

From the Closet to the Open: Mahesh Dattani's Play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* as a Study of the Plight of the Homosexuals

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at how Mahesh Dattani's play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* focuses upon the plight of gays and lesbians. It highlights the contrast of social and personal entities and the mounting pressure on individual's choice. Craving for social acceptance A group of gays confronts psychological trauma and humiliation. This contradiction between the self and the society leads to identity crisis which has been beautifully dramatized in this play. It highlights the contrast between fixed patterns of social behaviour and individualistic psychic demands. And the play questions the social behavioural patterns and shows how these patterns lead to creation of self-doubts in some of these characters who go to consult psychiatrists for curing themselves. Even one of them characters goes to the extreme of committing suicide due to societal pressure. Some of the characters later develop escapist tendencies while some of them take refuge in heterosexuality in order to join the main stream of society. Dattani considers that the biased attitude of the society tends to regard its individuals as 'things' and not as human beings with hostility towards them. He believes that for every individual, personality is an inseparable part of his/her self and the loss of this self means distortion of personality and alienation from one's own self. Any society that does not accept human nature is alien to the individual, and, in a way, distorts and deforms his/her real nature and converts it into non-self which may in certain individuals result in abnormal psyche.

Key words: Abnormal Psyche, Gays, Heterosexuals, Homosexuality, Humanistic Concern, Lesbians, Social Behavior,

Mahesh Dattani endeavours to explore the crisis that the homosexuals face in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and demonstrates that they, as social beings, occupy no honourable space in society. Their hidden fears and feelings are carefully exposed by him within the framework of the dramatic structure. Gay relationship is the cause of social exclusion in most of the societies but it is very severe in our country. This becomes the cause of hypocrisy that results in abnormal psychic personality or schizophrenia in the individuals concerned. Hence, a study of Dattani's play from socio-psychological point of view presents that the unique identity of his protagonists is the cause of their suffering. His characters suffer from a sense of uncertainty, isolation, insecurity in their life due to the humiliating attitude of the society they live in. There are lots of incidents and situations in his play where he very poignantly depicts the plight of the community of gays.

Due to a craving for social acceptance, these gays confront psychological trauma. They even try to hide their homosexuality beneath the veneer of heterosexuality. The action of the play mainly revolves around the mental trauma of characters like Kamlesh and Prakash (whose pseudonym is Ed). Ed who was in passionate sexual relationship with Kamlesh breaks off his relation with him and starts an affair with Kamlesh's sister Kiran. He wants to remain in touch with Kamlesh through his sister so that nobody suspects his identity. He says, "No body would know, Nobody would care...I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me" (CPI 105). The irony of the situation is that the poor girl did not know that the man to whom she was going to get married was a homosexual and an ex-lover of her own brother. But once she comes to know about this she is shocked. Ed sees no future in open gay relationship and does not want himself to be labelled publicly as a gay. He shields himself of his intentions of pretending 'straight' in an argument, "Look around you. Look outside... There are real men and women out there...."(99). Hence, deserted in their own island they wait for a normal social life.

Dattani cleverly juxtaposes two contrasting scenarios where there is the gathering of gays in a flat of Kamlesh on one side where all the action takes place, and of a wedding ceremony in progress offstage. The sounds of celebration are quite loud and clear. The wedding is the satisfaction and endorsement of a heterosexual relationship and “the whole world acknowledges two people who enter a union pact, so they have to stick by that” (72). The society approves of a heterosexual relationship but the homosexual relations are looked down upon by the majority. Kiran is the only character of the play who accepts their gay identity as she asserts, “I really wish they would allow gay people to marry” and she gets an ironical reply from Ranjit as he asserts, “They do. Only not to the same sex” (98).

