

Performing Queer : Alternative Sexualities in Select Contemporary Indian Plays

ANUPAMACHOWDHURY

Abstract. Dominative stage/theatre/performance discourses usually depict societies where only the straight sexual orientation is taken to be the “normal” rather than normative and the voice of the people with non-normative sexuality remain muted. Since Stage Performance can become a vital medium where subversive thoughts can germinate, it is specifically shameful that the heterosexual tradition succeeded in muting the voice of the LGBTQ communities in most of the earlier performances in the Indian theatres. Staging alternate sexualities, therefore, becomes an act of mapping sexualities producing an alternative history in the process. This paper analyzes select contemporary Indian plays staged in the Indian theatres to show how these depict the plight of people with alternative sexual orientation. While challenging the heteronormativity, the playwrights/directors/actors transform the existing tradition also by confronting the politics of language. This paper also proposes to offer a brief sketch of how the violation of constitutional rights in case of people belonging to the LGBTQ communities in India gets voiced in stage spaces.

Keywords : Gender-binary; sexuality; stage-space; transgender; violence; queer.

The gender binary is the root cause of gender based violence. No matter how much you decorate it, it is a fundamentally violent system that cannot be redeemed... We fear the loss of the gender binary because we don't know who we are outside of it. The ways that we have been taught to parent, build family, structure our lives and communities are called into question. But that interrogation, it's the beauty of being alive... How exciting it is to create new ceremonies, new language, new ways of being. How splendid it is to actually experience people for who they are, not what they should be... (Alok Vaid-Menon [instagram.com/alokvmenon](https://www.instagram.com/alokvmenon/))

Identities are the dynamic features of social life and are always in a state of flux, constantly evolving and changing. The socio-cultural constructs of identities often shape out in binaries and are established by means of a contrast between the dominant group and those excluded from the dominant group. Masculinity, femininity, and the concept of sexual “transgression”/ “othering” are all social constructs embedded, developed, and appropriated within/through the matrix of heterosexuality. In *Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Monique Wittig posits that gender, sexual difference, woman/man are not biological or natural realities; these

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are the creations of the tyrannical heterosexuality (10). The heterosexual society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level which is responsible for the conglomerate of sciences and disciplines that is called the “straight mind” (29). This “straight mind” approves of “straight” as the only acceptable sexual orientation and usually treats all other forms of sexualities as aberration/ perversion/ physical disorder/ punishable transgression. Sexuality, as Foucault rightly points out in *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1), surfaces as a process of power relations which mediates our everyday interactions, rather than being just a feature of private life. It becomes “a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (106).

Public representations of homophobic violence in India articulate something of the wider psycho-social context. In this context, the editors of the anthology *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, rightly point out:

To speak of sexuality, and of same-sex love in particular, in India today is simultaneously an act of political assertion, of celebration, of defiance and of fear. For far too long, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have simply been the distant and hypothetical subjects of theories and ideas, looked upon either with pity, curiosity or disdain. At each turn, we are constantly described and defined by other people’s words as they stand codified in religion, medicine, law, and in the silent assumptions that form the reality of our everyday lives. (2)

The rural or the urban areas (except a few metropolitan centres) in India still lack that flexibility and adaptability towards the non-normative sexual orientations. There are innumerable incidents where the basic human rights of the members of LGBTQ community have been violated in India. The rights to non-discrimination and rights against violence and harassment become non-functional because there is a huge gap between practice and precept in our country. In India most people with alternate sexuality live in a society where they are subjected to gender discrimination and violence almost daily. The construction of gender under the hegemonic control of patriarchy reinforces stereotypical masculinity/femininity and promotes homophobia. As Foucault points out in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 3, “the inversion of sexual roles and intercourse between individuals of the same sex” have always been surrounded by negative reactions and “the repulsive aura” (18). This paper analyzes select contemporary Indian plays staged in the Indian theatres to show how these depict the plight of innocent people of alternative

sexual orientation caught in the vortex of a whirlpool of multidimensional violence. While challenging the heteronormativity, the playwrights/directors/actors transform the existing tradition also by confronting the politics of language.

