

# CHALLENGING GENDER AND SEXUALITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI AND TONY KUSHNER'S THEATRICAL NARRATIVES

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## Abstract

Theatre has served as a medium for challenging gender and sexual norms across cultures. This paper examines how Mahesh Dattani's selected three plays *Dance like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Tony Kushner's famous play *Angels in America* question, resist, and redefine traditional gender roles and non-normative sexual identities. While Kushner's play critiques heteronormativity through the lens of the AIDS crisis and political power, Dattani's works expose patriarchal oppression, family dynamics, and gender expectations in urban Indian settings. By applying thematic analysis of Judith Butler's gender performativity, Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, and Michel Foucault's discourse on sexuality, this study highlights how both playwrights portray the tensions between personal identity and societal expectations. While *Angels in America* foregrounds homosexuality and political

struggle, Dattani's plays focus on how individuals navigate family and societal pressures concerning gender and LGBTQ+ identities. This comparative analysis reveals how both playwrights use theatre as a transformative space, Kushner engaging in political activism and Dattani in cultural resistance, creating a cross-cultural dialogue on gender, sexuality, and identity politics.

**Keywords: Gender Performativity, LGBTQ+ Theatre, Tony Kushner, Mahesh Dattani, Social Expectations, Familial Conflict**

## Introduction

Theatre has long been served as a transformative medium for challenging societal norms, particularly in its engagement with issues of gender and sexuality. Theatre with its power of performance, it has the power to critique rigid binaries and expose systemic oppression over marginalized identities of

the people. It provides visibility to marginalized identities and sympathizes with their problems across the cultures. Across various countries' cultures, dramatists have utilized the stage as a means to question dominant ideologies, address injustices, and provoke discourse on the complexities of human identity. Among the contemporary playwrights who have significantly contributed to this discourse, Mahesh Dattani and Tony Kushner stand out for their bold and new explorations of gender and sexuality within their respective socio-cultural landscapes. Writing about Television drama, as Kirti Jain observes in *Modern Indian Theatre*, theatre operates on two fundamental levels: first, as a medium for delivering social messages through carefully crafted narratives, and second, as a means of fostering deeper awareness of human relationships, challenges, and societal complexities (418). Jain emphasizes that rather than merely serving as a moralizing tool, drama should enhance the audience's perception of human nature and social issues, allowing for a more profound understanding of life and its intricacies. This transformative potential of drama, according to Jain, lies in its ability to gradually sensitize audiences, enabling them to engage with their environment more deeply and internalize finer human values. Though this

process may be slow, it remains crucial in attuning spectators to a shared consciousness, ultimately positioning theatre as a powerful instrument of social and cultural transformation (Jain 418). These transformative functions of theatre, as described by Kirti Jain, are fulfilled in the works of Mahesh Dattani and Tony Kushner. Mahesh Dattani and Tony Kushner both utilize theatre as a medium to critique rigid societal structures, expose systemic oppression, and provide a voice to marginalized identities, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) and *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) confront the invisibility of queer identities in Indian society, highlighting the struggles of gay men who are forced to conform to heteronormative expectations. Through realistic yet deeply symbolic narratives, Dattani not only provides visibility to LGBTQ+ characters but also humanizes their experiences, inviting the audience to empathize with their struggles rather than merely tolerating their existence. In doing so, his plays align with Jain's assertion that theatre fosters deeper awareness of human relationships and social complexities, allowing audiences to engage with issues they might otherwise ignore and don't care to understand their problems as fellow

human beings. Similarly, Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991-92) serves as a bold political and social critique of Reagan-era America, bringing to the forefront the AIDS crisis and the persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals. The play's magical realism, combined with its raw emotional depth, creates a theatrical space where the personal and political merge, forcing audiences to confront themes of identity, power, and systemic neglect of marginalized people. Kushner's portrayal of characters like Prior Walter, who struggles with illness and abandonment, and Joe Pitt, who grapples with his suppressed homosexuality, embodies the very function of theatre as an instrument of social transformation. By exposing the hypocrisy of conservative ideologies and depicting the resilience of marginalized individuals, Kushner's work echoes Kirti Jain's perspective on drama as a means of enhancing public consciousness and fostering a more profound understanding of societal injustices. Hence both dramatists fulfill theatre's dual function, they deliver compelling social messages while simultaneously deepening the audience's perception of human nature and socio-political realities. Their works do not merely present oppression as a distant reality but instead engage spectators in an intimate exploration of suffering, resistance, and self-

acceptance, reinforcing theatre's role as a crucial site of cultural discourse and change.

