

**Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai*: The Plight of Homosexuals**

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**Abstract**

Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* was first performed at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1998. Like Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani is always adventurous in his ways of introducing such hidden issues that are existing and have been unconsciously accepted by us. But they have never been given so much importance as to find their way into print. To pull them out from under the rug and display them threadbare is an uphill task which requires great skills which Dattani has proved that he has in abundant measure. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is such a bold play that deals with the plight of homosexuals in the heterosexual society. Homosexuality is one of the issues that recur prominently in some of Dattani's plays. In the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani deals with the subject with a bold pen and lays open the hypocrisies of social life which imposes stereotypical roles to men and women and acknowledges and legitimizes only these roles. Male and female – these are the only sexual categories which have secured social existence and society's approbation. People who do not fit into these two classes either keep trying to fit into the rut and suffer throughout their lives carrying a burden of living the big lie or if they choose to live with the truth they have to bear social ostracism and contempt.

**Key Words :** Heterosexual, Homosexual, Hypocrisy, Marginalized, Plight, Taboo

Artists since ages have dealt with the theme of homosexuality in very subtle, nuanced and probing manners unfolding not only its varied forms and expressions but also its multiple causes and consequences. For example, Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (1594) is one of the most radical explorations of homosexual love. It is great tragedy of a man torn between his hereditary role as a king and his love for another man. Ben Jonson too depicted the folly of inordinate desires in his play *Sejanus* (1603) in which the protagonist is accused of homosexual prostitution. Even the great poet and playwright William Shakespeare, in many of his sonnets celebrates the intense love between the poet

speaker and his male friend. His play, *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) is particularly notable for the explicit sexual relationship between Achilles and Petroclus.

In modern literature, the theme of homosexuality has received a more extensive, frank and free treatment in the hands of writers such as Dorothy Miller Richardson and Sylvia Townsend Warner. Dorothy Richardson's *Dawn's Left Hand* is one of the most notable lesbian writings of its period. We can see intense female friendship and homoerotic passion between the novel's heroine Miriam and her socialist friend Amabel. Sylvia Warner in her novel *Mr.*

*Fortune's Maggot* shows a missionary Mr. Timothy Fortune in the South Pacific who loses his religion because of an erotic attachment to Lueli, a male islander.

Indian writers too have dealt with this theme of homosexuality at length in a highly analytical and interesting manner in their works. Ismat Chughtai's short story *The Quilt* published in 1942 was the subject of an obscenity trial in the 1940s, for her delicate evocation of relationship between two women. From 1980s onward, gay and bisexual writers such as Suniti Namjoshi, Firdaus Kanaga, Hanif Kureshi and R. Raja Rao acquired world-wide attention. Hanif Kureshi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) deals with the gay romance between Omar, a young British-born Pakistani and Johnny, a working-class Englishman. Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story* published in 2001, was considered a revolutionary play because it had a lesbian protagonist called Mitra and the play is about her struggle to cope with her sexual orientation. Recently the famous LGBT writer and activist R. Raja Rao published his novel *The Boyfriend* in which the invisible gay culture in Mumbai is highlighted.

All this shows that Indian writers have ventured into territories often forbidden by the custodians of conventional morality. Mahesh Dattani is one of the contemporary playwrights who exhibit this tendency of exploring frankly the taboo issues and concerns of human relationships. Dattani's plays depict the plight of the gay people living in a homophobic environment which forces them to live a spurious life and conceal their sexuality for fear of hostile reactions and consequences. He provides clear insight

into a rule-based society where people are brought up with feeling that homosexuality is wrong and hence it causes strong feelings of shame and self-loathing in such people who are homosexuals. Dattani's plays also show that suppressing one's sexuality creates serious impact on one's life and relationships. Dattani aims at tearing the veneer of such filthy realities and exposes the gruesome truth which lies concealed in a hypocritical Indian society. Sangeeta Das remarks,

...Mahesh Dattani makes himself conspicuous by picking up such sensational issues of the society which we know and read now and then but refuse to acknowledge their existence amidst us (Sangeeta Das, 11).

