

Study of the marginalized in the play on a muggy night in Mumbai by Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the prominent playwrights of Indian writing in English, occupies a unique place for bringing out real life problems into the stage. Homosexuality is mostly considered as a taboo in the Indian society. Homosexuals are in fact considered to be a major problem that threatens the fabric of our society. His play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with the issue of Homosexuality. It also explores Dattani's representation of the homosexuals community as the marginalized from Indian society with a particular focus on two parallel themes in the play – the critique of heterosexuality, and the need to remain true to one's sexual orientation. The social exclusion faced by these sexually marginalized communities gives rise to their identity crisis. The afflictions of these homosexuals often remain invisible to the public. Mahesh Dattani in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* projects a vivid picture of the lives of the homosexuals. The themes of taboo relationship and homosexuality are the central motives of the plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.

Keywords: representation, marginalized, taboo relationship, society

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani, the first Indian playwright to receive a Sahitya Academy Award has probably been a trendsetter in this respect and through his iconic play like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* gives homosexual community in India a voice to articulate their hidden fears and desires which had so long been suppressed by the homophobic traditional Indian society. Mahesh Dattani is a modern Indian English playwright who has successfully staged his plays in India and abroad. He maintains himself among some notable playwrights and directors such as Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and, Mahesh Elkunchwar, who contributed much to the growth and development of play scripts and trans historical and modern inter culturalism. They also juxtaposed various strands of Indian culture simultaneously in their works.

The objective of the paper is to highlight the mental strife of the homosexual as they are torn between their true self and the apparent self which they try to put up in order to survive respectfully in the society. An attempt is made to examine the hidden fears and feelings of this sexually marginalized community within the framework of dramatic structure and to investigate the identity crisis of the gays.

The Mental Strife of the Homosexual

Dattani writes about human relationships, he does not ignore the most neglected and marginalized community of homosexual. Dattani takes them as the weakest class of the society. They are integral part of our society and culture. Dattani has thus unfolded words of Beena Agrawal are worth to be quoted here: Theatre is not a mute and mechanical representation of social dynamics but it is a lively representation of the voices resounding in context of totality of human experiences that consciously or unconsciously affect the existing dynamics of human sensibility. Dattani, in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences, tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of society whose identity is

shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order. (Beena Agrawal, p-34)

This play was first performed at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai on 23 rdNov., 1998 and then adapted to a film *Mango Soufflé*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is probably the best and the most complex play that discusses the socio-psychological identity crisis of the gays who are torn between the social taboos and their personal desires, their conscience and social consciousness. It dramatizes the conflicts, anguish, dilemmas, insecurities, fears and frustration of the gays in the society. Among Dattani's critics, the themes of gay relationship and alternate sexuality have been one of the interesting areas of discourse. But most of his plays which are based on these themes, have tried to project him as the champion of gay literary movement in Indian drama. Santosh Chakraborty puts her ideas on Dattani by saying that, Dattani is remarkable not only for his wide spectrum of interest in contemporary socio-political problems, but for his bold treatment of taboo subjects in his plays (Chakraborty, Santosh. p-41).

The Complexity the Socio-Psychological Identity

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is perhaps the best and most complex, because it discusses with varying layers of complexity the socio-psychological identity crisis of the gays who are torn between the social masks that they are forced to put up and their natural sexual desires which is socially unacceptable, their conscience and social suppression. John Mc. Rae in the introduction to the play writes, It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behavior and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates. (John McRae. p-45) This is a play with a theme often not touched upon-gay relationship and their need to assert their

true identity in society. It's actually a tragicomedy which deals with homosexuals. This is a play about the hidden desires of men and women who want to confine their love to the persons of the same sex. This is as natural as heterosexual love and there should be no illusion about it.

