



ISSN 1951-6436

ISSN en ligne 2260-8060

Queer citizens in the city

Angelie Multani

IIT, Delhi, Inde

angelie@hss.iitd.ac.in

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3789-9243>

Reçu le 10-09-2021 / Évalué le 22-10-2021 / Accepté le 18-10-2021

Citoyens 'queer' dans la ville

Résumé

Mon article se concentre sur trois pièces de Mahesh Dattani qui mettent en avant les questions de sexualité, de communauté et de famille. Je propose d'examiner les liens entre l'homosexualité, la marginalisation, la parenté et la citoyenneté (droits/exclusion). Judith Butler soutient que la parenté est toujours hétérosexuelle. Amy Brandzel (*Queering Citizenship : Same-sex marriage and the State*, GLQ 11:2, pp 171-204) établit des liens entre les lois sur le mariage, l'institutionnalisation de la relation avec son attente tacite de procréation, l'hétéronormativité et la citoyenneté. De plus, Brandzel cite M. Jacqui Alexander qui soutient que la citoyenneté est fondée sur la démarcation des corps homosexuels comme étant en dehors des limites de la citoyenneté. Par le biais d'une législation qui criminalise les sexualités situées en dehors du cadre de la famille monogame hétérosexuelle, l'État a construit l'hétérosexualité comme une condition préalable à la citoyenneté et comme la norme tacite de l'appartenance et de la nationalité.

Mots-clés: théâtre indien, sexualité, citoyenneté, communauté, théories gay et queer

Queer citizens in the city

Abstract

My paper focuses on three plays by Mahesh Dattani which foreground issues of sexuality, community and family. I propose to look at connections between queerness, marginalization, kinship and citizenship (rights/exclusion). Judith Butler makes an argument that kinship is always heterosexual. Amy Brandzel (*Queering Citizenship: Same-sex marriage and the State*, GLQ 11:2, pp 171-204) draws connections between marriage laws, the institutionalization of the relationship with its unspoken expectation of procreation, heteronormativity and citizenship. Further, Brandzel cites M Jacqui Alexander who argues that citizenship is predicated on the demarcation of homosexual bodies as outside the bounds of citizenship. Through legislation that criminalizes sexualities located outside the purview of the heterosexual monogamous family, the state has constructed heterosexuality as a prerequisite to citizenship and as the unspoken norm of membership and national belonging.

Keywords: Indian theatre, sexuality, citizenship, community, gay and queer theory

Introduction

India is a traditionally conservative society which has historically been plural and open to alternative sexual identities and practices; but increasingly in contemporary society these alternative lifestyles are only 'allowed' to exist if they do not demand to be acknowledged or accommodated. Homosexuality (sic) has been a criminal offence in the Republic of India under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, but the origins of the law dates back to 1861, when the British colonial government criminalised sexual activities "against the order of nature", including homosexual sexual activities. This colonial law was not repealed, but lingered on in the postcolonial independent Republic.

Looking at the historical origins of this law, Leela Gandhi (Gandhi, 2007: 92) argues that even though the 'East' was identified within colonial discourse as a homosexual (effeminate) zone, the imperial project was not homoerotic but homophobic. The anti-colonial/nationalist endeavour to reform in the image of the aggressor by 'recuperating' a 'lost' native masculinity, argues Gandhi, can be said to herald the onset of a postcolonial heteronormativity, which was "...tragically collaborative and fraught by the fear of effeminacy or homophobia." It is no surprise, then, that in independent India, prejudice against all queer/gay and lesbian people was not 'erased' but in fact, even strengthened.

It is this prejudice operating through society, and conflated with other prejudices of communalism and colour (or skin tone, in the Indian context) that are revealed in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. In this paper I trace the inter-sectionalities of sexuality, marriage/kinship and citizenship/community in contemporary India, within the urban spaces of putative cosmopolitan middle-class life as represented in three plays of Dattani. Dattani has four major plays that focus on queerness, community and how they function in contemporary cosmopolitan Indian cities. Each play deals with the subject differently and the treatment varies from almost light-hearted farce to tragic. In this paper I discuss three of the four plays as they specifically discuss the issues of community and belonging in ways that the fourth play doesn't.

