

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Narrative Form and sexual annihilation of Desire in Mahesh Dattani's Dramas**

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Article Received: 20/07/2026; Article Accepted: 02/08/2026; Published Online: 04/08/2026

Abstract

This paper undertakes a comprehensive literary review of Mahesh Dattani's dramatic oeuvre with particular emphasis on narrative strategies, the deployment of Indian cultural frameworks, and the representation of what may be termed sexual annihilation—the systematic erasure, repression, or distortion of non-normative desire. While Dattani is frequently positioned as a realist playwright, this study argues that his dramaturgy is structurally complex, combining linear narration with fractured memory, monologue, and symbolic layering. Through close textual analysis of plays such as *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the paper demonstrates that narrative form in Dattani is inseparable from ideological critique. Indian cultural practices—ritual, family hierarchy, marriage, and communal identity—are not merely contextual backdrops but active forces that shape narrative tension. The study further contends that Dattani's treatment of sexuality reveals a pattern of suppression that operates through silence, denial, and internal conflict. By integrating feminist and queer theoretical perspectives, the paper establishes that Dattani's theatre transforms narrative into a space of resistance where marginal identities are simultaneously represented and contested. Ultimately, the study positions Dattani as a dramatist who redefines Indian English theatre by exposing the interplay between narrative structure, cultural ideology, and the politics of desire.

Keywords: Narrative Technique; Indian Culture; Sexual Repression; Queer Identity; Identity and Power**1. Introduction**

Feminist consciousness is a significant and multidimensional theme in Mahesh Dattani's plays. The female characters in his works are not merely portrayed as victims of oppression or abuse; rather, they struggle to assert their existence, desires, and rights against the patriarchal social order. The play *Tara* highlights the brutal consequences of gender discrimination and a social mindset that privileges the male child; despite her talent, Tara is deprived of opportunities due to decisions made by a patriarchal family. *Bravely Fought the Queen* exposes the physical and mental abuse, sexual harassment, and the raw exercise of patriarchal power that women endure within the domestic sphere. In *Where There's a Will*, the power dynamics within the husband-wife relationship and the woman's aspiration for self-assertion hold particular significance. While *Dance Like a Man* raises questions regarding gender roles and societal expectations, the lives of its female characters are also shaped by patriarchal control. Dattani's feminism does not rely on simplistic slogans; instead, it analyzes the complex interrelationships involving family, marriage, sexuality, the body,

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motherhood, and social power. Consequently, his plays serve as a powerful critical voice regarding the status and freedom of women in Indian society. As it introduces the thoughts of Bhagwat Geeta: “मम कर्म फलं कुरु न मां प्रीतिं न च विमर्शः” – meaning “we are coming in this world only to play our part”.

2. Historical narratives:

Modern Indian drama has gradually shifted from the reliance on mythic and historical narratives toward an engagement with contemporary social realities, where the emphasis falls on lived experience rather than inherited legend. Within this transformation, Mahesh Dattani occupies a crucial position, not merely as a dramatist of social issues but as a craftsman of narrative form. His plays reveal that storytelling itself is never neutral; it is shaped by cultural norms, ideological pressures, and the unspoken tensions that govern human relationships. Dattani's theatre is frequently described as realist, yet such a description risks overlooking the sophistication of his narrative strategies. His plays often unfold through fragmented memory, retrospective narration, and layered dialogue, allowing multiple perspectives to coexist. In *Tara*, the narrative is structured through Dan's recollection, creating a temporal distance that underscores the emotional trauma of the events. As Dan reflects, "The pain comes back... every time I think of her" (Dattani, *Collected Plays* 51), indicating that narrative itself becomes a site of psychological reconstruction. Equally significant is Dattani's engagement with Indian cultural frameworks. His plays are deeply rooted in the social fabric of urban middle-class India, where institutions such as family, marriage, and religion shape individual identity. These cultural structures are not static; they actively influence the course of the narrative, often determining the fate of the characters. In *Final Solutions*, for instance, communal identity is not merely a thematic concern but a narrative force that drives the conflict. Javed's observation, "It must feel good being a majority" (Dattani 87), reveals how cultural belonging translates into power. The question of sexuality occupies a central place in Dattani's work, particularly in plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Here, desire is not freely expressed but negotiated within a framework of social prohibition. The narrative exposes what may be described as sexual annihilation—the gradual erasure of identity through denial and repression. As one character confesses, "We pretend to be something we are not" (Dattani 112), highlighting the disjunction between public persona and private self. This paper argues that Dattani's dramaturgy cannot be understood without considering the interplay between narrative form, cultural context, and sexual politics. By examining how these elements intersect, the study seeks to demonstrate that Dattani's theatre is not simply a reflection of society but a critical intervention that challenges dominant narratives. It denotes famous Rabindra Sangeet, "মদ খাওয়া গন্ধ মদ খাওয়া গন্ধ মদ খাওয়া গন্ধ মদ খাওয়া গন্ধ"—meaning 'I am drinking the venom not unknowingly'.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Mahesh Dattani has evolved considerably over the past two decades, moving from an initial emphasis on his thematic concerns to a more nuanced exploration of his dramaturgical techniques. Early critics tended to foreground his role as a socially conscious playwright who brought marginalised issues into the mainstream of Indian English theatre. Angelie Multani, for instance, observes that Dattani's plays "bring into visibility those lives that remain unacknowledged within dominant cultural narratives" (Multani 34). This emphasis on representation established Dattani as a significant voice in contemporary drama. However, subsequent scholarship has shifted attention toward the structural aspects of his work, particularly his use of narrative. Critics have noted that Dattani frequently employs non-linear