A critical lens through which to analyze their works is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an inherent trait but a repeated performance shaped by societal expectations. Butler's framework provides insight into the ways both playwrights depict gender as a socially constructed and regulated identity, rather than a fixed or innate reality. In the play *Dance like a Man*, for instance, Dattani critiques the rigid expectations imposed on masculinity and femininity, using the protagonist's struggles to highlight how gender roles are enforced and policed in Indian traditional social structures. Similarly, in *Angels in America*, Kushner's characters navigate their own performances of gender and sexuality, grappling with the constraints of heteronormative society. By applying Butler's theory, this study unpacks the ways in which both dramatists dismantle traditional gender binaries and foreground the fluidity of identity. Additionally, Sara Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology offers a useful framework for understanding the spatial and social positioning of queer identities in these theatrical narratives. Ahmed suggests that societal norms dictate the expected trajectories of bodies, meaning

that individuals who deviate from these norms whether in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, or nonconforming behaviors, experience disorientation and marginalization. Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen* exemplifies this concept through its depiction of characters whose desires and gender expressions do not align with societal

expectations, leading to alienation and conflict. Similarly, Kushner's *Angels in America* portrays the marginalization of queer individuals during the AIDS crisis, illustrating the ways in which dominant structures attempt to erase or invalidate their existence. By incorporating Ahmed's perspective, this analysis sheds light on how both playwrights depict the challenges of existing within spaces that reject non-normative identities.

Moreover, Michel Foucault's discourse on sexuality provides a critical tool for examining how power operates within these narratives to regulate and control expressions of gender and sexuality. Foucault's exploration of how institutions, discourses, and social norms shape individual identities is particularly relevant to Kushner's critique of political and religious institutions in his play *Angels in America*. The play exposes the ways in which power structures, such as government

policies and religious dogma, seek to suppress queer identities and reinforce heteronormativity. Similarly, Dattani's play *Tara* critiques how patriarchal traditions determine the value and agency of individuals based on gender, reinforcing systemic inequalities that limit personal autonomy. They forced to suppress female identities in favor of male superiority. By applying Foucault's insights, this study interrogates the mechanisms through which both playwrights expose and challenge these regulatory forces. While Kushner's work is firmly rooted in the political and legal struggles of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, Dattani's plays navigate the intricate web of familial expectations and cultural traditions that shape gender and sexual identities in India. Kushner engages with political activism, advocating for legal and social reforms to protect queer rights, whereas Dattani's plays function as cultural resistance, challenging deeply ingrained societal prejudices and offering alternative narratives of gender and sexuality. Despite these differences, both playwrights utilize theatre as a space for resistance, questioning and deconstructing dominant ideologies to create room for diverse expressions of identity. This comparative study underscores the transformative power of theatre in addressing issues of gender and sexuality,

illustrating how both Dattani and Kushner employ their craft to challenge, resist, and redefine normative identities. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Butler, Ahmed, and Foucault, this analysis highlights the intersections between personal identity and societal expectations in their works. Their plays not only reflect the struggles faced by marginalized communities but also serve as powerful calls for recognition, inclusion, and social change. Despite the significant contributions of Kushner and Dattani to gender and sexuality discourses in theatre, comparative analyses of their works remain relatively underexplored. This is clearly visible research gap. Existing scholarship often focuses on their respective national and cultural contexts without drawing connections between their theatrical strategies and thematic concerns. This paper aims to bridge that gap by exploring how both playwrights use theatre as a site of resistance against gender norms and as a platform for advocating marginalized identities. By examining their narratives, this study highlights the transformative power of theatre in redefining identity and challenging socio-political structures.

### **Thematic Discussion: Gender and Sexuality in the Selected Plays**

Both Mahesh Dattani and Tony Kushner employ theatre as a space to critique and subvert entrenched gender norms, aligning with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Cecilia Ridgeway's analysis of gender as a structural system of inequality. Cecilia L. Ridgeway, in her seminal work *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (2011), argues that "as a distinctive principle of inequality, gender will disappear only when gender status beliefs have faded, but the way to erode those beliefs is through the elimination of resource and power differences between men and women" (14). However, she also contends that "gender as an organizing principle of inequality must have had some independent dynamic that caused people to reestablish it in new contexts in a way that propelled gender inequality into the future" (14). This perspective is crucial in understanding how gender norms continue to shape social hierarchies despite cultural and political transformations. Both Mahesh Dattani and Tony Kushner, through their plays, expose the persistence of these gendered structures and interrogate the mechanisms that sustain them within their respective socio-cultural landscapes. Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991) interrogates heteronormativity and political