Do the Needful (DtN) (1997, radio play on the BBC) works as a light-hearted subversion of the conservative idea of "arranged marriages", even as non-normative desires are held up and examined - is a man falling in love with another man as transgressive as a Hindu woman falling in love with a Muslim man? DtN works as a comic subversion at multiple levels - the title refers back (tongue in cheek) to a favourite Indian English bureaucratic phrase - the formal phrasing of a request/order in officialdom here refers to the parents' expectations of their 'children' - that

they will 'do the needful' and marry, procreate, perpetuate bloodlines, traditions and social norms; it could also refer ambiguously to what the young people 'have to do' for their 'needs' - in order to live lives that fulfill their own desires.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (OaMNiM) (Mumbai, 1998) is one of Dattani's best known and most "controversial" plays - all the characters (save one) on stage are gay - male or female, from different socio-economic backgrounds, communities and with different goals, needs and desires. Some are single, some in proxy relationships and some in long-term committed partnerships. It also explores the idea of a community or kinship based not on traditional terms of biology or marriage, but on values of love and acceptance.

The idea of kinship and community is also explored in the radio play *Seven Steps around the Fire* (SSatF) (BBC Radio 4, 1999). The community here is the hijra community that is an integral if largely invisible part of traditional Indian society. The hijra community of course is different from the one represented in OaMNiM, since it functions as a community tied together with rituals and social bonds. Self-appropriating the terms of abuse regularly hurled at them by 'normal' people, the hijras seek to turn the fear of non-normative sexuality, illegitimate desire and even their so-called capacity for violence into weapons of empowerment. The aspect of forced heteronormative marriage is the darker side of the play first discussed - an arranged marriage for a homosexual man can be a proxy, a cover-up either serious or light-hearted, but it can also be the final denial and rejection of the individual's desires and identity.

All these plays interpolate sexuality with community and even citizenship - in the first play, DtN, we are constantly reminded that in India, identities cannot be conceived without reference to family, class and community. The prescriptions of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' love include communal or religious identity, caste, class, region as well as, of course, sexuality. There are some boundaries that are stretched for the sake of convenience and to pacify the idea of modernity and cosmopolitanism.

"We are family"... Family and Community

All the plays demonstrate a different aspect of family - from the nuclear family nestling within the larger community shown in DtN, to the invented communities of OaMNiM and SSatF. Sometimes the plays demonstrate the breakdown of families - exposing the tensions and fault lines in units that are based on traditional or patriarchal structures of oppression. Focusing on the family as a starting point is invaluable when looking at Dattani's plays - inasmuch as the texts enable a critical

questioning of individual identity and sexualities (especially in the plays under discussion here), they also focus on the family as a primary unit. The family in Dattani's plays is not necessarily a "happy, nuclear/joint family" - it is often a microcosm of society at large, and in fact very often cruel, biased and oppressive. The tensions between the idea of the normative family in the Indian context where it is seen as primary and the functioning of the family unit as oppressive also point to the tensions and fissures of a changing society, of revealing the tears in the fabric of cultural norms. Though the idea of the family unit as primary is a contested one in gay and lesbian scholarship, in South Asian literature it is still important enough to justify it as an opening into the discussion of sexuality.

Bose and Bhattacharya remind us that the heteronormative family unit is not:

central to all of its contexts in absolutely similar ways. ... it is vitally important not to assume (then) that all anti-heteronormative sexual relations and identities are necessarily anti-family. The unit of family itself is today constantly being challenged and reconstituted in non-normative evolutions which is making it possible for gay and lesbian marriages and hijra families/communes, for example, to lay claim to some of the economic and social benefits of what is considered to be the established, traditional family unit. [Bose and Bhattacharya, 2007: xxvi].