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narration, memory sequences, and multiple perspectives to complicate the audience's understanding of events. In Tara, the use of retrospective narration creates a layered temporal structure that reflects the fragmentation of identity. As Dan recounts the past, the narrative becomes a process of re-experiencing trauma rather than merely recounting it.

Feminist criticism has played a crucial role in shaping interpretations of Dattani's plays. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (The Second Sex 16), scholars have argued that characters such as Tara are shaped by cultural expectations rather than biological determinism. The narrative structure reinforces this perspective by revealing how decisions taken within the family have long-term consequences for identity formation. Queer theory has further expanded the scope of analysis, particularly in relation to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Judith Butler's concept of performativity provides a useful framework for understanding how sexual identity is constructed through repeated social practices (Gender Trouble 25). Dattani's characters are shown to perform identities that conform to societal expectations, even as they struggle to articulate their true desires.

The concept of sexual annihilation has also emerged as a critical lens for interpreting Dattani's work. This term refers to the systematic suppression of non-normative sexuality, often through silence, denial, or social exclusion. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, for example, the absence of open discussion about sexuality creates an atmosphere of repression that shapes the narrative. Cultural studies perspectives have highlighted the importance of Indian cultural frameworks in Dattani's plays. Rituals, family structures, and communal identities are not merely background elements but active forces that influence the narrative. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the marriage ritual becomes a symbol of both inclusion and exclusion, reflecting the tension between tradition and individual identity. Despite the richness of existing scholarship, there remains a need for an integrated approach that considers narrative form, cultural context, and sexual politics as interconnected elements. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how these dimensions interact within Dattani's dramaturgy. Critical engagement with Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy has steadily expanded from thematic appreciation to a more rigorous examination of form, ideology, and representation. Early responses tended to celebrate his courage in addressing taboo subjects, but later scholarship situates him within a broader theoretical and theatrical discourse. Angelie Multani argues that Dattani's dramatic universe is shaped by "the persistent presence of silenced subjectivities that resist erasure even when socially marginalised" (Multani 52). This observation is particularly useful in understanding how Dattani's characters are not passive victims but agents negotiating oppressive frameworks. The idea of resistance embedded within marginality complicates any simplistic reading of his plays as merely representational. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar places Dattani within the genealogy of post-independence Indian theatre, noting that contemporary drama increasingly "moves away from spectacle toward the interior life of characters, where conflict is psychological rather than external" (Theatres of Independence 148). This shift is crucial for analysing Dattani's narrative style, where events often unfold through memory, silence, and deferred revelation rather than overt dramatic action.

Erin B. Mee extends this argument by suggesting that modern Indian theatre redefines realism itself, asserting that it "absorbs traditional performative elements while remaining grounded in contemporary social realities" (Mee 203). Dattani's dramaturgy exemplifies this hybridity: although his plays appear realistic on the surface, they are structured through symbolic repetition, ritual patterns, and fragmented narration. In the context of sexuality, Ruth Vanita's work on queer expression in Indian literature provides an important framework. She observes that non-normative desire in Indian cultural contexts is often "articulated indirectly,

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through metaphor, silence, or displacement” (Vanita 89). This insight directly illuminates Dattani’s *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, where desire is rarely declared openly but emerges through hesitation and coded speech. Similarly, Anupama Mohan notes that Dattani’s plays “locate sexuality within the moral anxieties of the Indian middle class, where visibility itself becomes a form of risk” (Mohan 117). This connects to the concept of sexual annihilation, where identity is not violently suppressed but gradually erased through social conditioning. From a feminist perspective, Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex* 16) resonates deeply with Tara, where gender identity is shaped through familial decision-making rather than biological inevitability. Critics such as Nandi Bhatia further argue that Indian theatre often stages “the family as the primary site where gender ideology is reproduced and contested” (Bhatia 76), a point that aligns closely with Dattani’s domestic settings.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, comparative reading, and theoretical synthesis. The central aim is to examine how narrative form, Indian cultural structures, and the representation of sexual repression operate within Mahesh Dattani’s plays. Given the complexity of literary texts and the layered nature of dramatic meaning, a qualitative approach is best suited to capture nuance, ambiguity, and contextual depth. The primary corpus for this study includes *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. These plays are selected because they collectively represent the breadth of Dattani’s thematic and narrative concerns. Each text is analysed through detailed close reading, with particular attention to dialogue, stage directions, narrative structure, and symbolic patterns. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is employed to identify recurring themes such as marginalisation, identity formation, cultural constraint, and sexual repression. This method allows for the systematic organisation of textual data without reducing it to numerical categories. Instead, it emphasises the interpretation of meaning within specific contexts.