oppression, illustrating how personal identities are shaped by societal expectations. Through characters like Prior Walter, who grapples with illness and abandonment, and Joe Pitt, who struggles with his closeted identity, the play reveals the tension between individual agency and institutional constraints. By situating gender and sexuality within the broader political landscape of Reagan era America, Kushner highlights the resilience of social hierarchies that marginalize queer identities. Dattani's plays, such as *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), and *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), similarly expose the persistence of gender oppression in Indian society. *Dance like a Man* challenges rigid gender roles by depicting Jairaj's struggle to pursue Bharatanatyam, a traditionally feminine art form not to be usually learnt by men, while the play *Tara* critiques systemic gender bias within the family structure that favors male child over female. The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* further examines the suppression of female desires and the invisibility of queer existence within patriarchal frameworks. Dattani's work demonstrates how societal expectations confine individuals, reinforcing Ridgeway's assertion that gender remains a primary organizing force in social inequality. By applying Ridgeway's perspective, this study

highlights how both playwrights construct narratives that resist and expose the endurance of gender hierarchies. While Kushner foregrounds sexuality within political discourse, Dattani interweaves gender, culture, and familial oppression to critique patriarchal dominance.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as outlined in *Gender Trouble* (1999), provides a compelling framework to analyze Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*. Butler posits that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (43-44)." This perspective challenges the notion of an inherent gender identity and reveals how societal norms dictate rigid performances of masculinity and femininity. These ideas provide a critical lens to examine Jairaj's predicament in *Dance Like a Man*. In this play we can see, this verbal exchange between father-in-law Amritlal and Ratna about Jairaj's learning dance.

AMRITLAL. Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

RATNA. No.

AMRITLAL. In being a man.

RATNA. That sounds profound. What does it mean?



AMRITLAL. Does Jairaj know where his happiness lies?

RATNA. He does. But I don't think it fits in with your idea of where it should be. (Act I)

Jairaj's struggle to pursue Bharatanatyam, a traditionally feminine art form, exemplifies Butler's claim that "compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism are understood as regimes of power/discourse (Gender Trouble, preface xxx)." His father, Amritlal, embodies these structures of power, policing Jairaj's gender expression and condemning his passion for dance: "A woman learning to dance is tolerable. A man learning to dance is ridiculous (Act I)." Amritlal's criticism reflects a hegemonic discourse that equates masculinity with dominance and rejects nonconformity as weakness. Furthermore, Butler critiques the persistent "silencing [of] the feminine as a site of subversive multiplicity (Gender Trouble, 25)." Jairaj's wife, Ratna, who is also a dancer, inadvertently becomes complicit in his marginalization. Instead of supporting his artistic aspirations, she suppresses them, reinforcing the gender norms that confine both of them. This aligns with Butler's assertion that gender identities are "not an innate truth but a social construct shaped by repeated behaviors and institutional forces (Butler 147)." Jairaj's predicament

underscores the performativity of gender and his passionate desire to dance is not inherently unmasculine, but societal conventions render it so. The intergenerational conflicts in the play *Dance Like a Man* illustrate how patriarchal ideologies perpetuate themselves. Butler, drawing from Catharine MacKinnon, argues that "gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women (Gender Trouble, preface xxii)." In this light, Amritlal's authority and Ratna's complicity in supporting patriarchal powers demonstrate how institutionalized gender norms function as mechanisms of control. Jairaj's tragic struggle reflects the broader systemic reinforcement of masculinity as dominance and femininity as subordination. Through Butler's lens, the play *Dance Like a Man* critiques the rigidity of gender norms and exposes their performative nature. The play demonstrates how patriarchal structures, embodied in familial and cultural expectations, constrain individual agency. By revealing gender as a series of imposed performances rather than inherent truths, Dattani's play challenges hegemonic norms and underscores the necessity of dismantling restrictive gender binaries.

Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* exposes the patriarchal biases ingrained within the

Indian family system, illustrating how gender is a social construct rather than a biological reality. The stark contrast between the treatment of Tara and her twin brother, Chandan, highlights how gendered expectations shape individual destinies. Despite Tara's intelligence and aspirations, she is systematically denied opportunities simply because of her gender. The family's decision to prioritize Chandan's future over hers reflects the deep-rooted patriarchal values embedded in familial and social structures. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, as articulated in *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1999), provides a crucial lens through which to understand Tara's predicament for being a girl in Indian traditional family structures. Butler asserts that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (43–44)." Tara's father and even her mother, despite her sympathy, reinforce these traditional gender roles, illustrating how patriarchal norms dictate not only societal behavior but also personal aspirations.