The family units in DtN are both conservative and flexible. The Gowdas and Patels (two different community groups) are deeply embedded in their own communities yet recognize that their "wayward" children may not be able to find partners from within those close communities. The advantages and disadvantages of this closeness within the groups are highlighted with the families, i.e. the parents, making the "bold" decision to look for marriage partners outside the specific group in the hope that the young people will be more acceptable to groups who may not have heard of their particular indiscretions. The fine balance between tradition and modernity or between conservatism and cosmopolitanism is successfully negotiated in this play as both sets - the parents as well as the young protagonists find the cover of the arranged match working in their favour.

It is in the hypocrisy of using 'modernity' as a fig-leaf for desperate measures that is possible in the context of the city that Dattani's work is embedded in. The urban middle classes that inhabit India's cities imagine themselves as 'modern', as 'Westernised' in ways that have liberated them from traditional notions of social boundaries, yet they are as circumscribed within normative rules as they are by the noise and bustle of the city itself.

The city enables both Alpesh and Lata to transgress or transcend their community boundaries and to have romantic relationships with people who would otherwise have been taboo. It is the anonymity of the city that allows Lata to meet a Muslim man and the urban lifestyle that makes it possible for Alpesh to have a ‘manicurist’ and ‘masseuse’. The presence of the city as a social and cultural context is palpable in Dattani’s plays. Society and the multiple ways in which it impinges on our present is evidenced not only in an overtly political sense, as in that of communal violence and differences in culture interfering with personal relationships, but also through social mores and values.

In OaMNiM the outside world is suggested not only as a realistic marker of space and context but also functions as a symbol of location in the psychological sense. The stage directions in Act I read:

The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first is a small flat, beautifully done up in ethnic chic’ fashion. A huge poster of Meena Kumari in ‘Pakeezah’ offers relief to a stark white wall. The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city with its glittering lights. The flat is too high up for the noise but the partial view of the ‘Queen’s Necklace’ suggests that the flat is located in the upmarket area of Marine Drive, though not quite Pali Hill. (Dattani, 2000: 49).

If we simply concentrate on the spectacle of the Mumbai skyline seen as a backdrop to Kamlesh’s flat and his attempts at ‘creating a world where he can belong’ [Act One], the double function of the setting is quite apparent. In the first place it functions simply as a marker of space, and of socio-cultural locale. Kamlesh has succeeded in carving out a space on Marine Drive, if ‘not quite ‘Pali Hill’. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it signifies the constant and ineradicable presence of the cityscape itself - the conservative social world with its values, prejudices and judgements, that nobody can quite get away from, no matter how ‘high up’ you get.

The action in the play is also constantly circumscribed by the noise from a wedding party taking place downstairs from Kamlesh’s flat. The wedding guests serve to locate the play physically, again, much as the skyline of Marine Drive does, and also goes beyond this function as the very fact of the wedding, socially sanctioning and legitimising a relationship between two people (willing or unwilling) highlights the ‘transgressive’ nature of the choices made by Kamlesh and his friends.

The stigma-free utopic or radical space for freedom of sexual identity and choice is illusory in the ‘real world’, as represented through the bubble of Kamlesh’s flat in OaMNiM. The fragility of the bubble which ‘allows’ Kamlesh and his friends to lead

apparently free and independent lives is constantly highlighted by the fact that this freedom is afforded (literally) both by socio-economic circumstances and is also at the mercy of the outside world, which can cut off electricity (or other essential life) supplies at their whims. It is the permeability of the boundaries between the group of friends in the flat and the world outside that emphasises the tenuousness of the lives lead by those who choose non-heterosexual relationships and affiliations. The precariousness of queer lifestyles in heterosexual communities is underscored not just by the noise and intrusion of the wedding party but in the ways in which the outside materially affects the life choices of those who seek to belong or be accepted by the community.

