of *Gestus*, Brecht "…demanded a performance that offered the character's behaviour to critical inspection by his audience…. the *Gestus* of the performance was to take sides in the social struggles of our age" (44-46). Dattani's plays provide mainstream society a glimpse into the queer world—through a representation of queer characters, their lives, and emotional truths by facilitating the expression and communication of their identities and thoughts on stage—leading to a better understanding and awareness of same-sex desire and suffering amongst the masses. *Gestic* theatre is thus, part of a larger political process that does not simply depict the ideological estrangement of the queer subject but instead "proceeds on a dialectical path to a new level of greater understanding" (Carney 18) and acceptance of queerness amongst the masses.

The frustrations, suffering, and insecurities of his queer characters are naturalized through relatability; the audience is allowed to empathize with the queer character's pain of separation, betrayal, one-sided love, and the emotional turmoil of hiding their true Self amongst other things. By inviting them into the world inhabited by unhesitant expressions of queerness and its complete acceptance in all shapes and forms, Dattani reverses the convention. Instead of queer communication and community being 'othered', the interactions

between Kamlesh's group are represented as 'ordinary' and normal—queerness is recovered from its stigmatized position of abjection and 'abnormality'. Such naturalized theatrical visibility of queer expression is the first step in the Brechtian goal of 'changing the world' and liberating individuals marked by gendered and sexual alterity in India. Indeed, Carney too suggests that the principal function of *gestic* theatre is to displace or decentre the "fundamental material of theatrical representation, which is the opinions and the attitudes of men or ideology" (17). As such, Dattani's representation of postcolonial expression marked by sexual alterity is an interruption of hegemonic discourses on language and theatre.

3. *OAMNIM* **and the creation of Queer space**

Dattani's play*,* mirroring Jack Halberstam's theorizations in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, portrays queerness as a concept that threatens society not as a way of having sex but rather as a way of life itself (1). Borrowing from Foucault's ideas in "Friendship as a Way of Life", Halberstam argues that queer articulation, queer friendships, and their very existence within the bounds of 'normal' society create and maintain the boundaries of a queer space that comes to symbolize the 'menace' of homosexual life. Such queer spaces escape conventional definitions and are inhabited by individuals who don't conform to normative expectations and attitudes surrounding concepts of gender and sexuality. Dattani's representation of queer characters, communities, communication, and subcultures against the backdrop of a typical 20th century Indian metropolis shaped by heteropatriarchal ideologies is successful in producing and maintaining an alternative space through performance. It allows its participants, the actors as well as the audience, to believe that this way of life or existence can be imagined according to logics that lie outside the paradigmatic markers of a heterosexual life experience i.e., birth, marriage, reproduction, and

death. As such, queer spaces in theatre pose a challenge to the conception of the Indian nation as a heteronormative space of existence.[xxxiii]

In *OAMNIM*, the setting and use of stage space allow Dattani to physically delineate his imaginative queer space. McRae emphasizes, "Mahesh Dattani is always adventurous in his ways of using the theatrical space at his disposal: multiple levels, breaking the bounds of the proscenium, wondrously inventive use of lighting to give height, breadth, and depth. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, he reaches new heights of achievement" ("A Note" 45). Through playwright directions presented at the beginning of Act 1, Dattani divides the stage into three acting areas. The first level is a conventional staging of ordinary, everyday spaces: the interior of Kamlesh's apartment in a multi-storeyed building in an urban centre. This includes his living room as well as his bedroom. The second level comprises a completely non-realistic set that is black, empty, and expansive. Characters in this area are immediately suspended in a *shoonya* or void where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts and subconscious. The third level is the city outside with its vast skyline, with all its heat and sounds engulfing the private space of the apartment (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 49). Characters constantly move between the different levels, positions, and spaces depending on what the scene requires of them.

Dattani describes the living room as a mirror to its occupant's personality: "…a small flat, beautifully done up in 'ethnic chic' fashion…. The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline …The entire flat is almost too perfect to be real. Yet, it speaks a lot of its occupant, Kamlesh, and his attempt at creating a world where he can belong" (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 49). This is the primary physical space on stage where the majority of the dramatic action takes place. As Kamlesh's house, this space comes to represent his safe sanctuary where he can pursue his homosexual desires and relationships without any fear of public scrutiny. This is the space which was previously inhabited by Sharad—when he was in a relationship with

Kamlesh—as well as the multiple strange men, such as the guard, that Kamlesh confesses to having physical dalliances with. These same-sex relationships are either pursued for sexual pleasure, emotional fulfillment, or function as a psychological escape (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 69). Without the hegemonic notion of reproduction and a heteronormative family fuelling Kamlesh's life, spaces in his home—conventionally reserved for activities such as familial recreation, family eating, and child rearing—are queered, both metaphorically and literally.

Kamlesh's apartment also comes to represent a space of inclusivity and acceptance where his queer friends regularly meet to discuss their lives amongst other things. This is clear from Sharad's interaction with the guard.

SHARAD. To aise bolo na. Kya daaru bolnein mein sharam aati hai? (*Points to the bar*.) Wahan rakho.

The guard puts the bottles on the counter and removes the wrapping. Sharad observes him.

Yahan kuch bhi bolne mein ya karne mein sharam nahi rakhte.

GUARD. Ji

SHARAD. Hum log sab bahut besharam hain.

The guard laughs with embarrassment.

Tum bhi besharam ho jao. (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 60)

[Translation:

SHARAD. So, say that then. Does saying 'alcohol' make you feel ashamed? (*Points to the bar*.) Keep it there.

The guard puts the bottles on the counter and removes the wrapping. Sharad observes him.

Saying or doing anything should not make you feel ashamed here.

GUARD. Okay

SHARAD. We are all very shameless here.

> *The guard laughs with embarrassment.*

You also become shameless.][1]

This interaction highlights how within the confines of Kamlesh's apartment, his queer friends are free from the shame, guilt, and fear of being homosexual. Even Ranjit feels comfortable accepting and discussing his queer identity and lifestyle within this space. He reveals how twelve years ago, escaping India to start a new life in a foreign country—where he didn't have to choose between suffering through life as a "politically correct", openly queer individual or being closeted and betraying his own Self and desires—felt like the only option available to him. However, Ranjit does not view the privacy of Kamlesh's apartment as an extension of the restraints he experienced within the larger context of Indian society. Such interactions and portrayals contribute to the creation of Kamlesh's apartment as a safe space for queer individuals. The apartment as a queer space comes into being when queer individuals understand, appreciate, and seek out contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will towards each other (Halberstam 14). The challenge to Indian normativity comes through the social practices and alliances which exist in this space.

Even Dattani's use of *gestus* develops as a language and is assigned meaning only within the context of Kamlesh's living room. Case in point is the juxtaposition that Dattani foregrounds between the wedding celebration—occurring on the ground floor of Kamlesh's building—and the ritual that Sharad devises to help Kamlesh move on from the memories of Prakash.

SHARAD. Good. Now let's have a little ritual.

RANJIT. A ritual for God's sake!

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[1] All the translations have been done by the author of this thesis unless explicitly stated otherwise.

SHARAD. Why not? The whole heterosexual world is run by rituals! The wedding

downstairs will go on for days! (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 72)

Following this conversation, Kamlesh's friends urge him to tear up his last photograph with

Prakash and renounce all his ties with the past relationship. They direct him to throw the

pieces of the picture out of the window. This ritual by a queer individual—the act of tearing

up an ex-partner's photograph— "interrogates what we take as common sense" (Carney 18)

i.e., love and sexual desires, and their accompanying emotions can only exist between

heterosexual couples who require such physical practices to signify the beginnings or endings

of heteronormative relationships. Queer ritualistic performance such as this gains meaning

only within the space of Kamlesh's apartment as a reflection of heteronormative rituals. Its

meaning shifts and becomes unknowable to people existing outside the bounds of this space.

Halberstam refers to such rituals as "place-making practices...in which queer people

engage..." to bring "queer spaces" and "queer counterpublics" into existence (6). If weddings

symbolize the perpetuation of a reproductive, heteronormative society then queer *gestus* such

as the one suggested by Kamlesh's friends—an integral part of the Indian, queer subculture—

concretizes the validity of non-reproductive desires and feelings. As such, Dattani's portrayal

of actions such as the tearing of the photograph as well as the sounds of the wedding

"refamiliarizes our understanding of said object (or rituals) on a broader horizon of

comprehension" (Carney 18). This allows audiences to recognize and access queer practices

within queer spaces as an extension of ordinary, mainstream meanings in society. The

existence of queer individuals, their friendships, and their rituals in the play contribute to the

creation of Dattani's queer space.

Dattani imagines the queer space of the apartment in opposition to the normative

space of society i.e., the third level that exists outside Kamlesh's apartment. His stage

directions describe in vivid detail the mental or imaginative spaces of the city outside the

apartment window: the city skyline with its glittering lights, the intrusive sounds of the wedding celebration taking place below the apartment, the children, and the mobs that hound Bunny when he arrives. This world of the outside symbolized by the typical hot and humid weather of Mumbai is constantly infringing on the comfortably air-conditioned queer space of the apartment.

> RANJIT. Oh, some dreadful children down the corridor recognized Bunny uncle, and of course they want to chat with him. And there's a whole mob downstairs for some *shaadi*. They just wouldn't let Bunny go.
>
> SHARAD. I will leave the door open in case he fancies joining us.
>
> RANJIT. Just a crack, dear. Don't want all this lovely cool air contaminated by all the muck outside. (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 65-66)

Dattani draws parallels between these interruptions of normative society—their ritual performances as well as their symbols of reproductivity, i.e., children—in the apartment's world and the unbearable discomfort caused by the city's balmy conditions. Such mentions of constant infringement of the 'outside' heat upon the comfort 'inside' form a recurring part of the narrative. This allows Dattani to construct his bubble of queer space as a much more comfortable, inclusive, and accepting reflection of the outside. When defining 'queer space', Halberstam comments, "Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1). Symbols of these institutional values are a niggling, pressing presence impinging continuously and shaping the characters and spaces inside. The expectations and pressures of society are felt by each member of the group who react to it in different ways. Sharad chooses to flaunt his alterity, Bunny chooses to hide it, Ranjit chooses to escape it, and Ed/Prakash tries to change it. The dynamics of this interactive relationship between the space of Dattani's theatre and the outside society form the thematic core of the play. It brings into existence a queer space in

theatre which not only hosts a particular alternate way of life but also poses a challenge to the normative national spaces as explored next.

