



Disidentification And Performance In Indian English Drama: A Study Of Mahesh Dattani's Plays

Nuti Naga Sree Vaibhavi
Assistant Professor of English
Badruka College of Commerce and Arts

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of disidentification in Indian English drama through the lens of Mahesh Dattani's theatrical oeuvre, situating it within the theoretical framework of José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). Disidentification, as articulated by Muñoz, is a strategy used by marginalized subjects to negotiate their identities within dominant ideological frameworks neither complete rejection nor assimilation, but a transformation of cultural meaning from within. In the context of Indian theatre, Mahesh Dattani's plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Dance Like a Man* exemplify this performative negotiation. Dattani's characters as queer individuals, women, and artists inhabit and rework patriarchal, heteronormative, and traditional structures through performance. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, and Gayatri Gopinath's discourse on queer Indianness, this paper demonstrates how Dattani's dramaturgy turns Indian English drama into a site of cultural re-signification. His theatre performs Indianness through difference, staging resistance not through rebellion but through performance that both critiques and belongs. Thus, disidentification emerges as both an aesthetic method and a political stance in Dattani's work creating a subversive, yet culturally embedded, space for alternative identities on the Indian stage.

Keywords

Gender, Performance, Disidentification, Resistance, Marginalization, Identity.

Introduction

Indian English drama has evolved into a significant medium for negotiating questions of identity, gender, and culture in postcolonial India. Among its modern practitioners, Mahesh Dattani as a playwright is awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for English drama. His plays probe into the hidden anxieties of urban Indian life, examining how social institutions such as family, religion, and tradition regulate individual desire.

This paper reads Dattani's dramatic practice through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification, a performative strategy used by marginalized subjects to "work on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz 11). Muñoz situates disidentification as a middle ground between assimilation and

opposition, a strategy of survival for those whose identities are “at odds with the cultural scripts available to them” (Muñoz 5). In the Indian context, where queer, feminist, and artistic identities intersect with nationalist, patriarchal, and moral discourses, disidentification becomes an especially relevant framework.

Dattani’s plays are not overtly rebellious or iconoclastic; instead, they dramatize the politics of negotiation, revealing how the marginalized inhabit the structures that exclude them. Through *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani portrays identity as performance, a recurring act of survival and redefinition.

Disidentification and Performance

Muñoz’s concept of disidentification emerged from queer of color critique, recognizing that marginalized subjects often cannot afford to either reject or conform to dominant ideologies.

“Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. It is an attempt to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of everyday struggles of resistance.” (Muñoz 11)

This strategy aligns with Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an innate essence but a set of reiterated acts (Butler 179). Both Muñoz and Butler view performance as the means by which identity is constructed and contested. Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space” also illuminates this idea as an in-between zone where cultural meaning is negotiated and hybrid identities emerge (Bhabha 56).

Within Indian theatre, Dattani’s work transforms the stage into this “third space,” where queer Indianness (Gopinath 15) and feminist resistance coexist. His plays reveal how subjects inhabit dominant cultural norms but subtly rewrite them through the act of performance.

3. Performing Queerness within Indian Cultural Frames: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998) was India’s first openly gay play written in English. It centers on Kamlesh, a gay man who has recently ended his relationship with Prakash who in turn plans to marry Kamlesh’s sister. The play unfolds in Kamlesh’s Mumbai apartment, a claustrophobic yet intimate setting that doubles as a closet and stage for queer performance.

Dattani’s characters do not reject Indian moral frameworks; instead, they inhabit and parody them. The recurring conversations about family, marriage, and social respectability are performed in a tone that exposes hypocrisy.

“It’s not easy being gay in this city. Everyone loves to talk about sex, but no one wants to talk about love” (Dattani, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* 37)

Kamlesh’s statement captures the emotional dissonance of the queer Indian subject. Here, he performs disidentification: he neither assimilates into heteronormative expectations nor positions himself outside Indian culture. His longing for acceptance reflects a desire to belong differently to redefine Indianness through queer experience. Muñoz writes, “Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. It is about cultural, material, and psychic survival” (12). Kamlesh’s home becomes the performative space of such survival, a temporary utopia where queerness is lived, not hidden.

The play also critiques the myth of the “Westernized gay man.” While homosexuality is often dismissed in Indian discourse as foreign or decadent, Dattani situates queer desire within Indian family structures and emotional vocabularies. Thus, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* performs what Muñoz calls “minoritarian performance” a reconfiguration of visibility within the cultural mainstream.

In *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), Dattani examines gender and patriarchy through the lives of three women Dolly, Alka, and Lalitha trapped within the hypocritical Trivedi family. The play’s title, drawn from a popular ballad celebrating Rani Jhansi, is deeply ironic: these women’s bravery lies not in open revolt but in silent endurance and subtle resistance.