The friends in Kamlesh's flat are not a community based on sexual differences - As Esther Newton has argued, communities are not necessarily homogenous - "the community is an on-going social reality in, around and against which people align themselves according to their own self-definitions." [Newton, 1972: 21]. The temptation to treat all the gay/queer/lesbian characters gathered together in Kamlesh's flat as a unified group is tremendous - however it is imperative to recognize the fact that within the space of the apartment, and "despite the alternative sexual preferences" that have brought them together, each member of the group is sharply differentiated from the other by their self-definitions. It is not simply a question of who is "out" and who is not, it is in the ways in which they identify themselves, see themselves as subjects that sets them apart. Kamlesh, Bunny, Sharad, Ranjit, Ed/Prakash and Deepali and the guard all function very differently as subjects, sexual and otherwise.

It is only when the characters realize they can trust each other, when they feel empathy and love (again, not necessarily in a sexual or conjugal manner) for each other that the sense of community in a positive and affirming way is realized. Similarly, in DtN, it is when the young betrothed pair Alpesh and Lata see that they are similarly marginalized, that their choices are rejected by the mainstream or power apparatuses in similarly discriminatory ways that the "bond" of friendship/ community is forged, which essentially undercuts or subverts the overt bond of conjugality that they have been coerced into. Their partnership is possible precisely because they choose it themselves, without the prejudicial or bigoted baggage still carried by the older generation.

The unacceptability of the relationships that Lata and Alpesh have chosen for themselves also highlights another interesting aspect of mainstream conservative society in India today. Lata is in love with a Muslim man, derogatorily and "automatically" referred to by her parents as a "terrorist" on account of his religion. The segueing of Islam into terrorism is one aspect of the "othering" of the Muslim from what is considered mainstream Indian society.

Citizenship and Culture

Unpacking the intersectionality of sexuality, community and citizenship, we see the anxieties of one category traced onto the others. Sexuality is of course, connected with culture, and culture with nationalism, and nationalism with citizenship. Returning to Gandhi's argument which was laid out at the beginning of this paper, there is a clear connection in contemporary India between homophobia and culture and an equally clear connection between culture and nationalism. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 stated that "Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi and Christian foreigners, who have migrated from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan into India up to 31.12.2014, on account of persecution faced by them due to their religion" would be granted citizenship status in India. Muslims are not included in the list.

If we conflate the 'minorities' the other way around, the obvious question that arises is, are queer people also not 'already' citizens? What are the rights and privileges that queer people are forbidden from enjoying at par with hetero-normative Indians? The first and obvious one is the right to have a homosexual romantic/sexual relationship. Queer people also cannot marry, have children (we will not discuss the nuances of 'have' at this point) or have any kind of social contract with their homosexual partners. Butler of course has raised the question as to why marriage should be the goal of same sex relationships, but it is equally true that it may be a personal choice for some, a choice they have no legal or social authority to enact.

In her essay "Is Kinship always already Heterosexual", Butler points out the inextricable links between culture and the nation-state, where the state legislates on who belongs, and who doesn't, on the basis of who they have (legitimate) sex with. As Butler's argument goes, 'Legitimate' sex rightly belongs in a socially state sanctioned cross-sexual relationship, and even if we are radical enough to imagine that it may function between a same sex couple, we are not far-sighted enough to imagine a society without the marriage bond. Kiran (Kamlesh's sister) makes the statement in *OamNiM*: "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry". Ranjit's response to her is a typical Dattani line - witty, sarcastic and darkly true - "Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex." (Dattani, 2000: 98) Who the "they" is, and why should "they" have the power to dis/allow a putatively personal choice is not explored further.

Returning to the threat posed by "kinship outside the family", it is important to remind ourselves of what Foucault had stated: "what most bothers those who are not gay about gayness is the gay lifestyle, not sex-acts themselves." [O'Higgins,

1983: 22]. It is the idea of inventiveness, which “in Judith Butler’s terminology might breach the possibilities of imaginable and realizable ... configurations within culture.” [Gandhi, 2000: 100].