If the first and the third level of Dattani's theatre create and maintain a queer space on stage then the second level invites the audience to become participants in this process by providing them access to the queer characters' subconscious and relationships. It is Ed/Prakash's interiority which is explored the most within the 'void'; Dattani presents his convoluted insecurities and fears for the audience's speculation within this space. At the very beginning of Act 2—through a flashback to his first encounter with Kamlesh—the audience is introduced directly to Ed/Prakash's character. He is shown to be deeply troubled and an unstable alcoholic as he contemplates suicide and death while talking to a stranger he meets in a random park i.e., Kamlesh. The subsequent dialogue gives the audience the impression that Ed/Prakash's anxieties stem from his inability to come to terms with his queer identity and sexuality (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 81-82). He feels invisible and the consequent non-acceptance from the public is what contributes to his lack of confidence. Being seen and understood by Kamlesh in this moment of identity crisis is what enables him to come to grips with his reality and not pursue the thoughts of suicide any further. However, as the plot moves forward it becomes increasingly clear that Ed/Prakash continues to remain conflicted about his queerness. After separating from Kamlesh, he becomes a devout Christian and professes that his love for Kamlesh was the work of the devil (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 85). He claims to have been rid of the devil now and embraces his new-found heterosexuality leading to his current decision to marry Kiran. For Ed/Prakash, like Bunny, a complete rejection of his queer identity and sexuality seems like the only possible solution to leading a fairly 'normal' life in India.

ED. I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest.

(Dattani, *OAMNIM* 92)

ED. Look around you. Look outside. (*Goes to the window and flings it open*.) Look at

that wedding crowd! There are real men and women out there! You have to see them

to know what I mean. But you don't want to. You don't want to look at the world

outside this…this den of yours. All of you want to live in your own little bubble.

(Dattani, *OAMNIM* 99)

Ed/Prakash clearly believes that suppressing his queerness was the only way to become a

"real" man and be a part of the "real world" that exists outside the apartment—the only space

where he could find everlasting happiness. He also believes that sexuality and orientation is

an aspect of a person's Self that is changeable. Dattani leaves no stone unturned in fleshing

out the homophobic, patriarchal conditioning inherent to Ed/Prakash's actions and behavior.

He invites the audience into his character's mind and provides them ample access to the

difficulties of existing queerly in a society that has no space for individuals such as

Ed/Prakash. However, he quickly uncovers the hypocrisy, the absurdity of his pretense in the

following pages to complicate the audience's feelings of sympathy and compassion aroused

by his plight. When Kamlesh spontaneously confesses his love for Sharad in a subsequent

scene (Dattani, *OAMNIM* 101), Ed/Prakash is unable to hold on to his facade of

heterosexuality. Prompted by feelings of jealousy or insecurity, he confesses to Kamlesh on

the side that he only planned on marrying Kiran so that it would become much easier for

them to have an extra marital affair secretly without arousing suspicion (Dattani, *OAMNIM*

104). It becomes clear that Ed/Prakash was only using Kiran as a heterosexual placeholder to

make his life easier.

Dattani's masterful depiction of such ambiguously complex characters leave the

audience as uncomfortable participants in his queer space. They are both spectators judging

the deceitful and cowardly actions as well as implicated members of a society that victimized

Ed/Prakash and forced him into such a traumatic position in the first place. Jeremy Mortimer, in his introduction to the second volume of Dattani's plays, states, "Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead, he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions" (viii). On one hand, Dattani invites the audience to enjoy the normalized performance of queerness—as a way of life—on stage, even gives them access to the queer subconscious in the space of the theatre. At the same time, he forces his audience to critically reevaluate their own beliefs, attitudes, and expectations with their association to the perpetuation of national ideologies and a homophobic postcolonial discourse at the expense of alternate gender and sexual identities.[xxxiv] In his email to me in 2023, he notes, "Mainstream audiences found it too odd a play and weren't sure whether to laugh or not. Had it been a play where queer characters are the butt of homophobic jokes, yes, they feel they have permission to laugh." Drawing upon Novetzke's theorizations on performance and 'public', I read the popular circulation and consumption of Dattani's work endorsing homosexuality and its social acceptability as an important contributing factor to the construction of a counter-discourse—through audience reception—that provides material and emotional recognition to the experience of alternately marked sexual identities (Novetzke 261).

Borrowing from Partha Chatterjee's theorizations on 'political society' in "The Nation and its Fragments", Batra argues that after independence, India's nation space—as well as concepts of citizenship—were imagined in such a way that sexual difference was not considered a pertinent distinction ("Introduction" 7). The Indian notion of nationalism creates a subject position which marginalizes the queer citizen in contemporary society as discussed in the Introduction to the thesis. Dattani's modern, queer politics emerges in opposition to this—it highlights the socio-cultural relevance of gender and sexual difference in the

consideration of citizenship and ideas of nation-space which no longer resort to an authentic identity of past Indian purity. He recovers and provides center stage to the 'local' spaces of queerness which exist invisibly in pockets of urban Indian cities. One of the most important characteristics of queer space as theorized by Halberstam is the emphasis on the concept of the 'local'—as opposed to the national—inherent to queer space. They note, "…the 'local' for postmodern geographers [is] the debased term in the binary [with] their focus on the global . . . and even the universal is opposed to the local with its associations with the concrete, the specific, the narrow . . . and even the bodily" (22). It is the 'local' found in Dattani's alternate theatre politics—reflected in his representation of queer communities, communication, and space—which poses a challenge to the larger homophobic discourses by interrogating the normative expectations of a postcolonial nation and the identity categories it recognizes.

4. Conclusion

What makes Dattani's theatre unique beyond the overt representation of queerness during an era when these themes were either completely invisible or taboo is the tone of his plays. Neither does his dramatic voice preach or plead nor does it apologize or blame. Instead, it is a voice that dramatically recognizes and represents queerness by portraying the multiplicity of realities of homosexual experiences in India. Dattani's representation of the queer world is constructed as a mirror to normative society; it transgresses the expectations, beliefs, and ideologies which shape its socio-cultural institutions. While commenting on the thematic approach of Dattani's theatre, McRae notes, "…they are plays which embody many of the classic concerns of world drama…. Human relationships and the family unit have been at the heart of dramatic representation. Mahesh Dattani takes the family unit and the family setting…and fragments them…." ("An Introduction" 7). Indeed, *OAMNIM*'s narrative questions and deconstructs the heteropatriarchal framework of society by representing

queerness as just another way of living, always already present in India. I have read the depiction of Indian experiences of homosexuality in English through the lens of Brechtian *gestus* to argue that Dattani creates an alternate socio-cultural mode of expression and queer subculture in postcolonial India which are not conventionally recognized, accepted, articulated, or represented in mainstream urban society. Such a reading poses a challenge to the national discourses of India—including its unquestioned appropriation of the colonizer's language along with its queerphobic Victorian legacies—which seek to produce and perpetuate a hegemonic ideology rooted in heterosexual relationships and reproduction to control and regulate alterity. Ultimately, I have studied in this chapter how Dattani's theatre as seen in *OAMNIM* delineates geographies and languages of resistance that destabilize the dominant ideological gestalt as Indian queers use space and express themselves in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility. The queer space which comes into being on Dattani's stage has the potential to open new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space for its inhabitants.[xxxv]

Chapter 2

Revising Histories and Myths

An Analysis of *Frozen Fire* by A Mangai

A Mangai is the pseudonym that Indian playwright, director, theatre academic, and critic Padma Venkataraman has adopted in her works. Her theatre has often been labelled 'feminist' by critics who have noted her successful interrogation of taboo themes surrounding gender[xxxvi]. Her plays often take up popular mythological and historical narratives of marginalized, gendered figures from within the South Asian milieu and rethink their stories in order to reclaim their silenced voice and agency. *Pani-t-thee*, one of Mangai's popular Tamil plays—later translated to English as *Frozen Fire* by V. Geetha in Tutun Mukherjee's volume of plays by women, *Staging Resistance* (2005)—is based on the myth of an ambiguously gendered figure in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*.

This chapter reads *Frozen Fire* as a corrective to dominant theatre and historical narratives at the end of the 20th century aimed at recovering the voices and experiences of those who have been ignored in India's national past and identity. By retelling the life and experiences of Shikhandi, a queer figure who plays a pivotal role in the plot of the Sanskrit epic but is nonetheless marginalized for their gender alterity, Mangai questions the conventional boundaries imposed by patriarchal, cisnormative ideologies within popular Indian imagination. As an extension of Aparna Dharwadker's framework on Indian theatre and history, I study Mangai's use of mythology—articulating specifically Indian expressions of gender alterity—as an embedded form of history. Myths—as sites of cultural preservation of memory transmitted through embodied performance practices—emerge as sites of queer representation in the Indian context. Beyond the textual revision of history, the performance of *Frozen Fire* illustrates how Mangai intertwines different theatrical traditions, both

indigenous performance practices from Tamil Nadu (a south Indian state) as well as Boalian and Brechtian conventions to reconfigure the dominant meanings associated with 'modern, national' theatre. The central hypothesis suggests that mythological history, narrative, and identity intersect in complex ways to shape queer representation on Mangai's stage and further, that her play contributes to the production and perception of gendered bodies in both real and theatre time. A detailed exploration of the revisionist politics of Mangai's hybrid theatre reveals the theatrical 'body' as a 'spectacle': "…a site on which a range of issues converge, such as…. conventions of representation, ways of seeing, modes of performance and politics of the [gendered] Self" ("Intersections" 13). I will borrow from Amy Hughes' theorization of 'spectacle' to highlight how the body in performance relates to, reflects, subverts, and remakes queer identities and attitudes in real time. Through a layering of aesthetic and theatrical conventions, Mangai's representation of the alternately gendered body sits uneasily against the framework of social expectations and historicization, destabilizing encoded meanings of space and tradition.

1. *Frozen Fire*: A revision of Indian history and theatre

Meant for the modern, 21st century urban audience, *Frozen Fire* revises a mythological narrative found in the *Mahabharata*xxxvii*,* the name given to one of the two major Sanskrit epics that form an integral part of Indian 'itihasa'. An indigenous Sanskrit term, *itihasa* literally means "thus it was" or "the way things are" (Dharwadker 171). It is used to refer to the principal compendium of written, Sanskrit narratives about the past, both mythic and historical and includes all the regionally diverse versions of the *Puranas* as well as the epic, *Ramayana* (Dharwadker 171). Within the Indian poetic and mythic context—*itihasa* as a cultural and literary memoir of Indian society— doesn't refer to an external, objective entity i.e., it isn't synonymous with the understanding of history as verifiable, factual narratives.

Instead, *itihas*a has a referent that lies within the subjective, imaginative domain of poetics and myths.[xxxviii] However, an insistent equivalence of the term 'history' with *itihasa* in Western discourses is one of the overt examples of its impatience with the Indian matrix of historiography and its fluid categories.