Ehsaas by Asmita Theatre was organized in collaboration with Gay Bombay, as a part of Queer Azaadi Mumbai Pride month. This solo play by Kakoli Gaur narrated the journey of a young lesbian girl. The visibility of the Indian Lesbian is marked by the lesbophobic anxiety. Since a woman's image has always been constructed upon man's imagination, the concepts of softness, sympathy, beauty, and other womanly characteristics enforced upon her bind her to a heterosexual preference as the only legitimate choice and in the process, it obliterates her identity in cases of alternative sexualities. As a result, women are compelled in their bodies and in their minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for them. The resultant distortion of the body and the mind of women "is what they call "natural," and "oppression seems to be a consequence of this "nature" (Wittig, 9); and it is in this sense that the "category of sex is the political category" in a heterosexual society (5). The protagonist in *Ehsaas* is caught in the whirlpool of social diktats but she realizes that "there is no possible fight for someone deprived of an identity, no internal motivation for fighting, since, although I can fight only with others, first I fight for myself" (16). *Queen-size*, a contemporary dance-drama by Mandeep Raikhy transported the audience into the personal space of two queer men, ParinayMehra and Lalit Khatana who in various stages of their undress, played out the dynamics of same-sex desire. This play revealed how the power to repress and restrain something inversely provokes a will to knowledge that cannot be prevented in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but persists in constituting the very thing it had sought to control (Foucault, 12-13). While the much acclaimed plays *A Male Ant Has Straight Antennae*, and *Tu Khwab Saja*, represented the various nuances of gay male sexuality. *Ek Madhav Baug* by Chetan Datar played out the touching scenes of a mother's realization of her son's homosexuality. Staged by NCPA, *Shikandi*, drew heavily on Shikhandi from *The Mahabharata*, the first trans-character in mythology. It showed the transphobia of our society which enforces invisibility and marginalization of the Transgenders. Another bold and popular play, written and directed by Neel Chaudhuri, *Still and Still Moving*, was performed by the Delhi group 'Tadpole Repertory'. It presented the insecurities, anxieties, love, and emotions of the three characters: Partho, a writer in his 40s, Adil, 19-21, a student and Rishi, 15-17, Partho's son. In a poignant and introspective manner, it showed the intricacies of their relationships and the in-between spaces. From the depiction of this interspace on stage emerged the paradigm shift which introduced alternative interpretations of sexual identities that lie outside the heterosexual norm. Prateik Babbar's stage debut titled *Six, based on A Midnight Clear* by LB Hamilton, revolved around two former gay lovers and explored alternate sexualities in challenging ways. Happy Ranajit's *A Straight Proposal* and Gurleen Judge's *Dohri*

Zindagi also depicted homophobia and intolerance of the Indian society for the LGBTQ communities.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most powerful and daring voices in the Indian English drama. His popular play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* has been translated into many languages and have been staged several times with equal success. As John McRae points out in *A Note on the Play : On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, is the first one in Indian theatre to “handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates” (45). The characters, Kamlesh and his friends, meet at Kamlesh’s flat in Mumbai on a muggy night. The play reveals how the closet gays under the pressures of the heterosexual society put up a performance of ‘normal’ sexuality so as not to stand out against the prescribed straight, heterosexual norm. Except Deepali who is a Lesbian, all other friends of Kamlesh (who are all Gays) live in a constant discord between their biological sexualities and the way they wish to project themselves in the society to maintain the status quo. As Sharad, the gay and ex-lover of Kamlesh, mockingly tells how to conform to the heterosexual notion of masculinity :

All it needs is a bit of practice. I have begun my lessons. Don’t sit with your legs crossed. Keep them wide apart. And make sure you occupy lots of room. It’s all about occupying space, baby. The walk: walk as if you have a cricket bat between your legs. And thrust your hand forward when you meet people. . . And the speech. Watch the speech. No fluttery vowels. Not ‘It’s so-o-o hot in here!–but ‘it’s HOT! It’s fucking HOT!’’(88-89).

Ed/Prakash, a closet homosexual (lover of Kamlesh as Prakash and fiancé of Kiran as Ed), is also trying to become normal= straight(?) by marrying Kamlesh’s sister, Kiran, and posing as straight/heterosexual. As Nivedita Menon rightly points out :

In India the notion of sexuality leaves unquestioned heterosexuality as the norm – that is most of us are heterosexual, but there are others out there who are either lesbian or gay or B [bisexual], T [transsexual], or K [kothi]” The alphabets proliferate endlessly outside the unchallenged heterosexual space. But if we recognise that this “normal” heterosexuality is painfully constructed and kept in place by a range of cultural, bio-medical and economic controls, precisely in order to sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender,

then we have to accept that all of us are – or have the potential to be – “queer”(39).

Kamlesh suffers greatly because of his gay relationship with Prakash who walks out on him and develops a ‘normative’ relationship with Kamlesh’s sister, Kiran. Kamlesh realizes that he is torn between his own sexuality and the forced orientation. This also happens with Ed alias Prakash who starts nurturing a guilt complex after his relation with Kamlesh. The only visible solution for such persons is to get married but it does not spare them with their real identity and attraction for the same sex. Prakash confides in Kamlesh, “once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any... suspicion” (Dattani, 22). This is what Ed plans, what Bunny has been always doing and what the straight psychiatrists advise all gays to do. As Bunny says later in the play, “Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can’t find you” (101).