With this theoretical context provided by the quotations given above, I would like to critically examine the opening scene of the play with Kamlesh in the bedroom with the security guard. This is a frankly sexual scene which firmly anchors the discussion of homosexual identity and choice not simply in intellectual or abstract debates, but in a physical, sexual context. Quoting Leela Gandhi, this scene firmly “puts the sex back into homosexuality, and in so doing, foregrounds the rights of sexuality as the originary postulate of a homosexual politics.” [Gandhi, 2000: 96] The play uses this opening visual along with another visual, of the photograph of a naked Kamlesh and Ed/Prakash as bookends which emphasise the very real and corporeal basis of the “difference” between the protagonists of the play and the normative society which surrounds them.

The opening scene is significant and has multiple resonances. It is meant to be apparent that the two characters are in some sort of intimate relationship, one which has not however transcended class boundaries. There are stark visual differences and markers of class and privilege, as Kamlesh lounges in a dressing gown, smoking and watching the guard dress. Kamlesh hands the guard a few hundred rupee notes from his trousers and the guard salaams (salutes him). When they step out into the living room the differences between them are even more emphasized as Kamlesh hands the guard more money and instructs him to buy alcohol for the guests expected later. The complexities of this relationship that we cannot quite slot neither into a consensual one nor into a commercial transactional one are heightened when Kamlesh bends down to tie the guard’s shoe laces. This gesture in the Indian context is both transgressive as well as intimate - there is a clear class and caste hierarchy violated here as there are strong taboos governing the rules of footwear and who touches who’s feet. By tying the guard’s laces Kamlesh violates all rules of normative class behavior.

The other complications arising from not just social taboos but also the real threat of criminalization of homosexuality are underlined when Kamlesh asks the guard if he engages in a relationship with him for money. The guard initially denies this, then:

Guard: (*shakes his head*): No Nahin. (*Realises the implication of what he has said. Hastily.*) Yes yes. I do all this for money¹.

It is clearly the double threat of social censure as well as legal criminality that makes the guard prefer the stigma of a sex-worker rather than acknowledge

that he may be gay or may be in a consensual relationship with another man. The stench of exploitation of class cannot be ignored - Kamlesh may be very gentle and may have displayed tenderness in the gesture of bending down to tie the guard's shoes, but he does clearly enjoy the dominant position in the relationship. Lounging in a dressing gown and watching while the guard puts on his uniform is an act of sexual dominance and ownership, afforded by privilege.

It is precisely this act of Kamlesh tying the shoelaces of the guard which constitutes a breaching of possibilities in culture. The transgression of all social boundaries is what makes the gay lifestyle such a threat to society. It is the formation of a different kind of community, one based on mutual acceptance and respect, that doesn't accept binary oppositions and irreducible power relationships as necessary and inevitable. The radical 'queering' of kinship this entails also brings forth a utopic view of social relationships and family, one that embraces incompleteness and multiple views of the self.

To live in heterosexual society and to perpetuate its binary oppositions that are based on categories of sex is to implicitly or explicitly accept those categories as natural and binding. Traditional society and kinship, as Judith Butler says is 'already heterosexual', where the rights of homosexual men and women to marry are predicated on a notion of state legitimacy and the 'right' to have children. "To be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there and to find that one's public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation." [Butler, 2002: 17].

Again, it is not just that homosexuals are de-legitimised as citizens, but specifically as Indian citizens in this context - Gandhi mentions that the "slim entry" on South Asia in the voluminous 'The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage' is attributed to "the generally conservative mores of the people, brought on by repression and piety, compelling its homosexual refugees to seek amnesty in other, more sexually enlightened cultures..." "To come out, in other words, is to go out". (Gandhi, 2000: 91) Whilst not going into the merits of an argument that does not recognize privilege in the act of coming out, let me point towards the character of Ranjit in *OaMNiM*. Ranjit immediately sets himself apart from the daily life of India by wanting to make sure the 'lovely cool air' of the flat is not contaminated by the 'muck' outside. He is referred to as a 'coconut' by Sharad - brown on the outside and white inside, in reference to his rejection of his Indian identity in preference to living in the West. He claims that to live freely and openly according to his sexual preferences would not be a possibility in India, therefore he prefers to live abroad where he can be openly in a committed relationship with his partner. When Bunny accuses him of being ashamed of being Indian, he retorts:

That's really rich, coming from a closet homosexual like you! Yes, I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can't seem to be both Indian and gay. (Dattani, 2000: 88).