Before I begin exploring how Mangai destabilizes the encoded meanings within national and postcolonial discourses around Indian theatre and history, I will give a background on the theoretical conceptualization of the term 'history' itself as it has developed in the latter half of the century in India by comparing it to the understanding in Western intellectual thought. This will enable me to characterize Mangai's play as a revisionist narrative. The term 'history' as understood in the global, conventionally Western discourses becomes highly contested when applied uncritically to the Indian context according to theatre historian Aparna Dharwadker; the conflation of *itihasa* with history is only one amongst the several issues within literary historiographies of India. She argues that in opposition to the Western conception of 'linear' time[xxxix], Indian histories are based on a repetitive understanding of temporality i.e., time constantly moves in a loop or cycle (168). Such a conceptualization establishes a structure of traditional thought divided into 4 *yugas* or epochs, where each consecutive era follows the last consistently and repeatedly.[xl] The unchanging, regular continuity as well as the sheer monumentality of this temporal idea has also been analyzed by other historians such as Romila Thapar, who states:

> "[T]here is an eternal cyclic repetition of time, so huge in concept that human activities become minuscule and insignificant in comparison…Cyclic time is continuous, without a beginning or an end. This amounts to a refusal of history, for no event can be particular or unique and all events are liable to be repeated in the next cycle. Such a sense of time…can only support the philosophic notion of the world being illusory." (5-6)

When juxtaposed against modern, rationalist thinking of the West, these indigenous models are criticized for their seeming disconnection from individual consciousness and concrete temporal existence making 'historicity' an apparently indeterminable fact. Furthermore, the difficulties in differentiating between documented fact and poetic—as well as mythic—narratives lead to the Orientalist claims of India having 'no history' at all. This prevalent analysis of ahistoricity continued till the late 20th century as a more subtle extension of the argument ascribing 'Otherness' to Oriental cultures.[xli] In *History at the Limit*, Ranajit Guha's ideological critique of the Western and the conservative Hindu intelligentsia's efforts to appropriate *itihasa* to mean linear history reinforces the point that Western conventions of recording the past do not have any credible parallels in the Indian context; poetry, myths, and historical facts remain irrevocably intertwined. The binary models of Western discourse fail to explain these cultural differences in understanding of time and hence, are unable to analyze the particularities of the Indian methods of preserving the past.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Thapar suggested a new matrix for historicizing the early Indian theatrical context which distinguished between the varied forms of history. 'Embedded history' is assigned to narratives in which historical consciousness was not obvious and needed to be prized out; its opposite, 'externalized history', refers to narratives that were more aware of their deliberate use of the past, i.e., in which embedded consciousness was more obvious and open. While chronicles of institutions and families—as well as biographies of individuals—are examples of externalized history, mythological and epic narratives need to be studied as embedded forms. I borrow from this framework of reading Indian pasts to study Mangai's play, *Frozen Fire* as a narrative of embedded history. In its overt memorializing function of a past narrative, the play emerges as a form of embedded history in its refusal to maintain a strict distinction between 'myth' and 'historical facts'. Mangai herself notes the persistent relevance of shared myths and legends to diverse

theatre traditions of the late 20ᵗʰ century. Commenting on their fundamental connection to the new idea of India post-independence—as a nation with a rich, pure past of moralities and values—she says, "If Sanskrit stood for ancient Indian culture, myths were seen as the unifying factor in imagining 'Indianness.' Myths based on the two Sanskrit epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, were embodied in traditional forms in various regions" ("Revisiting Myths" 77). In another critical work, "Intersections", Mangai points to the "continuing presence of western canonical texts and theories and the relative paucity of conceptual ideas from an Indian context which would be far more adequate than the former in addressing *our* feminist concerns" (12). Building upon this call to use Indian frameworks in the readings of Indian theatre and drama, I have explored her play as a representation of the Indian myth of Shikhandi through a historical lens for the contemporary audiences. Mangai extends the theoretical debate central to Thapar and Guha's works on Indian notions of history to her own theatre; myths in theatre address the gap between theatre history and its practice.

Frozen Fire is based upon the mythological narrative surrounding the figure of one of the princesses of Kashi *(*modern day city of Varanasi in India*)*: Amba. In the *Mahabharata*, Amba's father arranges a *swayamvara*ˣˡⁱⁱ (a highly patriarchal, traditional practice of finding suitable grooms for women in high social positions while securing strong political alliances between powerful families and securing lineages) for her and her sisters, Ambalikaa and Ambika but doesn't send an invitation to the kingdom of Hastinapur. Bhishma, the archetypical patriarch of Hastinapur responds to this insult/humiliation by coming to the *swayamvara* uninvited with his younger brother Vichitra Veerya. Although he himself has sworn to lead the life of a celibate, Bhishma abducts the three princesses to get them married to his younger brothers. Mangai notes, "He [Bhishma] thus modifies the *swayamvara* into 'veera sulka' (the reward for bravery)" ("Introduction" 441). Amba resists this marriage since she is in love with Salva, the king of Saubala—who had vainly tried to prevent her abduction

at the s*wayamvara*—while her sisters cave into the pressure. Upon her confession, Bhishma

allows her to go back to Salva. However, Vedic texts and scriptures which codify the powers

and privileges enjoyed by the different *varnas* dictate that as a *kshatriya*[xliii] Salva ought to

reject Amba, a woman who has been lost to another man in a battle; accepting her back

would sully his *dharma* or caste-based duty as well as his reputation. Still hurting from the

insult of being defeated, Salva doesn't take her back. Abandoned by both the man who raised

her as well as the man whom she loved, Amba returns to Bhishma and demands that he take

responsibility for her as he is the one who put her in this situation. Bhishma too, rejects her

citing the *kshatriya* code that a woman whose heart belongs to another isn't his responsibility.

Enraged by Bhishma's indifference, Amba vows to exact revenge upon him for her suffering

and plight. She does severe penance for twelve years by the banks of the river Yamuna

because of which she is granted a boon by Lord Shiva. In her next life, she is reborn as

'Shikhandi'—sibling to princess Draupadi of the kingdom of Panchala. Born a female,

Shikhandi undergoes a gender change in the original myth; she exchanges her 'female' body

with the 'male' body of a *yaksha* or a supernatural being. This metamorphosis occurs to

enable the fulfillment of Shikhandi's boon: he/she plays an instrumental role in the defeat of

Bhishma at the hands of the Pandava prince Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra during

the war (Chaitanya 195). Thereafter, the river goddess Ganga bids that Shikhandi transform

into a monsoon river full of crocodiles that flows only for four months every year.

In what follows, I will contextualize theatre—and its national history—as an

intellectual discourse, including its development as a scholarly discipline, which emerged

after colonization in India. I will highlight how the Indian theatre and literary histories are

conspicuous in their absences when it comes to recording and studying issues surrounding

themes of gender leading to the marginalization of narratives of gender alterity such as the

myth of Shikhandi. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's theorizations, this thesis reads 'history'

as an artifact of culture that only records/documents 'what can be said', not a sum total of a society's experiences and memories (Felluga "Foucault"). History as a cultural narrative is always constructed under certain conditions of socio-political and economic pressures. As such, it is shaped by certain assumptions, practices, and principles which might not be all-inclusive or accepting in their bid to support patriarchal, cisnormative societal structures. Gendered theatre and performance practices, like those of Mangai, have been left out of the discursive historicization of 'national' theatre in India.[xliv]

Classical Sanskrit theatre was invariably granted a central position of importance in this vision of a nation comprising a rich heritage of performance traditions.[xlv] For example, Orientalist histories of early Indian theatre produced mostly by European authors during the late 18th century dealt exclusively with the elite culture of Sanskrit performance traditions based on royal patronage (Dharwadker 175). These culturally extrinsic narratives located an essential, civilizational Indian identity within histories of 'true, classical' theatre (wherein 'theatre' and 'drama' were discussed as static categories) by drawing connections between Sanskrit and Greek/Latin performance cultures.[xlvi] While discussing these early historiographic efforts, theatre scholar Tutun Mukherjee notes, "…In the entire history of the development of Sanskrit drama, there is hardly any discussion of a play written by a woman or directed by one" (6). *Natyashastra*, the preeminent Hindu treatise on classical, Sanskrit drama and theatre written by Bharata Muni (1st century BCE–3rd century CE) theorizes 'theatre' as *natya vesma*—a place of representation or *anudarsana* through speeches and gestures, both physical and verbal, as the actor tries to identify with and portray a certain character or situation on stage. This representation is universally accessible to the audience that is encouraged by pleasurable dramatization to spectate, identify with, and respond to the conflicts and themes being portrayed. The act of viewing or looking at, and by extension contemplating or interpreting, becomes a defining feature of Sanskrit theatre. This classical

theorization can be paralleled to Gillespie's western conception of 'gender-locked heritage'.

She studies the term theatre as a derivative of Greek 'theatron' —a 'seeing place' (Gillespie

284). This space of dramatization belongs to the public realm, a space to which women as

well as alternate gender identities (identities which do not conform to the gender binary)

traditionally do not have access. This becomes a foundational reason for the marginalization

of gendered theatre and histories of alterity during the classical age in India, thereby

contributing to the gaps in narrativizing the early history of 'Indian' drama.

By the 1930s, histories of Indian theatre written by Indian authors and based on

culturally intrinsic views started emerging. These western-educated scholars focused on

producing nationalist macro-histories—mostly in English—that were concerned with drawing

explicit connections between the idea of a pristine, classical past of performances traditions

and the newly realized idea of an independent nation (Dharwadker 176). These narratives

favoured the establishment of a unified, totalizing theatre history of India—from the mythic

time of the classical past to the present of multi-lingual, modern drama—which might

become the basis of a national identity. Feminist theatre histories recording gendered

performance practices or discussing issues regarding gender alterity continued to remain

glaringly absent as Indian **H**istory was constructed in forced isolation from the burgeoning

discourse on gender and sexual differences. Mangai feels that women theatre practitioners,

such as herself, "do not seem to have considered the traditions of Sanskrit theatre as

productive from the point of view of gender" ("Negotiations with Classical Texts" 178).[xlvii]

In retelling a mythological narrative in *Frozen Fire,* Mangai imagines theatre as a site

of interrupting such patriarchal, cisnormative histories of India written post-independence.

She understands that within the Indian context, the perpetuation of unequal gender politics is

highly dependent on the complex interactions between ideas of identity/subjectivity and

historical narratives. Harry Elam outlines in "The High Stakes of Identity" how gendered,

mythological narratives propagated through practices of community performance such as oral

storytelling and theatre have informed the construction of perceptions of queerness. Elam

insists that history as a form of mythological narration shapes the attitudes and beliefs of a

people, embodied and enacted by them daily. Simultaneously, conventional perceptions of

queerness shape ideas inherent to historical myths, narratives, and representations of gender.