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association eliminated homosexuality from its ‘disorders’ list. But till date, in most cases, a homosexual person is taken to be diseased who must be taught the ultimate normative roles of catering to the heterosexual pleasures and thus, be cured of his/her sickness. As pointed out by Shakuntala Devi, “most analysts (today) view homosexuality in terms of a neurosis or a character disorder. They, therefore, consider it treatable” (64). Kamlesh seeks medical assistance when he falls into depression:

I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand, until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while, I believed him. Because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change the society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself. (69)

Deepali doesn’t know of Kamlesh’s visit to the psychiatrist but visualizes what may happen within the psychiatrist’s counseling chamber and makes a satiric comment in this context:

He will go to this psychiatrist and say, “Doctor, I want to be heterosexual.” The Doctor will say, Okay, this is a case of ego-distonic homosexuality. If that’s what you really want... Then the doctor will put you on to your behavioural modification program. I hope that is not a problem. It’s a bit like you going to a cosmetic surgeon and telling him you want to look like Madhuri Dixit. (Dattani, 100)

The same experience was awaiting Prakash/Ed when he sought the assistance from religion to overcome his homosexuality. In the words of Kamlesh, "He goes to the church every week now. They put him on to a psychiatrist. He believes his love for was the work of devil. Now the devil has left him." (85).

Many homosexuals flee from India to live life according to their choices. As Vanita contends, "modern Homophobia drove men to lead double lives, flee the country, "cure" themselves and commit suicide" (12). Ranjit, another friend of Kamlesh, is a gay settled in England. During a conversation with Bunny he admits, "Yes, I am sometimes regretful of being Indian, because I can't seem to be both Indian and gay" (109). Bunny Singh, a gay and a popular TV actor, has chosen to live a life in camouflage. He is 'happily' married and has a family where he performs his role as a 'normal'/straight man.

Amal Allana's production of Satish Alekar's *Begum Barve* deals with the fluid spaces of gender identities. It shows how these identities create in-between spaces which in turn create a kind of void and alienation for the subjects. The protagonist Barve acts in Sangeet Natak Company as a female impersonator playing minor roles. He cherishes the golden moment when he received a token of appreciation from his muse, Balgandharva. We first see Barve polishing an old broken brass lamp draped in a rich-gold embroidered stole. Barve is presently without any stable job and lives a dull and drab life which stands in a sharp contrast to the world of art, aesthetics, imagination, and music that he enjoyed earlier in the Sangeet Natak academy. He now stays in a dark staircase with a foul-mouthed, drunkard, uncouth, lame and insensitive man, Shyamrao, for whom he dresses up as a Begum with gajra in her hair. He sells incense sticks for his living, and collects 'prasad' for his food. Shamrao exploits Barve sexually and economically and uses him as a commodity of /for his pleasure. Amidst this harsh reality, Barve escapes into the fantasy world of Sangeet Natak where he plays the role he yearns for: a woman of beauty and charm. But outside this imaginative bubble space, there is no real place for him where he would be accepted for what he is or as he is. Barve reminisces on this lack of space : "I exist only while the lamp exists" "The night belongs to my lamp. To the organ. To the velvet curtain. To the stole that was once Narayanrao's"(304). It is in this junction that the playwright, Alekar, introduces the two office clerks, Jawdekar-Bawdekar, who work in the same office and share the same room. They live their lives in constant fear and insecurities—the fear of losing a job because they have been appointed to the same post by mistake. The unbearable heat in the office room which has no fans, lack of cool water and lack of women in their personal lives have made a hell of their daily lives and existence. One night they happen to see Barve in his feminine *avatar* and become enamoured of him taking him as the woman he is impersonating. Barve enters their life as Nalawadebai and gets married to one of them. Barve lives his life in this fantasy zone and very soon tells them of his pregnancy. The jealous Shamrao exposes him brutally:

You are pregnant? You? You-hoo-hoo-hoo! Did you hear that? Nalawadebai is pregnant. You-hoo-hoo-hoo! Look at his dhoti. Nalawadebai's 'dhoti'. Look at this dhoti-wearing woman. Look at this woman, pregnant without a womb. (Shamrao pulls off Barve's dhoti, revealing his knee-length striped drawers.) Show us where you get pregnant, bastard. Look, look, look. Take a look at Nalawadebai's knickers! (346)

The dream world of Barve's fantasy shatters in pieces. While the clerks resume their routine tasks, Barve returns to his claustrophobic space. The play ends with the last natyageet: "Spirit of the Universe, have pity on me/... Take me, your servant, to such a place Where there is no sin, nor worldly worries. Where all is peace and tranquility" (347).

The concepts of ideal/heterosexual/straight "man" and "woman" limit our vision of an alternative world. The homophobic spaces further trigger the politics of exclusion, liminality, and silence. Sometime, through a destabilization of fixed meanings/ categories/definitions of our cognitive selves, a certain fear of ambiguity and void is created. The double bind becomes more complex as the individual gets translated into a new identity as a hyphenated subject. But the gendered subjectivity serving the heteronormative matrix, can dangerously overstep the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix, thereby forcing a re-vision of subjectivity and gender, and consequently dissolving the matrix altogether. The formation of versatile 'self' occurs through an amalgamation of multiple relationships and identities.

Anupama Chowdhury

Associate Professor of English
M.U.C. Women's College
Burdwan (West Bengal)

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