At another point in the play, Sharad makes an ironic reference to the de-legitimised status of homosexuals as citizens - as he and Kamlesh argue over what music they should play, Sharad suddenly asks Kamlesh to play "our anthem". When he is questioned as to what he means, Sharad responds: "I certainly didn't mean Jana Gana Mana..." (Dattani, 2000:55). Homosexuals have 'their own' anthem, they are not counted as part of the normative world outside, and especially not if they refuse to camouflage themselves, to make themselves invisible and fit in. The choice seems to be between sexuality and community, or citizenship. In a memory scene with Ed, while looking out on the street with him, Kamlesh says, "They can't see us at all, though we can see them ... they don't really see us." (Dattani, 2000: 81).

Mainstream society can 'tolerate' while being able to ignore homosexuality and its radical lifestyle, as long as queer people "camouflage" themselves as Bunny puts it. It is when the material reality of sexuality breaks its borders, when it can no longer be sealed into closed spaces, that society turns on those it deems 'different'. The photograph of Ed and Kamlesh embracing in the nude flies out of the window and is seen by the children in the wedding party. The guard comes to inform Kamlesh that there will be a complaint lodged the next day and says:

You people want the whole world to know what you do? What will happen to you now? Why do you want to do all this so openly? [Dattani, 2000:105].

The operative phrase here is "khullam khulla" - openly. There is a popular Hindi movie song, the lyrics of which translate to "We will love openly and publicly/ we will not be frightened of the world³". The idea of claiming one's right to love where one wants to, to claim indeed, your right to live the way you want to is in itself a threat to conservative society and state which needs to govern and regulate all relationships. The need for this governance is rooted in a belief in 'culture' - this takes different forms in different countries, but the symbolic order of heteronormativity is in the "belief that the culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child and that the child have this dual point of reference for its own initiation into the symbolic order, and the symbolic order consists of a set of rules that order and support our sense of reality and cultural intelligibility." (Butler, 2002: 29).

In DtN, at Lata and Alpesh's wedding, Alpesh's mother breaks down when her spiritual guru enters, and says " ...Bless them, Swamiji! Bless them for a long and happy life! (*crying*) Bless them. May our lives be added to their lives. May they

have many children. At last God has answered our prayers!” (Dattani, 2000:156). There is a belief in a “natural order”, which is predicated on cross-sex marriage and procreation. Even when Alpesh hints at his sexuality as a probable reason for the failure of his first marriage, his mother denies it - this denial constitutes her determination to de-legitimize his sexuality and to make him into a normative member of her society⁴. The end of the play DtN subverts the dominant notion of ‘closure’ and perpetuation of the culture through a marriage - the heteronormative cross-sex marriage is a symbolic success, but is not going to actually achieve the goals set for it.

The pervasiveness of state and social control works through the ways in which it is internalized by us - ironically it is precisely the membership in a community/group that makes us desire or aspire to be completely a part of it, to be completely accepted, acknowledged, legitimized. This desire for recognition, is one that various characters in OaMNiM express throughout; the desire to be seen, and it is this that works to make them hide, obfuscate and lie. Both Bunny and Ed/Prakash are examples of this, however it is Ed/Prakash who is the more extreme and damaged product of internalized heteronormative values. He desperately wants to belong to the world outside “the bubble” as he calls it, and to be seen as “a real man”. By accepting the power of society and the state to legitimize sexual relationships, not only does Ed/Prakash accept that his homosexuality is illegitimate but he himself doesn’t exist as a real person. Prakash is committed to living a lie, in some form of pretence or the other so as *not* to be seen as who he really is. As Butler says, there are significant forms of disenfranchisement that occur when sexual and kinship relations that fall outside the heteronormative model are de-realised: a gay person may not be admitted to the hospital where their loved one is ill, may be refused the body of the loved one when they die, may have their adopted children and access to them taken away by biological parents. These are made worse by:

the personal effacements that take place in daily life. If you’re not real, it can be hard to sustain yourself over time, the sense of delegitimation can make it harder to sustain a bond, a bond that is not real anyway, a bond that does not ‘exist’, that never had a chance to exist, that was never meant to exist. Here is where the absence of state legitimation can emerge within the psyche as a pervasive, if not fatal sense of self- doubt. And if you’ve actually lost the lover who was never recognized to be your lover, then did you really lose that person? Is this a loss, and can it be publicly grieved?” (Butler, 2002: 25-26).