Considering such contemporary arguments, it becomes pertinent to raise the following

question: how does the politics of gender alterity function in Mangai's play to revise India's

past in the present? In studying Mangai's revisionist politics, I have followed the lead of

literary and performance studies scholar Soyica Colbert as seen in her critical analysis of *The

America Play*. Colbert suggests that each performance and rereading of Suzan-Lori Parks'

revised historical narrative—and the resulting shared and individual audience experience it

generates—is an alteration to the mainstream idea of black literary history (3).[xlviii] In their

critical work on black performance and theatre, *Blood Debt*, Harry and Michele Elam also

write, "Social change can potentially occur through history itself" (103). Mangai similarly

uses a strategy of 'revision'—she reworks an enduring cultural narrative from the

Mahabharata to recuperate the life and fate of a gender 'marginalized' character[xlix] thus,

reconfiguring the dominant idea and meanings associated with **H**istory and Indian theatre. I

will now undertake a detailed study of the different thematic and narrative strategies of

revision as employed by her in the play, both the text and its performance.

    Frozen Fire begins in *media res* as Bhishma lies on his deathbed made of arrows on

the battlefield while refusing to accept that it was Shikhandi who was responsible for

mortally wounding him. The play takes off with Bhishma's words.

    This is Arjuna's arrow…

    —no doubt there

    Not Shikhandi's

Cannot be—not his, certainly not…

Not Shikhandi's…

not his (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 441)

Bhishma's denial serves as the impetus for Shikhandi's traumatic reliving of his/her history on stage as he/she recounts it for the audience. At the very outset, Mangai makes visible the constructed rigidity of Hindu society—as portrayed in the text *Mahabharata*—that relegates Shikhandi's tale to the margins. Against Bhishma's erasure of Shikandi's active role in his end, Mangai's protagonist commands:

Listen! I'll confess—lay bare my heart to you—

A tale that has never been told before

A point of view never heard until now

Listen to my tale and wonder… (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 443)

The socio-cultural framework of Indian society as portrayed in the *Mahabharata* was based upon specific interpretations of honor and duty which influenced the dynamics of societal institutions such as family, marriage, political alliances, and even wars. *Manusmriti,* or the book of the Laws of Manu—another prominent Hindu scripture which constituted a legal/constitutional document in ancient India—gives a detailed account of these codified rules of conduct or *dharma* which are to be followed by every stratum of Hindu society (Meena 579). According to its description of the *varna* system[1], women—due to their reproductive capabilities—are treated as property under the control of the patriarchs of the family. This was a result of the centralized Hindu ethos of protection of 'virtue' and 'purity'. Women's bodies become objects to be 'traded' thus, mapping out, maintaining, and consolidating the balance of phallocentric control, status, and power in ancient India. Mangai condemns the complacency and ignorance of the "learned" Hindu society of "noble birth"— also a referent to her contemporary audience comprised mainly of upper class, educated

Hindus. Their socio-cultural ideologies—enshrined in their sacred texts—not only justify but rather, encourage the oppression of women and individuals marked by gender alterity.

Many watched, horrified—

Mutely, they bore witness

Those people, no those logs of wood along the road…

'Is this indeed my destiny? Tell me!

Aren't you learned people here? And good ones, besides?

Brahmans famed for their sacrifices

People of noble birth!

Tell me!

Don't your ears burn with anger?' (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 450)

Amba's story reveals how she lacks any agency over herself— her father arranges her marriage, potential grooms competing for her hand. Their actions determine her social positionality and subsequent ostracization from polite society. She became a receptacle of masculine power struggles instead, helpless in the face of male authority figures who decided the course of her destiny. The pain of her position is brought out through these lines.

That past is belied by our laws of today.

These are our laws:

Women are not comparable to men—this is clear.

A man can sell his wife, give her away as a gift

And even if a slave himself…

has the right to deem you a slave too— *(*Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 450-451)

What are women's bodies

But rounded pots to hold man's seeds?

What are women's bodies

But playthings, forced to a king's bed

To keep alive his lineage? (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 452)

The narrative trope of a gender change after reincarnation also panders to these patriarchal beliefs. As symbols of fertility, familial pride, and continuing legacy, women were not considered true *kshatriya's* or warriors and were banned from participating in wars or entering battlefields. It was the *dharmic* duty of the male members of their family to protect their women or seek vengeance on their behalf. Women themselves did not have access to the same kind of education available to men of nobility who underwent rigorous training to develop their martial skills and prowess as protectors of their land and communities. Amba, as a princess, was denied the right to become a warrior and exact her revenge through violence. Her gender transformation becomes necessary to justify the character's tutelage under Dronacharya, the most revered and royal preceptor of both the Pandavas and the Kuaravas. Only by honing his/her archery skills is Shikhandi able to join the Kurukshetra war and ultimately, contribute to Bhishma's death (Chaitanya 198). Thus, Amba/Shikhandi was forced to turn into a male to enter, as an active agent, into India's mythological history. The following lines from the play emphasize the lack of choice given to him/her, gender change being the only available option.

But I—

Just a woman who had sworn an oath—

I had neither husband nor son

To help me

Wreak my vengeance.

But I was graced with a boon

To kill Bhishma—

But I had no one.

No one, you see,

Dared accept me. (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 444)

Within the larger world of the *Mahabharata*, this story of gender change to fit social conventions is a sub-plot, sidelined except for its contribution in furthering the primary plot of war, a highly masculinist struggle for power and control.[li]

Mangai is aware of the revisionist project she is undertaking in *Frozen Fire*. She sees this play as a "sequence of enactments that disturb and confound traditional notions of heroism, masculinity, valor, suffering, revenge…" (Mangai, "Female Impersonation" 131). If the mainstream understanding of the myth of Amba/Shikhandi maintains the gendered status quo in ancient Indian society, Mangai's portrayal of an agential protagonist subverts such hegemonic understandings of the classical narrative.

I had to do it

on my own.

I stood alone to

fulfil my vow.

I did not want to

Simper behind the scenes

Deploy another to my task

— 'Just like a woman' the world was bound to mock—

I stood my ground, fought in open battle

And won. (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 444)

Shikhandi rejects the conventional expectations of heroic masculinity—and the glory of fulfilling a *kshatriya's* dharmic duty—associated with the defeat of such a great warrior as Bhishma; instead, s/he emphasizes the feminine experiences of a previous life even in this

moment of triumph. Furthermore, the rejection of physical male characteristics—the very attributes that enabled Shikhandi to win—is made overt when the protagonist says, "This body. Its muscles, nerves taut as strings. Broad chest and tense jaw—these are not mine, they do not belong to me" (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 445). While the classical myth (and subsequent historicization) rejects Amba/Shikhandi's female identity, Mangai's protagonist rejects the male. Within the play, Shikhandi is quick to recognize their ambiguous gender after the transition.

> I…
>
> I am Draupada's son
>
> …no, his daughter…
>
> Rather, the one who was born a daughter but changed into a son…
>
> I am Draupadi's—and Drishtadyumna's—brother-sister…
>
> I am Shikhandi
>
> Born to behead Bhishma
>
> I am Amba…
>
> Do I confuse you? The truth is, I am confused—
>
> Who am I? Why was I born? How did I grow up? (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 442-43)

The protagonist unequivocally asserts the multiplicity of their identities within the mythological narrative as well as along the gender spectrum. Similarly, the gender fluidity inherent to Amba/Shikhandi's queer identity is acknowledged explicitly by Mangai in her own critical reflections as recorded in her article "Female Impersonation", when she notes how the protagonist is forced to take on identities of "female and male, female-becoming-male" (129). Throughout this piece, she refers to her character with a multiplicity of pronouns—he/she and her/him are applied as referents simultaneously. Given in this new context that denotes a clear break from the ancient, patriarchal authorial voice of the

Mahabharata, *Frozen Fire* carries radical meanings and connotations that go a long way in filling the silences found in dominant Indian discourses while challenging continuing, contemporary legacies of such rigid structures. In Parks' words, Mangai's theatre becomes "an incubator for the creation of [queered] historical events" (Colbert 4).

Mangai recovers Shikhandi's immense pain during the gender change on stage.[lii] Their sense of loneliness, isolation, guilt, shame, doubt, anger, and confusion felt during the gender transition is fleshed out with poetic aplomb.

> Born a girl
>
> I had to learn
>
> a thousand tricks
>
> and a thousand ways
>
> to bend and break my body.
>
> Unimaginable to any—
>
> tricks difficult to learn
>
> in all these seven worlds.
>
> That black yaksha
>
> He taught me this and more
>
> Taught me to mortify my flesh
>
> So that I could become
>
> A man. (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 447)

By highlighting the protagonist's own confusion regarding their identity, Mangai draws attention to the contemporary anxieties created because of the conspicuous silence around fluidity of gender. In her active and continual addressal of history, Mangai's play "…creates an opportunity to… squarely engage the problem of 'futures'" (Colbert 4); queer futures within the exclusionary Indian context in this particular case. Mangai reconstructs history

through a theatrical lens for the present moment by drawing parallels between Shikhandi's history of struggle to fit within conservative frameworks of gender and the contemporary problems faced by gender fluid individuals in modern society. The author's express hope in revisiting the myth and rereading the character is to draw "meanings from the classics for the present…" ("Negotiations with Classical Texts" 180). Such emotional, psychological, and even physical turmoil continues to plague current generations—temporally far removed from the audience the epic addresses. Unable to fit into the conventionally gendered molds created by national, postcolonial discourses, and deemed 'foreign' to Indian culture in their queerness, they encounter legacies of homophobia and transphobia.

But Mangai's revisionist strategies extend beyond a questioning of narratives of national history; they also challenge the performance structures and forms of indigenous theatre along with their encoded cisnormativity. Indeed, Mangai insists that borrowing from the rich mythological oeuvre of indigenous performance practices imbues her work with "some traits that work beyond temporality and spatiality" (Mangai, "Negotiations with Classical Texts" 177). Mangai successfully incorporates elements from two traditional theatre forms—*Issai Natakam* and *Therakoothu*—in her play. Developed in the northern parts of 19ᵗʰ century colonial Tamil Nadu, *Issai Natakam* or 'special drama' conventions allow Mangai to insert dance and music sequences to the plot of the text (Singh 502). In fact, it is through the insertion of a musical interlude in the play's narrative that Mangai invites Shikhandi's voice to take center stage and recount the story from their perspective.

(Musical interlude connoting Kattiyakkaran's enquiry)

Hey!

We don't know you, do we? Tell us who you are, what's your business?