The play begins with a conversation between Kamlesh and the guard in Hindi. Kamlesh orders refreshments for his friends and asks the guard to make necessary arrangements. Later on, Ed and Kiran come and begin to chat. Here are two important characters named Kamlesh and Prakash (who is also Ed). Prakash who romances with Kamlesh's sister Kiran. Initially Prakash suddenly turn coats and changes into Ed. As the conversation between Kamlesh and Sharad continues, Deepali drops in. Kamlesh and Deepali reveal their attitude to love. Kamlesh also reveals his secret and regrets his action of being gay before his friends and seeks help to get over his difficulties. On the other hand, Kamlesh is depressed and nostalgic about his relationship with Prakash. While these friends were discussing how to solve Kamlesh's problems, Kiran came in. She told them that she was going to marry Ed soon. She also told them why her first marriage failed.

After that, Prakash and Kamlesh meet in the park. The main thing of this play is all the friends Kamlesh, Sharad, Bunny, Deepali and Ranjit know the secrets of each other's private lives and same sex love. It is a play all about a homosexual and lesbian relationship between the friends. The play ends with Ed and Kiran's Engagement breaks off. Each Character in the play finally goes in search of his/her own identity and seeks to know what he/she has achieved or failed to achieve in life. Finally, Sharad, Speaking for himself, in a way sum up the feelings of all characters in the sad words. This is a play which focuses on the homosexual relationship in the society. It also observes that love is more in the mind than in the body, the attitude to sex varies from person to person. Dattani used symbolic means to foreground his idea of gay relations.

It is often considered that gay literature has unhappy endings. Gays and lesbians move towards death, isolation or a deception heterosexual marriage as Ed and Kiran are heading towards in this play. But this play ends on a luminous note. About this play Asha Kuthari Chaudhary comments: This is the first play in Indian theatre to openly deal with gay themes of love, affiliation, trust and betrayal, raising serious 'closet' issues that remain generally invisible. The primary audience comprised both gay and 'straight' people; mostly middle class. Curiously enough, a play as 'daring' as this actually proved to be an enormous commercial success in Mumbai and later on, everywhere that it was later performed. (Chaudhari, Asha. p-51)

Heterosexuality and Homosexuality

Heterosexuality and homosexuality both developed from the original bisexual disposition. This inhibited self of every man is very adventurously brought out by Dattani in his play. He brings to light the 'invisible' issues which are often pushed to the periphery. As A.K. Chaudhari comments: Much of 'mainstream' society, Dattani believes lives in a state of 'forced harmony' out of a sense of helplessness, or out of a lack of alternatives.

Simply for lack of choice, they conform to stereotypes like 'homosexuals' that in some sense leads to a kind of ghettoisation within the society, little spaces to which the marginalized are pushed'. (Chaudhari, Asha. p-47)

The society approves of a heterosexual relationship but the homosexual relations are looked down upon by the majority. The gays present in the party feel the pressure of the social customs and traditions. They try to gain space and come to terms with their own identity in contrast to the social norms. Kiran, the heroine of the play say to Ranjit and gets reply as beloved, Kiran: I really wish they would allow gay people to marry. Ranjit: Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-98.)

Ed has left Kamlesh because he wants to hide his gay identity and therefore he intends to marry Kiran who is Kamlesh's sister. He wants to remain in touch with Kamlesh through Kiran so that nobody suspects his identity. He says, Nobody would know. Nobody would care...I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-105.) Here we see that on what level the homosexuals reach to hide their identity from the society. On the other level they do this kind of things in the society because they are devastated from the society and society would not allow them so that they became marginalized in the society. They can do the things beyond our thinking to maintain their relationship as we see that Kamlesh marry Kiran to maintain his homosexual relationship with Kiran's brother who is in relation becomes brother in law to him. He sees no future in open gay relationship. He does not want himself to be branded publically as a gay. He defends himself of his intentions of pretending 'straight' in the arguments in the party when he says, Look around you. Look outside... There are real men and women out there. You have to see them to know what I mean. But you don't want to. You don't want to look at the world outside this- this den of yours. All of you want to live in your own little bubble. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-99.)

Deepali is a sensible lesbian among the group. She feels sympathetic and concerned of Kamlesh and has an affinity towards him which is reflected in her conversation with Kamlesh, If you were a woman, we would be in love... If you were heterosexual, we would be married. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-65.) She is vocal of her sexual inclinations in her arguments at the party and says, It's not shame, is it? With us? Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-89.)