The analysis operates at three interrelated levels. At the micro level, the focus is on language and dialogue, examining how meaning is constructed through speech patterns, pauses, and silences. For instance, in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the hesitation in dialogue reflects the characters’ inability to articulate their desires openly. At the meso level, the study examines narrative structure, including the use of flashbacks, monologues, and multiple perspectives. At the macro level, the analysis considers broader ideological frameworks, such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, and cultural identity. The theoretical framework integrates feminist and queer perspectives. Feminist theory is used to analyse gender relations and the role of patriarchy in shaping narrative outcomes. Queer theory provides a lens for examining the construction of sexual identity and the mechanisms of repression. These frameworks are applied flexibly, allowing the texts to guide interpretation rather than imposing rigid categories. The methodology also incorporates a cultural approach, recognising that Dattani’s plays are deeply embedded in Indian social contexts. Cultural practices such as marriage rituals, family hierarchy, and communal identity are analysed as narrative forces that influence character behaviour and plot development. By combining close reading with theoretical analysis, this methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of Dattani’s dramaturgy. It reveals how narrative form, cultural context, and sexual politics intersect to produce meaning, thereby offering a nuanced interpretation of his work.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that Mahesh Dattani’s dramaturgy is characterised by a complex interplay between narrative form, cultural structures, and the representation of sexual repression. These elements are

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not independent; they function together to create a layered and multifaceted dramatic experience. One of the most striking features of Dattani's work is his use of narrative fragmentation. In *Tara*, the story is presented through Dan's retrospective narration, which blurs the boundary between past and present. This structure reflects the psychological impact of trauma, suggesting that the past cannot be fully contained or resolved. The narrative becomes a process of continual re-experiencing, as indicated by Dan's admission: "The past is never really over" (Dattani 53). Cultural structures play a crucial role in shaping the narrative. In *Final Solutions*, communal identity is not merely a theme but a driving force that determines the course of events. The tension between Hindu and Muslim characters reflects broader social divisions, while the chorus functions as a collective voice that embodies cultural memory. This use of chorus adds a symbolic dimension to the narrative, linking individual experiences to historical processes. The representation of sexuality in Dattani's plays reveals a pattern of repression that can be described as sexual annihilation. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, characters struggle to reconcile their desires with societal expectations. The narrative exposes the psychological cost of this repression, as characters are forced to conceal their identities. The statement "We cannot be what we are" (Dattani 115) encapsulates this conflict, highlighting the gap between self-perception and social reality. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the absence of open communication about sexuality creates an atmosphere of tension and unease. The narrative reveals how silence functions as a mechanism of control, preventing characters from expressing their true selves. This silence is not merely a lack of speech; it is a form of power that shapes the narrative.

Overall, the analysis shows that Dattani's dramaturgy transforms narrative into a site of ideological critique. By integrating cultural frameworks and exploring the repression of desire, his plays challenge dominant narratives and offer new ways of understanding identity. The deeper critical framework allows us to see that Dattani's dramaturgy is not merely thematic but structurally ideological. His narrative techniques, cultural settings, and representation of sexuality work together to produce a layered critique of Indian society. Dharwadker's observation that modern drama privileges "interiority over spectacle" (148) becomes particularly relevant in *Tara*, where the central conflict is not staged as confrontation but unfolds through recollection. Dan's narrative voice does not resolve trauma; rather, it perpetuates it. This aligns with what Peter Brook describes as theatre's capacity to reveal "the invisible forces shaping human behaviour" (Brook 54), a description that fits Dattani's subtle dramaturgy.

In *Final Solutions*, the use of chorus has been widely discussed, but its narrative function deserves closer attention. The chorus does not simply comment; it embodies what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling"—shared yet unarticulated social emotions (Williams 132). Through this device, Dattani transforms communal tension into a lived, almost inherited experience. The treatment of sexuality becomes even more complex when viewed through Vanita's framework. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the characters' inability to articulate desire openly reflects what she terms "cultural coding of intimacy" (Vanita 91). The line "We cannot be what we are" (Dattani 115) is not just a personal lament; it is a structural condition imposed by society.