There are a number of homosexuals such as Sharad and Deepali who, though comfortable with each other, have different ways of being gay. They all are complex characters who cannot be understood by their outward gender preferences only. They have their own fears and fantasies, care and concerns, conscience and consciousness, emotions and passions as part of their personally traits like anybody else and have different expressions regarding their identity. Kamlesh is not a closet homosexual who wants to hide his true self. He himself says. “How long shall we continue to hide? We can’t hide forever!” (91). He was all the more obsessed with the memory of Ed which keeps ‘cropping up’ in his mind ‘like herpes’. While Kamlesh fails to reorient even with homosexual relations with others, Ed at least pretends to be successful in beginning a new life because the church and the psychiatrist have helped him to believe that his love for Kamlesh was “the work of the devil. Now the devil has left him” (85). It is not only the social circle alone which disapprove and condemn such relations, but institutions like church also do not approve and sanctify such relations because relations between same sex are seen as carnal, and also against the Nature’s blue print of evolution since such relations are not procreative. Dattani, but, intends to establish that homosexuality is rooted in human psyche as in the life of Kamlesh, and that it is an irresistible passion that drags him to all erroneous judgments.

The basic opposition to homosexuality is that it is an instinctive behaviour against Nature, and is deemed unethical. Homosexuality is a guilt and heterosexuality is a deal. So the former results in terrible anguish and suffering. It represents the conflict between individualistic psychic demands and social compulsive forces, and subsequently results in the strong upheaval of human emotions. To represent the idea of ‘gay culture’ in theatre where a lot of traditional stage mechanism still rules the roost demands great courage. And like in his other plays where he has successfully handled other taboo issues, here also Dattani successfully takes up a very sensitive social issue and tries to give voice to the muted group of homosexuals.

After Kamlesh, Ranjit too admits that he is a gay when he asserts, “Call me what you will. My English lover and I have been together for twelve years now. You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country!” (71). It is remarked, “...the play is the first in Indian theatre to openly handle gay themes of love, trust and betrayal” (qtd. in Das 86). Thus, Dattani has depicted the same-sex love with frankness and boldness expected of a postmodern playwright. He has made use of different spaces of Kamlesh’s households to represent the mental state of his characters as the dark expansive area which represents the mental anguish and dilemma of the characters while the open space represents the action in the context of external thoughts.

It is a pathetic and daring dramatization of the anguish of Kamlesh, who finds it impossible to reveal his personal life and ultimately falls in depression. In order to come out of the bouts of depression, he visits a homophobic psychiatrist and ultimately comes to the harsh realization. “I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society...” (CPI 69). The question comes, “If two men want to love each other, what is the problem?” (98) Kiran, the only character in this play who defends the position of her brother Kamlesh as a gay, admits, “I really wish they would allow gay people to marry” (98) but the social apathy has been vitalized in the cynical reply of Ranjit, “Oh! They do, only to the same sex” (98). She requests Prakash, “I wish we could help him, somehow, I wish he would be as happy as we are” (214).

Sexual desires, in spite of being related with instinctive behavior, are controlled by the canon of morality. Since often linked with procreation process, heterosexuality is the only sacrosanct mode of accepting man and woman relationship. It has been treated as the ‘norm’ and homosexuality has been shunned as deviant, perverted and even criminal. Politically, the community of gays and lesbians is marginalized. Marginalization, victimization, self-torture, guilt-ridden psyche and resistance against the social traditions

constitute the spectrum of existence of gays. They suffer under the pressure of the loss of identity along with a sense of guilt.

Some of the 'gays' in the play covers their homosexuality under the veil of heterosexuality. For instance Sharad, a 'gay', wants to be heterosexual because he now understands the hegemony of biased attitude of society towards them and to make an acceptable position in society he becomes heterosexual also as he asserts, "... You see, being a heterosexual man-a real man, as Ed put it-I get everything. I get to be accepted-accepted by whom?-well,... I can have a wife, I can have children who will all adore me simply because I am a hetero.... If I can be a real man, I can be king.... (101). Eventually, the argument falls back onto the audience when Kiran clarifies their position: 'If there are any stereotypes around here, they are you and me. Because we don't know any better, do we? We just don't know what else to be' (107).