And of the gay cause, I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men! (Dattani, Mahesh. p-60.)

All the friends – Kamlesh, Sharad, Bunny, Deepali and Ranjit know the secrets of each other's private lives and same-sex love. Now that Ed is going to marry Kiran (Kamlesh' Sister), Deepali threatens to show the photograph of Kamlesh and Ed in an objectionable pose to Kiran. That is because Deepali wants her to know the truth. Kamlesh feels that Ed has now become heterosexual. This is how the conversation moves: Kamlesh: He goes to Church every week now. They put him on to a psychiatrist. He believes his love for me was the work of the devil. Now the devil has left him. Sharad: Now the devil has put him on your sister. I'll tell you what. Show her the photograph. Let her know who the devil is. (Dattani, Mahesh. p- 85)

As mention in the above conversation between Kamlesh and Sharad, it focuses on that when Prakash/ Ed had changed herself from homosexual to heterosexual. If homosexuals want to become heterosexual, they have two sides whether choose the religion or go for psychiatrist. In our country, religion does not accept them. So they seek help from psychiatrist.

A number of questions are thrown up by this play. It reinforces the experiences and narratives of the marginalized in a society where stereotypes always hold center stage; redeem with prejudice, guilt and dishonesty, survival is not easy for the 'misfits'. These are some concerns that go into the exposition, exploration and refashioning of the self and the society in Dattani's works.

Kiran is shown to having all compassion for the gay people and wishes they could marry for happiness for her brother who she knew was homosexual. At one stage, Kiran innocently remarks: I really wish they would allow gay people to marry. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-98) to which Ranjit cynically replies, Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-98) On the other hand, through these words they yearn for their right to marry with their same sex partner. The following conversation between Kamlesh and Deepali Reveals their attitude to love:

Deepali: If you were a woman, we would be in love

Kamlesh: If you were a man, we would be in love.

Deepali: If you were heterosexual we would be married.

Bunny: You can leave the country, but you can never run away from being

brown. You are ashamed of being Indian.

Ranjit: Yes, I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can't seem to be both Indian and gay. But you are simply ashamed. All this sham is to cover up your shame. (Dattani, Mahesh. p-88)

Culture, Customs and Community

The above lines focus that being gay particular in India is not accepted by the society. So both things Indian and being a gay cannot go together in same line. The treatment of the subject in the play is most broad-based. The play focuses upon a whole spectrum of gay behavior - Sharad's flamboyance, Bunny's hypocrisy and double-dealing and Ranjit's cleverness in escaping to the liberal West where he can 'be himself' by openly pursuing his homosexual activities. As Chaudhuri observes in *Contemporary Writers in English*, Much of 'mainstream' society, Dattani believes, lives in a state of 'forced harmony', out of sense of helplessness, or out of a lack of alternatives. Simply for lack of choice, they conform to stereotypes like 'homosexuals' that in some sense leads to a kind of ghettoization within society, little spaces, to which the marginalized are pushed. (Chaudhari, Asha. P-47)

Dattani discusses the homosexuality as it happens in our society. He shows how established norms of society suppress and repress individual urge and passion causing mental agony to the person concerned.

The whole play revolves around the identity crisis of gays in Indian society, and how they find out their own gender orientation midway through fulfilling their parental and social expectations. The marginalization of people in the name of culture, customs, community, and gender, is questioned by Dattani, through the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. He neither approves nor disapproves the marriage between the people of the same sex. He is just unmasking the truth shrouded under established tradition of heterosexual relationship. He has an awareness and also ability to look into the invisible or taboo issue wrapped in the web of hypocrisy and tradition. Dattani's insightful handling of the relations between persons in homosexual relationship is unmatched.

Conclusion

It is clear that Dattani feels the need to establish a firm connection between the possibilities of greater space for the gays from the affluent society. He makes a plea for the gay and lesbian community and also brings out the gay issues out of the closet into the open. He problematizes the whole issue of gay relationship and analyzes the world of gay people expecting public participation. The community of homosexual needs some kind of recognition and they are craving for their identity as a member of the society whom they are actually living in the margin of the society. In this innovative way, Dattani has tried to bring the center of the society through his play.

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