Why are you here? (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 442)

Also indigenous to Tamil Nadu, *Therakoothu's* rich traditional repertoire allows her access to south India's popular mythological past in theatre (Mangai, *"Revisiting Myths" 98).* The original music for the Tamil play was composed by A.K. Selvadurai, a famous Indian *koothu* artist. At the same time, in her critical work, Mangai studies both these traditions as historically resistant to ideas of gender alterity. *Therakoothu* in particular, is conventionally an "all-male form" with its first appropriation by women theatre artists recorded only in 1997 (Mangai, "Female Impersonation" 127). She comments on the impact of this production—a staging of *Draupadi's Wedding* by Peerungattur Rajagopal—on her own use of *Therakoothu* conventions in her play *Frozen Fire*. She writes:

> That [the performance by women artists] was daring enough and drew gasps of astonishment from the viewer—not only because there were women on stage performing [*thera*]*koothu*, in full *kattai vesham* (heroic, usually male role, distinguished by characteristic ornamentation and demanding great physical stamina), but even more for their immensely polished and brilliant performance. ("Female Impersonation" 127)

Her play similarly extends the subversive potential of such an appropriation of male dominated theatre forms by women practitioners to foreground ideas of alternate gender, gender bending, and fluidity on stage.

In 1993, Mangai became the coordinator for the 'Maunak Kural' or Voicing Silence Project.[liii] She worked with the all-women's performance group of professional theatre artists for four years, starting from 1999. The Tamil version of the play in question, *Pani-t-thee*, was written during this period as a solo-show to be performed by Usha Rani, a female theatre artist from Voicing Silence who cannot read or write formally. During the performance, Usha Rani appears on stage in complete *koothu* male costume in the beginning— "a soldier on the battlefield" (Mangai, "Female Impersonation" 129). The performance by Usha Rani itself

poses a challenge to the physical space of *koothu* practice, traditionally accessible to only

men. Mangai particularly emphasizes Usha Rani's anxiety while performing this dramatic

piece in Purisai (a village in Tamil Nadu) once, "home to one of the main traditions of

koothu—as part of a festival organized in memory of the famed *koothu* performer, Kannappa

Thambiran" (129). Having a woman in male costume perform a piece on gender alterity on

stage during this festival was a very unconventional and bold decision, requiring substantial

convincing for even being granted a performance slot. Her performance disrupts the socially

conservative meanings associated with this gendered space, previously inaccessible to female

performers and their expressions of gender alterity. Usha Rani's nervousness while

performing here makes complete sense when read within this context: she goes against the

grain of traditional belief systems and historical meanings associated with the place often

understood to be the indigenous practice's origin. The symbolic connotations of such a

performance disrupt *koothu* as a form when the performer both embodies the indigenous

conventions but unsettles their embedded meanings. It creates a critical site on stage that

transforms "absence into ways of being present" within dominant national and indigenous

performance histories (Colbert 8). Going back to an element of Colbert's argument that

locates "interpretive multiplicities" in the "collaborative process" (6)—between the

performance, the performer, and director's choices as well as the audience reception[liv], I read

Mangai's revision of the form of *koothu* as a collaboration between her text and its

performance which becomes a site of political action.

Her revisionist politics, in the representation of gender alterity in Indian theatre, play

out most obviously upon the physical body. The knowledge that emerges from a performance

of the play renders the gendered 'natural' construction of the body in Mangai's theatre flexible

as it " highlights the mechanics of spectacle" (Colbert 1). In her work, *The African American*

Theatrical Body, a similar reading is undertaken by Colbert who reads every performance of

The America Play as a challenge to the construction of black racial identity, especially the objectification of the black body and the theatricality stereotypically associated with it. She argues that Park's performance exemplifies a 'real' or 'natural' on the performer's body that constantly slips and destabilizes their racial identity. Colbert reads Park's use of the performance of digging a hole and faking a persona by the protagonist as a questioning of "the certainty of the body as a signifier of the real" (2).[lv] In *Frozen* Fire, the act of dressing/undressing—which accompanies the narrative from the beginning till end, broken down into actions or sequences upon the director's discretion—performs similarly deconstructive work. Mangai's comments on the mutability of theatre and gender as categories of performance: "…both gender and theatre are realized in 'doing', and the conditions of doing gender and theatre, while related, are fairly distinct. Gender and theatre when 'done' are essentially rooted in experience…. experiences that constitute gender and theatre practice are crucial to knowledge that emerges from them" ("Intersections" 11).

 Frozen Fire's narrative takes the audience through the entire process of the protagonist's gender transformation from Amba to Shikhandi. It describes their rigorous discipline and penance undertaken to leave behind their feminine attributes and gain the strength of a male body—"Softness melt, stiffen into hard-wood," "Swelling bosom turn into stone," "Make your muscles taut, rub dry your soft wetness" (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 447). Rising above the description of corporeal changes, the play gives a detailed account of the psychological and emotional struggles inherent in this metamorphosis.[lvi] The change is necessitated by the 'honourable' codes of conduct to be followed during wars, as recorded within Indian scriptures and archives— "It is said, a warrior shall not let fly an arrow at a woman. But you, why did you let me be, let me stand in front of you?" (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 449). One thing that remains constant throughout Amba/Shikhandi's transformation is their desire for revenge; the rage and wrath burn inside, indifferent to the performances of gender

on the outside. This leads to an important question posed by Shikhandi, "Can an arrow be male or female?" (Mangai, *Frozen Fire* 448). This statement reflects the futility and fragility of gender categories and identities in the face of violence, death, and war.

This narrative of transformation from female to male is paralleled, but in reverse, by the performance itself. As explored earlier, the narration begins with the female performer in complete *koothu* costume. Eventually, as the story progresses, the protagonist sheds these male codes of dress on stage by peeling off her attire and removing each piece of ornament one by one. Multiple stage directions allow space for make-up changes in between the dialogue delivery. Shikhandi disappears through the course of the narration of how they were wronged, along with others, and came to find themself on the battlefield. By the end, Amba emerges in all her glory (Mangai, "Female Impersonation" 129). After the final costume change, the protagonist transforms into a river. The play describes a space where marginalized, gendered characters have agency, access, freedom, dignity, equality, as well as the strength of community to support them. The river itself becomes a metaphor to denote fluidity—a fluidity that ignores normative conventions and crosses 'naturalized' boundaries to occupy liminal, radical spaces of alterity.[lvii]

This performance of gender and the possibilities of transfiguring one's body connotes that gender is neither a fixed nor a natural category but rather a fluid identity that constantly evolves depending on an individual's choices, actions, and environment. Moreover, the narrative's depiction of the manufactured nature of gender turns the physical, human body of Shikhandi into a spectacle, pushed to the extremities of gender boundaries. Amy Hughes defines 'spectacle' as anything leading to our sensation of 'exceptional' which often comes from the subversion, destabilization, or exceeding of cultural norms during their representation (14). The body thus becomes an ideal space for 'spectacular' representation as it is one of the most common stages for the performance of cultural normalization. Mangai

uses spectacle to highlight the 'tactics of seeing' that influence how Indian society consumes and experiences the world. The performance technique of spectacle becomes an important didactic tool for conveying/communicating the core principles of the ideological structure in power.[lviii] Mangai makes Shikhandi's aberrant body publicly available for appraisal and judgement to enable a comparison with the 'ordinary'. By creating a spectacle of the gender change, Mangai foregrounds the artificiality of the dominant ideas about 'normal' or 'proper' bodies i.e., those which fit within the binary structure of biological gender at the expense of fluidity, variety, and difference. In the spectacularlization of Shikhandi's performing body, audiences must confront ideas of conventional gender. The play foregrounds the "ideologically constituted nature of all bodies" (Colbert 4) -- specifically targeting that of the postcolonial, Indian body with its gendered inheritances.

In this section, I have argued that *Frozen Fire's* emphasis on Amba/Shikhandi as a historical agent—since the myth is retold through their voice—positions them as a producer of history, recuperating their agency from the margins of a mere textual recording of the events of the mythical war. In Mangai's words, "… 'being visible' itself constituted a form of political action" ("Staging Gender" 45). If Colbert reads Park's deployment of performance in *The America Play* as a mode of resituating black identities within historical narratives, then Mangai's play similarly uses revised history and performance as a site to reclaim gendered alterity and resituate queer identities in the national imagination. Thus, Amba/Shikhandi becomes a recuperated character from the Indian mythological past whose unique inner life is represented and made relevant to Mangai's own ideological concerns of the present. Her engagement with this mythological oeuvre not only questions the popular cultural understanding of tales from the *Mahabharata* but also foregrounds and challenges the absences of gendered narratives within the imagining of the 'national' postcolonial discourses

in theatre. Mangai's theatre is her attempt at meaning-making through re-reading and re-fashioning traditional tales which respond to the present.

2. **Mangai's 'modern' Indian theatre**

Mangai's theatre, as seen in this play, no longer conforms to the prominent, traditionalist thought in intellectual discourses of post-independent India; neither does it borrow from the classical, Sanskrit traditions in theatre nor does it take a recourse to ideas and themes of an authentic Indian past in its drama. Instead, as a mythological play for 'modern', English-speaking audiences, *Frozen Fire* combines Tamil conventions with elements of Brechtian epic theatre and Boalian thought. The influences of Boalian thought, as enshrined in the playwright's conceptualization of 'theatre of the oppressed' or 'social theatre', are made prominent when Mangai notes that the ideological challenge posed by her "efficacious" social theatre is "not just in terms of histrionics, but choice of subject, and the context of performance and timings" ("Staging Gender" 40). Whether performed as a street play or in proscenium theatre, the aim of Mangai's play is to represent the acceptance and inclusion of gender alternate individuals, communities, and their experiences in the national discourses and imagination. As such, its similarities with Boalian 'newspaper theatre'—belonging to the fourth stage of Boal's Theatre of Oppressed: the theatre as discourse—become apparent (Boal 102). Boal's idea of 'newspaper theatre' addresses burning social issues on stage, either leading to an increase in social awareness or a socio-political call for action (Boal 122). As we have seen, *Frozen Fire* highlights the mythological and theatrical marginalization of gender alternate individuals through multiple revisionist strategies. It also calls for social change through the communication of a message of queer inclusivity.