Tara: Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. Chandan: I haven't decided yet. (looks

at Patel) I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle. (*Tara* Act I) Patel: I suppose we were both to blame. Your mother and I. And your grandfather. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. That same evening, your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. (*Tara* ACT II)

These dialogic exchanges in the play *Tara* vividly illustrate the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that dictate gender roles and determine individual destinies. In Act I, Tara's remark reflects the arbitrary nature of gender divisions, aligning with Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* that gender is not innate but rather a socially enforced performance (43–44). Chandan's uncertainty about conforming to these roles further exposes the constructed nature of masculinity. In Act II, Patel's admission that both he and Tara's mother played a role in shaping Tara's fate reinforces Catharine MacKinnon's assertion, as referenced by Butler, that gender is the "congealed form of the sexualization of inequality (*Gender Trouble*, preface XXII)." The family's decision to prioritize Chandan's well-being over Tara's by literally taking what was rightfully hers epitomizes how patriarchal power manifests through systemic injustices. Tara's tragic end underscores how gender



operates as a structural force that not only limits opportunities but also determines life itself. Furthermore, Judith Butler, in her preface, engages with Catharine MacKinnon's argument that "stopped as an attribute of a person, sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women (Gender Trouble, preface XXII)." This perspective is particularly relevant to Tara, as the play demonstrates how gendered discrimination is not merely an individual experience but a structural reality. Tara's fate is not a result of personal inadequacy but of deeply entrenched social structures family, education, and healthcare that systematically limit female agency. That is a shocking revelation in this play. Butler further argues that "the repeated practice of naming sexual difference has created this appearance of natural division (147)," which is evident in Tara through the rigid enforcement of gender roles. The tragedy of Tara's life is not just the unfair treatment she endures but the way this treatment is justified as 'natural' within the patriarchal framework. By applying Butler's and MacKinnon's insights, the play *Tara* emerges as a powerful critique of the

ways in which patriarchal structures define and restrict female identity and agency. Dattani's play ultimately challenges the illusion of gender as an inherent reality, revealing it instead as a mechanism of systemic oppression.

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, argues that "institutions like marriage, religion, and law regulate sexuality by defining what is "natural" and what is "deviant" (Hurley xx)." He explains that rather than being a private matter, sexuality is controlled by social norms that enforce power structures (Foucault 38). In the play *Bravely Fought the Queen*, marriage is portrayed as an oppressive institution where both women and men suffer under societal expectations. Dolly is trapped in a loveless marriage with Jiten, who seeks pleasure outside with prostitutes, leaving her unfulfilled and uncared. Her loneliness leads to sexual fantasies about Kanhaiya, a servant figure, as seen in her words in the play,

DOLLY: The thumri plays. And it ends. Another one plays. I forget when that ends and a new one begins! All I'm aware of are two powerful black arms around me and the beautiful sound of the heartbeat of a warm gentle soul. The voice of Naina Devi comes back. It is the most beautiful song I've ever heard in my life! (Act I).

Alka, similarly, is forced into an unhappy marriage with Nitin, who is secretly homosexual. She turns to alcohol as an escape, while her brother Praful, knowing Nitin's truth, still arranges the marriage, showing how family and society prioritize appearances over individual happiness. Men also suffer under these rigid structures. Jiten's infidelity and Nitin's secret life reveal how patriarchal expectations push men into hiding their true selves or seeking fulfillment in socially unacceptable ways. Even Sridhar's wife Lalitha, feeling emotionally neglected finds solace in growing bonsai plants, all of these disturbed women experiences reflecting how marriage isolates individuals rather than nurturing them. Foucault's theory helps to explain how this play *Bravely Fought the Queen* critiques marriage as a system of control that suppresses desires and enforces rigid sexual norms. The play exposes how both men and women are trapped by these institutions, leading to hidden indulgences, secrecy, and frustration, just as Foucault describes in his analysis of sexuality.

Mahesh Dattani's plays *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Dance Like a Man*, and *Tara* expose how societal norms regulate individual desires, particularly within the institution of marriage and gender roles. Drawing from Michel Foucault's *The*

*History of Sexuality*, these plays illustrate how power structures dictate acceptable forms of pleasure, forcing individuals into secrecy,

repression, or transgression. While Dattani's characters struggle with societal expectations in an Indian context, similar Foucauldian dynamics emerge in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, particularly through the character of Roy Cohn. Foucault argues that "ancient Greek society did not define sexuality by heterosexual or homosexual categories but by active and passive roles in pleasure. Masculinity was linked to dominance, while indulgence in pleasure signified weakness

(Foucault 85-86)." Roy Cohn in Kushner's *Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches* reflects this philosophy, refusing to identify as homosexual despite his relationships with men. He insists, "I am not a homosexual. I am a heterosexual man who fucks around with guys" (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 46). His fear is not of his sexuality but of appearing weak or powerless. His masculinity, like in ancient Greece, is tied to control, and he dreads victimhood whether from his desires, his illness, or societal judgment. However, his AIDS diagnosis forces him into vulnerability, the heinous image for him he strongly resists. As Foucault suggests, the

ultimate fear is not just loving another man but losing self-mastery (Foucault 86). The play *Angels in America* critiques these rigid ideas of masculinity, showing that even the most powerful cannot escape fragility and mortality.