The community that is shown as possible in the bubble of Kamlesh’s flat is one based on embracing multiple identities, for instance, the apparent contradiction that Ranjit faces, when he says he cannot be both Indian and gay. Rejecting

the straitjackets of binary oppositions and identities based on categories of sex and power is the way forward for a community based on ideals of equality and acceptance.

Dattani takes the ideal of this community forward in *Seven Steps around the Fire* a radio play commissioned by the BBC and first broadcast in 1999. The title refers to the Hindu marriage ceremony, which is solemnized by the central ritual of the couple going around the fire seven times while making seven commitments to each other. This bond between the couple is also supposed to last for seven lifetimes. The plot of *SSatF* revolves around the murder of a hijra⁵ - Kamla, a crime for which another hijra Anarkali is jailed, despite there being no real evidence against her. The protagonist of the play is Uma, a sociologist working at the University where her father is the Vice-Chancellor. Uma is writing a research paper on hijras and her access to Anarkali in prison is facilitated by her other familial relationships - she is married to the Superintendent and is the daughter-in-law of the Commissioner of Police.

At first glance the two - Anarkali and Uma live in completely different worlds. Uma is surrounded by material and social security, her work and life comfortably propelled by networks of power and privilege to which she has access. Anarkali is completely disempowered, criminalized and exploited in a system which can use her but which will never accept her. The only ways in which Anarkali can fight back is either by taking recourse to exactly what the hijra community is feared for, that is their alleged power to curse, and to the violent transgressive sexuality that threatens normative society. The constable Munswamy who is appointed to help Uma in her interviews begs her to consider other cases - cases of murder, incest, domestic abuse - anything but the repellant and transgressive one involving a hijra, who, because s/he does not fit into the binary categorization of gender, becomes completely dehumanized - an "it". An "it" for whom there is no legitimate space in a heteronormative community and citizenry.

As Uma's notes remind us, the two events in mainstream Hindu culture where the presence of the hijra is tolerated are birth and marriage - these cornerstones of filial, kinship and community building rites are based on relations of socially sanctioned sex and birth. Rejecting these ideas of community, we hear Anarkali teasing Munswamy: "We make relations with our eyes. With our love. I look at him, he looks at me, and he is my brother. I look at you, you look at me and we are mother and daughter. Oh brother, give me a cigarette, na." (Dattani, 2000: 11).

In this teasing and manipulative manner Anarkali gestures towards the exploitation prevalent under the surface in all relationships - she asks Munswamy "You

are not a sister-fucker?" (Dattani, 2000: 11). Similarly, Uma's attempt to build a fake empathetic bond is rebuffed on grounds of difference:

Anarkali: If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister.

Uma: Oh, thank you.

Anarkali: But you are not a hijra, no?

Uma: No.

Anarkali: So you will not be my sister.

Pause

Uma: Of course we can be sisters!

Anarkali: Where are you and where am I? (Dattani, 2000: 13).

When Uma is trying to convince Anarkali that she cannot help her with the police, despite her claims of sisterhood and her familial relationships with the police, she blurts out that she is there to get information on her thesis. Anarkali's response is emphatic: "Then say that. Don't pretend to be my sister." (Dattani, 2000: 13).

The dehumanization and surveillance that the marginalized hijras are constantly subjected to is mirrored and refracted in Uma's relationships with her own family. The 'normalcy' with which we tend to perceive the (literal, in Uma's case) policing of women in mainstream society comes under critical focus when it is seen through this context. Munswamy the constable assigned to help Uma is also assigned to 'guard' her and to make sure she doesn't cross the boundaries of behavior deemed acceptable by her husband and father-in-law. The line between 'protection' and 'policing' is a very fine one.