The influence of Boalian thought on Mangai's theatre politics is made visible in her critical work as well. She analyzes the effect of social, street theatre and performance on

political discourses during the 1980s—this was the period when Indian women were protesting gendered issues such as dowry harassment and death, bride-burning, sexual abuse etc. ("Staging Gender" 40). Mangai views her own theatre as an artistic instrument that is also "a form of knowledge, and a political practice" ("Staging Gender" 75) that addresses questions of gender and sexuality within the realm of queer politics towards the turn of the century. She identifies herself as part of an emergent wave of feminist theatre artists and their works with their "self-conscious staging of gender issues with a deliberate intent to politicising them" ("Staging gender" 39). Mukherjee uses the label of "Womanist theatre" (14)—with its general concern for gender relations, gendered perspectives, and experiences towards consciousness raising —to describe the works produced by women during this period.[lix] As an activist with the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Mangai has worked with marginalized women's groups since the 1990s. Her experience with grassroot activism is reflected in the substantial body of dramatic texts produced by her. Several have been performed across South India in an effort to raise consciousness about contemporary feminist concerns such as the literacy rate amongst females in India, the importance of education, female infanticide, hygiene, and healthcare to name a few. A popular name among contemporary theatre circles, Mangai is also a founder-member of the prominent Tamil street theatre groups 'Chennai Kalai Kuzhu' (established in 1984), 'Palkalai Arangam' (established in 1987) and 'Marappachi' (established in 2006). Her other plays, such as *Manimekalai*, *Mauna Kuram*, and *Avvai,* are based on well-known figures from Indian mythology and history who stand up for their own beliefs, refusing to submit to the rules imposed by patriarchy while charting their own destinies. Her plays are often written in response to the extreme Hindutva, conservative politics of the majoritarian right-wing government in India (Singh 496).

Likewise, in true Brechtian fashion, Mangai begins her play in *media res* and has

Shikhandi recount their life in retrospect—a narrative constantly interrupted by music and

dance sequences—thus, subverting the conventionally linear idea of time (which is

foundational to the Western conception of historiography and realist drama) and alienating

her audience from the illusion of the 'real' on stage.[lx] In this regard, Mangai's vision has many

parallels to Parks' theories on theatre time—history isn't inherent in 'what was' but rather,

'what is' (Elam 287). Mangai explicitly acknowledges the influence of non-naturalistic forms

of Brechtian theatre on her depiction of the act of dressing-undressing on stage, meant to

'alienate' audiences from their ideologies of binary gender by revealing its constructedness

("Female Impersonation" 130). Brechtian influences of alienation become more obvious

when the body on stage in Mangai's play is read through the lens of the 'spectacle', that is

gender performativity through the act of dressing/undressing. By anchoring her exploration of

Amba/Shikhandi's myth within this hybrid frameworks, she attempts to rethink and

reinterpret not only historical content but what constitutes the categories of 'indigenous'

traditions and 'modern' Indian theatre.

3. *Conclusion*

This chapter illustrates *Frozen Fire's* nuanced representation of Indian queerness as a

revised narrative—from the *Mahabharata* mythological tradition—unfolds on stage and the

body in performance inhabits and makes the theatrical space its own. The play raises

important questions about how mythological narratives and identity intersect in the

representation, perception, and formation of gender on stage. Mangai's theatre destabilizes

dominant Indian, postcolonial discourses of the late 20th century with their tendency to ignore

or marginalize narratives that challenged binaries and hierarchies of gender, in both their

political theme as well as identity. As Harry Elam claims, "…(theatre) historiography can

provide us access to alternative histories that are complex, contested, and imbricated" (283). I have read *Frozen Fire* as a revisionist narrative, both textual and in performance, that pushes the boundaries of the patriarchal, cisnormative principles which predetermine histories of the post-independent era and their silence on themes of gender alterity. Such a revisioning occurs through various thematic, narrative, and performance strategies—Mangai recuperates and represents the 'lost' voice and agency of a mythological, queer figure i.e., Amba/Shikhandi. The innovative use of intersecting frameworks inspired by radical techniques borrowed from western theatre as well as indigenous traditions contribute to her revisionist politics on the 'modern' stage. In Mangai's theatre, the body in performance— containing inscriptions of knowledge systems and social practices which intersect in complex ways to mark the body as at once ideologically natural, gendered, and sexed—becomes a malleable site. She studies how Shikhandi's marginalization in postcolonial intellectual thought is a consequence of their 'spectacular' gender identity. The performer's body thus, becomes a space for the playwright where both the oppressive fate of gender-transformation for the mythical Shikhandi, as well as the resistance to its encoded social meanings through the actor, are framed through the performance of gender and the acts of dressing/undressing. The totalizing vision of 'Indian history' vanishes behind the contemporary spectacle of queerness in this performance text. As such, Mangai's theatre belongs to the Boalian school of thought that reinvents the canonical narrative of the past to provide a corrective through a critical analysis. It demands change in the form of acceptance and inclusion of experiences of gender alternate individuals. Such a revision of Indian archives illustrates the arbitrariness as well as elasticity of temporal frameworks which define postcolonial and global ideas of theatre, history, queer identity, and nation.

Conclusion

1. Overview

Queer representation in Indian theatre and drama has always carried great politically destabilizing potential. As ideological institutions, literature and performance contribute to the production and propagation of socio-cultural understandings around ideas of gender and sexuality; they likewise shape the national and postcolonial intellectual discourses. The plays of Dattani and Mangai, such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Frozen Fire* respectively, are perfect examples of how theatre can question and revise attitudes toward and meanings of gender and sexual alterity in a nation. They are a reminder that political change and empowerment for subaltern positions emerges from within art forms capable of capturing and articulating the indigenous particularities of postcolonial queer experiences, identities, and histories which remain absent from the mainstream narratives in the national and global contexts.

We started in chapter 1 with a detailed exploration of queer representation in Dattani's play, *OAMNIM*. His portrayal of *gestic* communication amongst a homosexual community of friends in urban India constitutes an ideological interruption of heteronormativity as embedded in English. When the colonizer's language is used uncritically, it leads to the ideological perpetuation of legacies of homophobia within the nation as defined after independence. Through the usage of Brechtian conventions, the play articulates specifically Indian expressions and experiences of sexual alterity. This in turn creates a 'queer space' on Dattani's stage which counters the marginalization of queer lives. As such, *OAMNIM* questions the applicability of Western centric queer and postcolonial frameworks to the Indian experience. Though useful—even liberatory—critical frameworks in one site, their non-intersectionality serves to mask and marginalize queer lives in another.

In chapter 2, I extend this critique of marginalizing forces. My analysis of Mangai's play, *Frozen Fire,* exposes the internal ideologies of normative gender binary governing the nation and its history. Mangai's recuperation and representation of mythological queer narratives contributes to the interrogation of 'modern' national discourses in Indian theatre and drama. *Frozen Fire* recenters the queer experience of Shikhandi by revising cisnormative Indian history as well as the traditional form and space of Indian theatre. Such a retelling challenges the mainstream national discourse of the late 20th century that reads queerness in India as a 'foreign import.' Ultimately, the hybrid theatre piece represents the nuances of Indian histories and experiences of queerness upon the 'spectacle' of the actor's body playing the protagonist. In doing so, *Frozen Fire* destabilizes encoded meanings of gender identity, theatre, and history.

Thus, the main force of this work has been to reorient Western assumptions and frameworks underlying national and postcolonial discourses around ideas of queerness. In the past, scholars such as Madhu Kishwar have attempted to find liberatory, feminist potential in a traditionalist view of an ancient Indian identity interrupted by colonialism. Instead, I have explored two dramas—and their performances—by applying an intersectional, critical, and analytical lens to Indian theatre. I have attempted to study the plays' politics of repositioning Indian queer identities in contemporary, urban representation and in the colonizer's language. Framed by theatre strategies that borrow from both Western conventions and local traditions, these plays no longer try to locate a national identity through ideas of 'purity' and 'authenticity'. Put simply, their articulation of vernacular queerness shows that gender and sexual alterity have *always been present* in the Indian context. Some of the questions that have shaped this work include the investigation of: 1) how queer identities are shaped in postcolonial India; 2) how theatre and performance as ideological institutions influence the formation of queer subjectivities in contemporary, urban society; 3) how Western

assumptions underlying national and global queer discourses marginalize indigenous alterity; 4) how intersectional understandings of gender, sexuality, and postcolonial positions allow the visibility of local nuances and lastly; 5) how queer theatre destabilizes hegemonic discourses to articulate inclusivity, acceptance, and empowerment for subaltern positions marked by alternate gender and sexuality. In answering them, I have addressed issues of queer representation, the politics of queer identity and community formation, as well as the expression of alternate sexual desire and queer agency in two plays by A Mangai and Mahesh Dattani.

In retrospect, undertaking such intersectional research on queer representation in Indian theatre was also a way of remaining connected to my alma mater—Miranda House, University of Delhi—during all the years away from India. My 2019 participation in the Miranda House Archiving Project—an undertaking which sought to collect and preserve the post-independence experience of women studying in national, educational institutes—gave me a golden opportunity to interact with some internationally-acclaimed theatre and movie artists such as Anuradha Kapur, Mira Nair, and Nandita Das (all MH alumni). Conversations and interviews about their work and careers had provided the initial impetus for this work researching the dynamics of identity construction, gender-sexual representation, and subject formation on the Indian stage. The strong similarities and connections between the atmosphere of intense intellectual enquiry and scholarship as found at both MH and McGill have characterized and shaped my work to a great extent. At the same time, I have been acutely aware of my own position as a brown, queer woman studying in a Western university and writing about 'recognition' of absent or invisible forms of Indian queerness. The risk of perpetuating similar violences of Western presumptions and frameworks when projected uncritically upon Indian contexts has both haunted and propelled my work. As such, instead of looking for novel modes and ways of representing Indian queerness, I have explored

existing representations in Indian theatre, rereading them through a hitherto, critically absent queer, postcolonial lens.

2. Effectiveness of Queer Representation in Indian theatre and its future

Drama and theatre are mimetic art forms in so far as they reflect and respond to life and society. After the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018—and a respite in the State censorship of mainstream portrayals of queerness—a number of theatre artists have used the stage to articulate their stories and experiences of being queer in India. The first of its kind queer theatre group in India, 'Q Rang', was formed in early 2019 in the state of Kerala (Deb). One of its founders, Prijith P K, comments, "Theatre has always been progressive and ahead of its time. It is, in fact, one of the most inclusive spaces in the performing arts spectrum… We decided to form a dedicated theatre group for the queer people, where our stories could find a platform" (Deb). Theatre artists across the nation have started emphasizing themes and narratives of inclusivity and acceptance in their works rather than focusing on tales of victimization or exclusion in a bid to dismantle existing ideas in society. They seek to portray how queerness exists, and has existed, in a myriad of forms and shapes in this diverse and historically rich nation. Empowerment through theatrical representation is not a new concept, however it has found a new resonance in contemporary, urban contexts for the queer community. Through plays such as Mangai and Dattani's, theatre has become a space for articulating queer experiences and its uniquely Indian nuances contributing to the increased understanding of queer perspectives that exist in the nation. For theatre artists such as Fiza Rizvi, a transwoman and actor from Mumbai, queer theatre represents dignity and hope (Deb). At the same time, it articulates for queer individuals a sense of community, self-acceptance and equality, acting as therapy for the trauma and stigma that is inherent to the mainstream understanding of queerness as 'western' or 'foreign'.