In this play, Dattani successfully examines the psychology of the individuals who are by nature 'gays' or 'bi-sexuals' and the desire on the part of some of them to turn to heterosexual which seems to be an unusual theme in the Indian context. But in real life such characters do exist. Hence, Dattani has re-created the characters in their own situations. 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 we were heterosexual we would be married” (65).

The pivot of drama *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* moves between bio-sexual and socio-cultural dilemma in the life of homosexuals. Deepali is proud of her femininity and accepts with dignity, “I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank God, I am a woman” (186). The reaction of Sharad and Deepali in contrast of absorbing passion of Kamlesh evinces that homosexuality is a passion beyond the natural scheme of things.

In the play one of the characters, Ranjit asks a basic question in the opening line of Act III, “Why do people get married?” (95) The answer is given by Bunny, “It is natural to the majority of the people” (95). That is because heterosexual love leads to procreation. But this question and the answer to it can't be taken as the authorial voice. The whole play deals with homosexual and bisexual love relationship. Hence, the playwright seems to establish a firm connection between the possibilities of greater space for the gays from the affluent society. He, not very loudly, makes a plea for an atmosphere of acceptance and acknowledgement 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 gays expecting public participation on the problem under discussion. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari, while discussing this play, wonders: “...gay literature seems to have been beleaguered by unhappy endings. Homosexuals invariably move towards death, isolation, or a shame ...” (50).

All the characters are honest to themselves and are bold enough to confess their sexual exploitations and preferences as well. In the play the entire experience of crisis, predicament and dilemma that the homosexuals encounter regarding their identity can be summed up in the speech of Bunny Singh in the third Act of the play when he makes his confession in front of his gay friends and especially to Kiran: “...I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me- the real men- are present here in this room....I have tried to survive in both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either...I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now-I am a gay man” (CPI 102-03). It is just not the denial of the true identity by Bunny Singh but the speech encompasses the entire gay community that is under tremendous pressure as to how to hide their true identity and be a hypocrite so that the people of the 'acceptable world' do not hate them. All of them try to 'survive in both the worlds'. But they end up with a sense of non-belongingness to any.

The play ends at the torn pieces of a photo of Kamlesh and Ed that signifies that the reality will always exist howsoever or whosoever tries to deny it. Kiran who is 'frozen' to see the picture at first later replaces the picture of her and Ed in the frame with that picture symbolizing that she considers an open gay relationship as a better choice than a hidden one. So the picture is the most powerful and vital symbol depicting their unique identity leading to crisis. Sharad and his friends suggest to Kamlesh to perform a symbolic funeral by burning the photographs. The scene, in which they perform it, becomes a bit absurd and melodramatic to be presented on the stage. As soon as Kiran formally introduces Prakash, “meet my fiancée”, Kamlesh is frozen. Such sensational situation in the drama fills the audience also with emotions. To explore the

possibility of such a situation that involve the upheaval of the entire emotional balance of characters brings Dattani into the range of the celebrated dramatists like Webster, Osborn and O'Neill.

At the end of the play 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, sums up the feelings of all the characters in the following words, "I ask myself what I have got. And what I am and what I'm not" (111).

Certain questions spring up in our minds when we come across this play: 1. How are men and women constructed in terms of gender? 2 What are the definitions of their roles? 3. How meaningful are these definitions? 4. What is masculine and what is feminine? Is this play a true reflection of human behaviour in terms of same sex relationship? And 5. Can the theme of 'gay-love' be a fit subject for contemporary drama? Dattani, in course of his introduction to *Collected Plays* (2000), explains that his plays are the true reflection of the contemporary society when he writes: "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background." (XV)

Despite the development in humanlife the past is still rooted in Indian mind set up. It would be beneficial if gender study thus expands beyond the prescribed role separately for male and female to assert the socialistic need for humanism. This gender concept in the mind of people should be changed to promote the humanistic concern among the people of different sexes.

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