Anupama Mohan's argument that visibility itself becomes dangerous (117) helps explain why Dattani's characters often choose silence over expression. This silence, however, is not empty—it is charged with meaning. As Michel Foucault reminds us, "silence itself is part of the network that governs discourse" (*History of Sexuality* 27). Dattani's plays exemplify this insight, showing how what is not said can be as powerful as what is spoken. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the domestic space becomes a site of concealed violence. Here, Bhatia's claim that the family reproduces ideological norms (76) is clearly visible. The

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absence of open conflict does not indicate harmony; instead, it reveals a deeper level of repression. Moreover, Dattani's narrative strategy differs from Western dramatists in its refusal to externalise conflict dramatically. While playwrights like Sarah Kane foreground violence, Dattani internalises it. This distinction is critical: his theatre does not shock the audience into awareness but draws them into recognition. As a result, the audience becomes complicit in the structures being critiqued. Ultimately, the integration of narrative form, cultural context, and sexual politics produces what can be described as a theatre of exposure. Dattani does not offer solutions; instead, he reveals the mechanisms through which identity is constructed, constrained, and sometimes erased.

5. Conclusion

The present study set out to examine Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy through three interlocking concerns—narrative form, the workings of Indian cultural frameworks, and the representation of what has been termed sexual annihilation. Read together, these strands reveal a body of work that is far more structurally and ideologically complex than the familiar label of “social realism” suggests. Dattani's theatre does not merely mirror contemporary life; it actively interrogates the ways in which stories are told, identities are shaped, and desires are disciplined within the cultural sphere. A central finding of this study is that narrative in Dattani is never a neutral container of events. Instead, it is a dynamic process through which memory, guilt, and desire are continually reworked. Plays such as *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* demonstrate how retrospective narration fractures temporal continuity, allowing the past to intrude upon the present in ways that unsettle any sense of closure. When Dan reflects that the past returns “every time I think of her” (Dattani 51), the line does more than register grief; it reveals how narrative itself becomes a site of repetition and unresolved tension. This narrative strategy resists the neat resolution often associated with conventional drama and instead foregrounds the persistence of psychological and social conflict.

Equally important is the role of Indian cultural structures in shaping both narrative movement and character formation. Family, ritual, and community are not passive settings but active agents that determine what can be said, felt, or even imagined. In *Final Solutions*, the chorus functions as a repository of collective memory, reminding the audience that communal identity is sustained through inherited narratives as much as through present action. The remark, “It must feel good being a majority” (Dattani 87), captures in a single line how cultural belonging translates into everyday power. Such moments underscore the extent to which Dattani's plays are embedded in the lived realities of Indian society, even as they question its normative assumptions.

The study also highlights the significance of sexual annihilation as a recurring pattern in Dattani's work. Across plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, non-normative desire is not simply opposed by external authority; it is gradually eroded through silence, denial, and internal conflict. Characters learn to censor themselves, to “pretend to be something we are not” (Dattani 112), until the boundary between performance and identity becomes difficult to sustain. This process aligns with Judith Butler's understanding of identity as performative (*Gender Trouble* 25), yet Dattani's treatment gives it a distinctly Indian inflection, where familial obligation and social respectability intensify the pressure to conform.

What emerges from this analysis is a vision of theatre as a space where the personal and the political intersect in subtle but powerful ways. Dattani does not rely on spectacle or overt confrontation; instead, he exposes the quiet mechanisms through which power operates in everyday life. His dramaturgy reveals that marginalisation is often reproduced through ordinary gestures, habitual silences, and unquestioned traditions.

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In doing so, it implicates not only the characters on stage but also the audience, who are invited to recognise their own participation in these structures. At the same time, Dattani's plays resist a purely pessimistic reading. By bringing suppressed narratives into the open, they create the possibility of recognition and, potentially, transformation. The very act of articulating what has been silenced—whether it is Tara's muted suffering or the concealed desires of characters in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*—constitutes a form of resistance. Theatre, in this sense, becomes a space where alternative narratives can be imagined, even if they cannot be fully realised within the constraints of the dramatic world. Mahesh Dattani's contribution to contemporary Indian drama lies in his ability to weave together narrative innovation, cultural critique, and an unflinching exploration of desire. His plays demonstrate that the stories a society tells about itself are inseparable from the identities it produces and the exclusions it enforces. By interrogating these stories, Dattani expands both the ethical and aesthetic horizons of Indian English theatre. His work stands as a compelling reminder that drama, at its most effective, does not simply represent reality—it challenges the very terms through which reality is understood. At last to give equality to everyone, we should chant from the moral of Upanishads, “सर्वस्य समत्वं, सर्वस्य समत्वं, सर्वस्य समत्वं”.

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