Even though there is still a long way to go on this journey of queer empowerment, the conversation started through queer representation in English language theatre is very important. I have pointed out through my work how queer individuals and communities are marginalized, oppressed and ignored, their rights violated under the watchful eye of the Indian state and its ideological institutions. Examining queer and postcolonial subaltern positions in conjunction with one another, I have suggested that theatre and drama as social institutions contribute to the empowerment of queer community through the representation of gender and sexual alterity. They have increased the popularity of both anglophone performance practices as well as their addressal of 'taboo' queer themes and stories with empathetic sensitivity and compassion. This in turn has contributed to changing the perceptions and fears in society that politically charged queer theatre is loud and offensive. Queer theatre artists, since independence, have often noted how their works are often censored due to their portrayal of 'obscene' or 'unacceptable' narratives. Theatre, as explored in this work, highlights that political destabilization and empowerment lie simply in opening channels of communication and understanding about queer representation; it isn't preachy or motivated by scholarship limited to intellectual circles. Queer theatre has been used by the two playwrights studied here as a space for depicting queer conversations, art, and representation. Through these representations, one can imagine and hope for queer integration in the national future.

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End Notes

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i Adopted as a queer-positive legislative act that protects the rights against discrimination of the gender alternate community of Indiai, the bill has sparked outrage amongst Indian queers. Described widely as a "murder of gender justice" (Pathak), activists have spoken out against the requirement for a transgender individual to submit a 'gender-confirmation surgery' certificate to the Indian government if they wished to be recognized as a 'protected' community member. Such problematic biological determinism of gender is explored as inherently discriminatory and misguided in Chapter 2.

ii They argue that the problem of defining what constitutes 'Indian theatre'—through the creation of a monolithic, universalizing history of the performing arts in such a vast geographical, cultural, and linguistic place—has been one of the major reasons for such a dearth. This has been recognized by other critics too, such as theatre scholar Ananda Lal, A. Mangai, Nandi Bhatia etc.

iii In their work *Post-colonial Drama (1996)*, Gilbert and Tompkins provide commentary on theatre in India, noting that its "history/practice is extremely complex, it is impossible to do justice to Indian drama in a broadly comparative study. Moreover, the varieties of drama, dance, languages, and cultures that have influenced Indian theatre are far too vast…." (7)

iv Tagore combined conventions of Bengali folk theatre with the influences of Western medieval, mystery plays to create fluid spaces where the East and the West met seamlessly on stage, as well as within the context of literary traditions (Lal, 462).

v Chattopadhyay's historical-religious play *Siddhartha, A man of Peace* (1956) explores the life of the Buddhist leader. Kailasam composed Shakespearean style, English-drama on the *Mahabharata,* while Sri Aurobindo's works explore his religious philosophies. (Lal, 122) Aurobindo's plays transcend spatial and temporal boundaries through the commonly occurring theme in his plays—a universal notion of love and brotherhood.

vi Minoti Chatterjee's *Theatre Beyond the Threshold* (2004) analyses the modern, nationalist Bengali theatre. Nandi Bhatia's work *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (2004) does a similar study.

vii Partha Chatterjee, a notable Indian theatre scholar, identifies and studies this trend in reference to Bengali theatre post-independence. In his work, *Nation and its Fragments*, he argues that twentieth century Bengali drama rested on two models: the modern European drama and the Sanskrit drama, restored to a reputation of classical excellence.

viii Revival of Sanskrit theatre can be traced through developments such as the return of the Kalidasa Festival of Ujjain, Shanta Gandhi's production of *Madhyamavyayoga* in Hindi by the National School of Drama in 1960s, the 1956 production of Bhasha's play *Swapnavasavadatha* in Hindi by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and many other such performances of Sanskrit plays in Hindi, sponsored by national institutions. (Bhatia, xxii)

ix Warner uses 'queer' to not only signal "the new wave of lesbian and gay studies" (x) but also, as a designation for a radically political, and politicized, body that "do[es] a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer" (xiii). It is used to highlight and challenge the

"the wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, [which function] as the site of violence" against queer individuals and communituies. (xxvi)

[x] The term was first used by Vinayak Savarkar to describe ideologically-right, conservative Hindu politics.

[xi] Historians and scholars have analyzed the Indian literary and performance archives and pointed out several visible examples of discourses around queer identities and ways of existence. An opportune moment to start talking about Indian queerness would be Vatsayana's celebrated text on sexuality, *Kamasutra*. Indian scholars on queer histories, Vanita and Kidwai trace these discourses further back to ancient India.

[xii] In his article "Approaching the Present", Sibaji Bandhopadhyay notes that a precolonial Indian text that contains an approximation of a code penalizing same-sex desire is the *Manusmriti*, which mandates forms of punishment for homosexual behavior or acts. Manu's mandates, however, are more patriarchal than homophobic; judging by the asymmetrical codes for men and women, it is apparent that the intention of the text is to safekeep the virginity of women than any obvious rigidification of hegemonic heteronormativity. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai similarly point out that while same-sex desire was not uniformly valorised or celebrated in precolonial India, homosexuality rarely called for punitive measures before the British instituted the anti-sodomy law in 1861. ("Preface" xviii)

[xiii] This law continued to criminalize same-sex relationships for 150 years, till it was repealed in 2018.

[xiv] Vanita and Kidwai examine in detail the colonial impact on the expression of same-sex desire, analyzing how colonial legal discourse rigidified normative patterns of sexual behavior. They also analyze the homophobic tendencies that continue in present-day Indian society, coexisting with more tolerant traditions ("Introduction: Modern Indian Material", 191-217).

[xv] Summarizing colonial and nationalist strands of homophobia, Choudhuri writes, "The rigidification of sexual norms in nationalistic thought that had taken place in response to the colonial vilification of indigenous sexual behavior as 'depraved' and 'abnormal' continues to manifest itself, either in the symbolic idea of the nation upheld by procreative sexuality or in the more concrete vocal equations of national identity with heteronormativity in the rhetoric of right-wing political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party in India" (14). Queer identity was located outside the reimagining of the national identity that was based on a "recovery of tradition and the recourse to the ancient Indian past" (Shahani). As it inevitably strengthened normativity, Indian postcolonial discourse deepened binaries such as the private and the public, male and the female etc.

[xvi] Michael Hames-García, in his essay, "Queer Theory Revisited," too criticizes queer theory's tendency to marginalize queer voices of colour through its establishment of white queer theory at the centre. García argues, throughout the history of thinking on race and sexuality, queers of color "have been there all along" (28). However, acknowledging the moments in which race has been addressed in queer theory, he highlights how such considerations are "gestures of marginalization, paternalism, or tokenism" (43).

[xvii] Currimbhoy's works, such as *Dumb Dancer* (1966), were known for transgressing theatrical and conventional boundaries of realism through insertion of dance sequences and disruption of linear chronologies. (Lal, 92)

[xviii] Currimbhoy's play, *Goa* (1966), an allegory on India's liberation of the Portuguese held enclave, "…showed that neither side was to blame but neither really won. *Inquilab* (1971) depicted the contemporary Maoist Naxalite movement in Bengal and *Sonar Bangla* (1972) the topical Bangladesh war." (Lal, 92)

[xix] Karnad's *Yayati* (1961) retells the Mahabharata myth about responsibility. *Tughlaq* (1964), inspired by Albert Camus' *Caligula*, reads the dilemmas of PM Nehru's political rule into the Tughlaq era. (Lal, 197)

[xx] Borrowing from Benita Parry's work in "The Institutionalization of postcolonial studies", this thesis reads the term postcolonial, not as a temporal category, but a category of critical thought used to refer to the "deconstructive philosophical position" occupied by nation-subjects as an ideological response to colonialist systems or more generally "the logocentrism and identitarian metaphysics underpinning western knowledge" . The postcolonial subject position is one that is weighed down by the "…heritage of imperialism intimately but deconstructively, is enjoined to intervene in the structure of which s/he is a part and to change something that s/he is obliged to inhabit." (67)

[xxi] Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian playwright, who writes in English, to have won the Sahitya Akademi Award —an annual honour conferred upon literary works of merit by India's National Academy of Letters—for his play *Final Solutions* (1993) in 1998. His play *Dance like a Man* (1989) was adapted into an award-winning film production of the same name. He has written and directed other critically-acclaimed films such as *Mango Souffle* (2002) and *Morning Raga* (2004) starring celebrity names such as Shabana Azmi and Lillete Dubey.

[xxii] Dattani is quick to assert in his piece, "Contemporary Indian theatre and its Relevance", that "…I am not speaking here today as a representative of the English language theatre in our country. I am here to move beyond this very limited definition of the theatre that I see myself involved with." (469)

[xxiii] Dattani sought to move away from the portrayal of exoticized Indian culture and themes, typical characteristics of oriental stereotypes he believed were circulating in late 20th century Western imagination. For him, a depiction of themes "authentically Indian" in nature, no longer meant an appropriation of western traditions simply to take recourse to an imaginative past of purity and rich values/moralities. He was more interested in using theatre to "reflect life as it is now." (Mee, 24-25)

[xxiv] As a dramatist aware of both Western theatrical traditions as well as the indigenous aesthetics of dramatic performance, Dattani made anglophone theatre a medium for socio-cultural expression of the postcolonial subjectivity. Dattani believes that an articulation of the Indian social, cultural and individual identity requires a combination of tradition and continuity accompanied by radical change in theatre. (("Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance" 472)

[xxv] Postcolonial theatre, such as Dattani's are "performance events" that refer to political, economic, and social conditions of the times." (Batra, "Introduction" 3). Dattani's theatre uncovers the contemporary positionality of the queer nation-subject: To be homosexual in India is to occupy a position of stigmatized abjection. Such stigma is produced through the constant reiteration of the

heteronormative discourse and practices by the mainstream society which perpetuates the 'subalternity' of the gendered, sexed bodies and communities.

xxvi Spivak theorizes that the purpose of postcolonial expression and critique is to tamper with hegemonic, ideological fault lines with the aim of "reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" ("Post-structuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value" 228) Dattani's theatre too, dismantles and displaces the truth-claims of heteronormativity.

xxvii *Gestus,* in Dattani's hands, becomes a "stylistic device" which provokes the reader to consider the articulations of postcolonial queerness (Batra, "Introduction" 3).