Dolly and Alka perform domestic femininity as expected by patriarchal norms, yet their performances are tinged with irony. Their apparent compliance becomes a mask of disidentification, a performative camouflage that allows them to survive within oppressive structures. When Alka drunkenly mocks her husband Jiten’s authority, her laughter becomes a weapon, a brief, carnivalesque rupture in the masculine order. Dattani writes:

“She laughed and laughed until she could not breathe anymore. The laughter had turned to sobs but she was still laughing.” (*Bravely Fought the Queen* 68)

This moment encapsulates disidentificatory tension, an act that appears submissive yet destabilizes patriarchal control.

Lalitha, the outsider, exposes the family’s moral pretense, representing what Bhabha would call the interstitial voice, one that disrupts the illusion of harmony. Erin Mee notes, “Dattani’s women do not revolt; they expose” (Mee 213). Their exposure of hypocrisy becomes a feminist strategy of disidentification, a way of performing agency within confinement.

Dance Like a Man (1989) explores the tension between tradition, modernity, and gender performance. The protagonist Jairaj aspires to become a Bharatanatyam dancer but faces resistance from his father, Amritlal, who deems dance unmanly. Jairaj’s struggle dramatizes the intersection of artistic identity and gender politics.

When Amritlal says, “A man in make-up and anklets—do you call that manly?” (*Dance Like a Man* 45),

He echoes the patriarchal anxiety surrounding male bodies that perform femininity. Jairaj’s insistence on dancing, therefore, becomes a disidentificatory act. He does not reject Indian tradition; rather, he reclaims it, queering the art form to include himself. Through dance, Jairaj re-signifies masculinity. The body that society polices becomes the site of resistance.

“If dance is womanly, then let me be woman” (*Dance Like a Man* 48).

This line embodies the very essence of disidentification: a performance that neither assimilates nor rejects, but transforms.

The play also critiques generational conflict, Amritlal’s nationalist pride, born from colonial resistance, now translates into patriarchal repression. Jairaj’s dance thus resists both colonial modernity and domestic patriarchy. His stage becomes what Bhabha calls “a space of enunciation” (Bhabha 37) where identity is neither fixed nor pure but performed through negotiation.

Language, Staging, and Aesthetic Disidentification

At a formal level, Dattani's dramaturgy performs disidentification through language and staging. Writing in English, he inhabits a linguistic paradox: English, the colonial language, becomes the medium for expressing subaltern realities. Dattani infuses Indian English with local idioms, accents, and rhythm, transforming it into a hybrid expressive form.

This linguistic disidentification mirrors what Muñoz calls "recycling encoded meaning." Dattani neither imitates Western dramatic forms nor completely rejects them. He adapts the conventions of realist drama—drawing-room settings, domestic conflict, and transforms them into spaces of Indian moral critique.

Spatially, the home recurs as a disidentificatory stage: Kamlesh's apartment (closet and confessional), the Trivedis' living room (mask of respectability), and Jairaj's dance hall (hybrid space of tradition and modernity). Each setting becomes a microcosm of Indian identity, where normative roles are performed and contested.

Dattani's dual role as playwright and director allows him to employ blocking, lighting, and silence as expressive tools. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, dim lighting and confined staging amplify the claustrophobia of the closet. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, fragmented scenes mirror the fragmentation of self. These techniques visualize disidentification—not only in character but also in form.

Disidentification as Cultural Belonging

Dattani's plays ultimately challenge the binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, conformity and rebellion. His characters inhabit what Gayatri Gopinath terms "queer diasporic space", a space of non-normative belonging (Gopinath 18). They do not seek liberation through exile but through re-inhabiting Indian culture differently.

Kamlesh, Alka, Dolly, and Jairaj all strive to articulate alternative Indiannesses, a belonging that accommodates queerness, feminism, and artistic autonomy. Their performances exemplify what Muñoz describes as "a mode of being in the world that is both pragmatic and utopian" (23). Thus, disidentification becomes not merely resistance but reclamation, a re-writing of cultural identity from within.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's theatre exemplifies how performance becomes a politics of survival. Through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification, Dattani's characters emerge as performers who neither abandon nor conform to dominant Indian ideologies. They re-signify cultural codes, using the very instruments of their marginalization language, family, religion, art to express subversive identities.

His plays demonstrate that Indian English drama is not a mimicry of Western realism but a space of critical hybridity. It stages Indianness as a dynamic, contested performance - queer, feminist, and modern, yet deeply rooted in cultural memory.

In Dattani's world, identity is always performed and always in flux. The stage becomes a site of cultural disidentification, where the marginalized subject speaks not from the margins but from within, transforming Indian theatre into a performative politics of belonging and resistance.

Works Cited (MLA 9th Edition)

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
3. Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance Like a Man*. Penguin India, 2006.
4. *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Penguin India, 2005.
5. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Penguin India, 2000.
6. Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2005.
7. Mee, Erin B. "Mahesh Dattani: Invisible Issues." *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors*. Routledge, 2001, pp. 210–220.
8. Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