The mystery of who murdered Kamla and why is soon cleared up - the appearance of a photograph in which Kamla and Subbu, a minister's son, are married and happily smiling at the camera is handed to Subbu at the wedding ceremony which his father is forcing him into. Unable to accept the death of his lover at the hands of his father and equally unable to accept the heterosexual relationship being forced on him, Subbu shoots himself.

The two different ideas of community hang uneasily together at the end of this short and disturbing play. On the one hand the marginalized and disempowered Uma and Anarkali seem to have formed a genuine bond of kinship and acceptance, but on the other, the networks of authority and power close ranks as Uma's husband and father-in-law allow Subbu's father, a politically important person to (literally) get away with murder. The individual personal relationship of marriage, of equality and love that is ideally supposed to exist between Suresh and Uma is completely exposed to be farcical as Suresh barter's Uma's integrity in exchange for Sharma's gratitude. The play ends with Uma's voice-over narrating the complicity of all the

social, institutional and state structures in the conspiracy to silence and erase the lives and alternate sexual choices of two young people. The threat that this alternate or transgressive sexuality posed to the state and society is clearly not in its mere existence, but in the attempt it made to be 'legitimate', to be open.

Conclusion

Acknowledging differences and multiplicities of identity and choice as equally valid and legitimate is an important step towards creating a better community. Maybe a community like this is indeed a utopic space - a 'bubble', but the idea of utopias as radical, as being able to effect change can only be realized through changing attitudes and raising critical questions about our culture, our present. Returning to Butler's argument here, maybe we should question the very idea of 'legitimacy' and stop being drawn into arguments that force a binary position. Rejecting conventional ideas of kinship and sexuality may constitute the first step towards this kind of radical utopic community.

Bibliography

- Dattani, M. 2000. *Collected Plays Volume 1*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Butler, J. 2002. "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?". *Differences*, vol 13, no. 1. p. 14-44. Duke University Press, doi:10.1215/10407391-13-1-14.
- Brandzel, A. L. 2005. "Queering Citizenship? Same-Sex Marriage And The State". *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian And Gay Studies*, vol 11, no. 2, p. 171-204. Duke University Press, doi:10.1215/10642684-11-2-171.
- Bose, B., Subhabrata Bhattacharya. 2021 (2007). *The Phobic And The Erotic: The Politics Of Sexualities In Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Seagull Books.
- Gandhi, L. "A Case Of Radical Kinship: Edward Carpenter And The Politics Of Anti-Colonial Sexual Dissidence". In Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya. 2021. p. 91-116, Accessed 9 June 2021.
- Newton, E. 1979. (1972) *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Higgins, James. 1983. "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview With Michel Foucault". *Salgamundi*, vol 22, no. p. 58-59. Accessed 9 June 2021.
- Foucault, M., Hurley, R. 1990. *The History Of Sexuality*. London: Penguin.

Notes

1. My translation: The original lines in the play are retained in Hindi as this also functions as a marker of class difference between the Hindi speaking guard and the English speaking Kamlesh and his friends. Original lines are: "Hahn! Hahn, main paisa keliye to karta hoon sab kuch".
2. My translation: Original lines are: "Aap log apna kam sari duniya ko batana chahte hain kya? ... Abhi aap logon ka kya hoga? Aap yeh sab khullam khulla kyo karte hain?"

3. Original lyrics: “*Khullam khulla pyaar karenge hum dono/ is duniya se nahin darenge hum dono*” Movie: *Khel Khel Mein*, 1975. Directed by Ravi Tandon.
4. This is of course a complex argument and I do not mean to raise it as a general universal truth, but the complexities of the position are beyond the current scope of argument and it holds true for this point.
5. Hijras are transgender people, eunuchs and inter-sex persons who have been officially recognized as the ‘Third Gender’ in India.