xxviii McRae comments on the politics of queer representation in *OAMNIM*: "Yes, Dattani has the Ibsenite talent for revealing the secrets of a family, but goes beyond this, making his characters turn towards the future in exorcising the past…Unlike Ibsen's plays, Dattani's are plays of healing, rather than of destruction…. although the concerns are deeply serious. The problems are not insuperable, the human spirit is never crushed…" (9) Dattani's representation of the queer world moves beyond a simple reflection of realities in India to articulate a sense of hope for idealistic harmony and acceptance of alterity in the mainstream.

xxix Anthologies of other scholars—Hoshang Merchant's *Yaarana: Gay Writing from India*, Brinda Bose's *The erotic and the phobic,* R Raj Rao's *Criminal Love?* —have similarly contributed to the discourse of alternate Indian sexuality by creating awareness of the plethora of indigenous same-sex expressions which don't fit the western model of queerness.

xxx Sexual promiscuity and alterity in the Indian society were both viewed by the Britishers as 'oriental vices' since sexual freedom in the colonies threatened colonial ideologies of Victorian heteronormativity (Dasgupta, 662).

xxxi This gestural communication is also reciprocal in nature, as is revealed through the discussion around the poster of Meena Kumari (a famous Indian actress), that Sharad had stuck on Kamlesh's walls when they lived together. When questioned about it, Kamlesh confesses that he left it untouched even after they separated as a silent gesture to honor Sharad's influence in his life (*OAMNIM*, 57).

xxxii "With Dattani, this becomes the only way to actually push these 'invisible' issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence. '...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.' (Mee, 1997)"

xxxiii This is an extension of the argument that Kanika Batra makes in her work: postcolonial drama generates a nexus between hegemonic gender ideologies and their impact on subaltern groups or communities to create a dialogue on concepts of nation, citizenships, and community. Such plays consider the material and sexual aspects of the lives of gender and sexual minorities to provide a postcolonial historical, cultural, and political analysis of the queer practices prevalent in India in the decades following independence. ("Introduction" 4)

xxxiv Speaking of Dattani's theatre, Batra labels it "socially relevant" because of its critique of State ideologies which acts as a mode of educating and shaping the views of postcolonial citizens. Its

sociality enables it to connect the audience to the performance and the performers. Batra reads "drama (as) one of the most powerful mediums of conveying social concerns, deployed in India and other postcolonial nations to articulate gender justice." ("Introduction", 2)

xxxv Dattani views his theatre as a "complex language" created by man to reflect his experience in the world, and thereby "redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement….Through this language of theatre he has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be." ("Contemporary Indian Theatre and its Relevance" 470)

xxxvi Critics and theatre academics such as Anita Singh, Tutun Mukherjee and C.S. Lakshmi in their respective works have done detailed analyses of Mangai's feminist theatre—ideas which have been explored further later in this thesis.

xxxvii One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, *Mahabharata* (traditionally attributed to Sage *Vyasa* and written sometime around 3 BC-3 AD) recounts the struggle and war that takes place in Kurukshetra between two sects of cousins—the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*. It also contains a lot of religious, philosophical, and spiritual material around Brahmanical and Vedic Hinduism such as the *Bhagvad Gita.* (Thapar, 1831)

xxxviii Mythic time cannot be separated neatly from historical time, and *itihasa* cannot become synonymous with history. Dharwadker writes, "The Purana is a recognized literary-poetic form that transmits some historical information because of its concern with the past but cannot be synonymous with history" (172).

xxxix Temporality is divided along an imaginary straight line where the past is succeeded by the present, which is followed by the future.

xl One cycle of the 4 *yugas* consist of "…4,320,000 human years; at the end of a *mahayuga*, which represents the moral nadir of human existence, the cycle begins again" (Dharwadker, 169).

xli Dharwadker argues that these differences, between the intrinsic idea of history within the Indian context as opposed to its extrinsic Western understanding, are a direct product of the uneven power relations established due to colonialism from the late 18th century onwards. Orientalist denigration across two centuries has reduced these traditional modes of Indian thought into the very antithesis of rational thinking.

xlii The practice of *swayamvara* involves the father of the bride inviting suitable bachelors from across the kingdoms to come and contest for his daughter's hand in marriage. The bride is then allowed to 'choose', from among the gathered men, a suitable groom for herself. Often, the 'choice' depends on an actual competition with the victorious individual winning the hand of the woman in question.

xliii "*Kshatriya* are second highest in ritual status of the four *varna*s, or social classes, of Hindu India, traditionally the military or ruling class. The earliest Vedic texts listed the Kshatriya (holders of *kshatra*, or authority) as first in rank, then the Brahmans (priests and teachers of law), next the Vaishya (merchant-traders), and finally the Shudra (artisans and labourers)…. In modern times,

the Kshatriya *varna* includes a broad class of caste groups, differing considerably in status and function but united by their claims to rulership, the pursuit of war, or the possession of land."

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Kshatriya". Encyclopedia Britannica, 23 Feb. 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kshatriya.

[xliv] Scholars Anuradha Kapur and Mangai provide commentary, in their respective works on theatre criticism, on this paucity of gendered representation—in terms of art and practice, as well as the literary oeuvre—in the postcolonial theatre discourse. They analyze dominant strands of debates and discussions during the late 20th century to examine the politics of what constituted 'national'. The 1956 seminar organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (India's national body in the field of performing arts) to set the national agenda for theatre and the practices of the Indian People's Theatre Association (or IPTA, the oldest association of theatre practitioners and artists in India, established during British rule in 1943) form their central subjects of inquiry. (Kapur, "Notions of Authentic" 10-12) ("Revisiting Myths" 76)

[xlv] In the Sangeet Natak Akademi report of 1985, theatre critic Suresh Awasthi tries to define the 'theatre of roots' in the postcolonial context and emphasizes this link between a rejection of colonial hegemonic thought and the recuperation of classical forms in the construction of the 'national' (*Sangeet Natak*, 1985, 77-78)

[xlvi] Such narratives led to the production of a common, pristine Indo-European heritage which was to be celebrated when juxtaposed against the debased, colonial present.

[xlvii] She goes on to note, "While it may be argued that Sanskrit performance traditions did not ban participation by women completely, as was the case with Greek theatre, the fact remains that women performers [and their practices and issues] were not considered particularly important. Besides, as the *Arthashastra*[xlvii] makes clear in several of its verses, women viewers were seen as a social problem." ("Negotiations with Classical texts" 178)

[xlviii]Colbert analyses "losses" as a central concern for black historiography, wherein the black bodies remain associated to legacies of slavery as communicated through racial hierarchies in contemporary society. She studies how playwright Parks' work manipulated the relationship between the audience and the performance to "untangle this snarled web of racial inheritances, and in Park's words, to make history." (4) The play becomes a way for Parks to "challenge existing historical narratives" (4) by inserting her voice and therefore remaking the very meaning of history. This chapter extends her revisionist reading strategy to 'untangle' the inheritances of gender structures while creating counter-histories.

[xlix] While commenting on the character's lack of agency in the myth, Mangai notes, "the epic does not record the voice of Amba in any context. Her story is narrated at different times by different people" ("Female Impersonation" 127). By re-narrating the story in the Amba/Shikhandi's voice, the play foregrounds a marginal fate—both in terms of the character's role and position and in terms of their alternate gender identity.

[l] The system of stratification that divided ancient Indian society based on social status, later evolving into the modern caste-system as found in contemporary India.

[li] Mangai reads the mythical war of Mahabharata itself as a symbolic representation of the remains of a 'rotting' patriarchal, cisnormative structure that Shikhandi questions. Such symbolism is brought out eloquently through these lines: "So many heads—heads of kings and ripped-off armour. So many hands—chopped. So much rotting flesh, so many streaming guts, so many bodies that smell. Nerves that lie shattered and bones. Broken thighs and rotting tender feet. War! War! The Great War" (*Frozen Fire*, 444)

[lii] Chaitanya highlights the determined anger that allows Amba to overcome her suffering and pain during her penance, her single-minded goal being the death of Bhishma: "She engages in superhuman tapas [penance] on the banks of the Yamuna. She gives up food, grows emaciated and dry, her hair grows matted, but she stands motionless… The *Mahabharata* tells us that the only food she consumed in those six months was the air. Following the six months, she enters the waters of the Yamuna and standing there, does tapas for another year, fasting throughout. For the next one year, she performs austerities standing on her toes and eating only a single leaf that has fallen by itself. Possessed by her scorching anger, she continues her tapas for twelve years." (197)

[liii]   The project was an initiative by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation ("Staging Gender" 67).

[liv] Colbert argues that the actor and director's choice to reenact or not the textual performance of 'mourning' revises black literary history and creates possibilities for the protagonist's son to accept or reject his 'black' inheritance on stage (6). The performance by Mangai's protagonist similarly creates possibilities for the gender fluid community to escape historical marginalization.

[lv] Colbert argues that *The America Play* foregrounds this line of inquiry by "having the Foundling Father refer to his beards, the shape of his body, his costume, and the wart on his face throughout the first act. In Brechtian fashion, he emphasizes the artifice of his physical properties…" (2)

[lvi] This assertion of androgyny isn't a simplistic reclamation of identity and agency without any struggle. Shikhandi's sense of self, though strong and always in the foreground, is fractured and ridden with doubt and confusion. (*Frozen Fire*, 443)

[lvii] "The idiom of *koothu* and *isai natakam* project maleness and female-ness, while the transformation of male into female, as revealed by costume and make-up, offered a parallel text. As Shikhandi sheds male codes of dress and Amba emerges, the play arouses emotions that transgress boundaries. Usha Rani's dramatic presence in the *koothu* garb and the transformation in to woman, her high-pitched voice, her confident narration and her song made her solo performance captivating."
(Devika, "Classic Protest Theatre.")

[lviii] Hughes argues for the reading of 'spectacles' as a methodological concept that enables reform due to its inherently transgressive form (14)

[lix] Mangai comments on the contentious space of 'culture' during the 1970-1980s feminist discourse around equality and rights in the political sphere. Since it was 'culture' which was often harnessed by the conservative voices to deny gendered claims to social justice, women came to work within the space of culture and its narratives, including the performance arts and theatre, thus appropriating them as spaces of activism. ("Staging Gender" 42)

[lx] This thesis reads Brecht's conceptualization of 'Verfremdungseffekt'—translated into English as 'alienation'—as the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh. Alienation, as a cornerstone of Brechtian theory, is a theatrical strategy of representation that seeks to expose or 'make visible' (Brecht, 192). Brecht argues that if the performance remains outside the affective response to linearity, the audience may remain free to analyse and form opinions about the play's 'fable.' (Diamond 84).