Joe Pitt another major character in this Kushner's play, his major internal conflict in *Angels in America* exemplifies Sara Ahmed's idea of disorientation in Queer Phenomenology. Ahmed argues that "certain spaces extend some bodies while making others feel 'out of place' (Ahmed 11)." As a Mormon law clerk, Joe is raised within a rigidly heterosexual environment, where marriage and faith define belonging. However, his struggle with his sexuality disrupts this alignment. His inability to connect with his wife, Harper, and his painful phone call to his mother announcing his homosexuality signify a break from the space assigned to him. This disorientation is evident in Joe's conversation with Louis in *Perestroika* (Part II), where Joe confesses, "I know how you feel, I keep expecting Divine Retribution for this, but . . . I'm actually happy. Actually (Kushner, *Perestroika* 201-202)." Joe, surprisingly, finds happiness in this relationship despite the guilt and conflict. But as per his Mormon's religious expectations, it is a great sin for men.

However, Louis immediately challenges this notion, responding, "You're not happy, that's ridiculous, no one is happy. What am I doing? With you? With anyone, I should be exterminated but with you: I mean politically, and, and you're probably bisexual, and, and I mean I really like you a lot, but ... (Kushner, *Perestroika* 201-202)."

Louis's words highlight not only his own self-doubt but also the difficulty of reconciling their relationship with the societal and political structures that shape their identities. Ahmed's notion that queer individuals experience pressure in spaces saturated with heterosexual norms (Ahmed 11) is evident in Joe's emotional turmoil. His attempt to conform through marriage and career fails to extend his sense of self. As a result, Joe's journey reflects Ahmed's argument that queer lives involve re-orienting toward new spaces, even before they fully inhabit them. His attraction to Louis is an attempt to realign himself within a new framework of identity, yet it is fraught with uncertainty and conflict. Further supporting Ahmed's claim that queers seek new spaces when they feel "out of place" (Ahmed 11), Joe Pitt redirects his desire toward Louis Ironson, his subordinate at the law firm. This shift represents Joe's attempt to reorient himself toward a queer space where his desires are acknowledged. Ahmed

notes that queer lives involve moving toward new possibilities, even if they remain uncertain (Ahmed 11). Joe's relationship with Louis, though complicated, signifies his search for an authentic existence beyond the constraints of his heteronormative past. Joe Pitt's journey mirrors this idea. He has followed the "straight" path and marrying Harper, working as a law clerk but without fully realizing that this direction was imposed rather than chosen. When he acknowledges his homosexuality, he experiences a crisis of orientation. His struggle to find his way aligns with Ahmed's idea that our paths are not always conscious choices but shaped by unseen forces (Ahmed 19). His moment of unexpected happiness with Louis is not just personal and it is emblematic of the broader struggle for queer individuals to navigate spaces that were never designed for them. By integrating both *Millennium Approaches (Part I)* and *Perestroika (Part II)* of the play *Angels in America* offers a complex portrayal of disorientation, re-orientation, and the ongoing search for belonging in a world resistant to change.

### Conclusion

Dattani's plays expose the societal regulation of gender and sexuality, illustrating how power structures enforce heteronormativity. Applying Judith Butler's

performativity theory, this paper analyzed how identities are not innate but socially constructed and policed. Foucault's ideas on power and surveillance further revealed how queer individuals navigate repression and secrecy in the traditional bound society. Similarly, Kushner's *Angels in America* critiques rigid masculinity and heteronormative power, particularly through Roy Cohn's denial of weakness and Joe Pitt's struggle with reorientation. Using Sara Ahmed's concept of disorientation, this paper

explored how queer lives are shaped by the spaces they inhabit and resist. Hence these analyses show that identity related to gender and sexuality is an ongoing negotiation, shaped by social forces yet always seeking authenticity. Hence both playwrights challenge the binaries of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, power/marginalization, revealing that gender and sexuality are not fixed categories but sites of continuous negotiation and resistance. Their works reaffirm that queerness is not just about individual identity but about disrupting and reorienting the very structures that seek to regulate it.

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