Dattani's plays become the outcry of sexual minorities such as gays, lesbians and hijras, the marginalized members of society, the excluded and subalterns, who in their futile efforts to connect with society are reduced to pathetic conditions, guilt-ridden tortured psyche opposing socio-ethical background. John McRae in his note on the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* expresses,

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 behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victims to the expectations society creates (CP 45).

The play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* can be studied and examined in the light of above lines focusing upon the plight of homosexuals. We meet a group of homosexuals belonging to the urban elite society gathered in the flat of Kamlesh in

Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. They discuss freely the problems of contemporary society. Through their discussion Dattani brings forth their pains, turmoil and travails. The atmosphere inside the flat and outside is muggy and full of suffocation. The noise outside, the music and the dim light indicate lack of peace which is symbolic of their inner turmoil. They are forced to meet in darkness of a closed area. They are unable to cope with their situation openly in the society.

The play opens with a scene where Kamlesh had sex with the middle-aged guard whom he pays for it. This behaviour may shock the conventional sensibility but in the modern context the situation of Kamlesh needs to be explored more liberally and sympathetically. In the play, Dattani has tried to force the audience to give their thinking a new approach.

All the friends of Kamlesh have started gathering for the party in his flat. The readers witness his intense and passionate desire for Prakash – his homosexual partner, who has become an obsession for him. Kamlesh is in utter pain as Prakash has betrayed him and deserted him after staying with Kamlesh for some time. Prakash believes that he can't bear this state of mind and starts feeling guilty. So in order to get rid of the whole unusual situation and obsession for Kamlesh, he plans to marry Kiran who is none other than Kamlesh's sister. Kamlesh feels completely broken at his betrayal and is severely hurt with the behaviour of Prakash (who has changed to Ed),

KAMLESH. ... I would have understood it if he had left me for

another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship. It would have worked between us, but he was ashamed. I was very angry. I left my parents and my sister to come here, all because of him ... (CP 68-69).

Kamlesh feels so much tortured and humiliated at his own being gay that he bursts out, "...for the first time in my life I wished I wasn't a gay" (CP 69). To come out from his fear, loneliness and anxiety he seeks the help of a psychiatrist which proves futile, "I tried explaining to him that I needed his help to overcome my anxiety and fears, not to be something I am not. Could he help me cope with my loneliness and fear the same way he would help a heterosexual cope with his?" (CP 69). Kamlesh's words and the doctor's attitude to his problem bear the testimony to the viewpoint that a doctor or society never accepts homosexuality as natural. Kamlesh's dilemma is that he can't resist his sexual orientation as it is deeply rooted in his body and psyche.

After having been betrayed and deserted by Prakash, Kamlesh starts living with Sharad who is also a gay of different kind – daring, enthusiastic and flaunting. His relations with Kamlesh are very complex. He is angered at Kamlesh's love for Prakash even after being deserted by him. He also feels humiliated that while living with him, Prakash occupies a large space in Kamlesh's mind than him. He wants Kamlesh to come out of his obsessions and lies, "Oh spare the lies! You could not love anyone because you are still in love with Prakash" (CP 56). It is a complex love situation as Sharad wants the same intensity and passion from Kamlesh, while Kamlesh in his helplessness is unable to come out of his

obsession for Prakash. Kamlesh confesses the fact that he has hurt Sharad,

KAMLESH. ... I did cruel thing by loving Sharad to forget Prakash. I have not succeeded. And I have hurt someone as wonderful as Sharad. I made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that I was trying to get over" (CP 68).

Sharad and other friends make efforts to being Kamlesh out of his loneliness. They even burn his photos with Prakash, but somehow Kamlesh manages to keep one that is most reflective of their intimacy, "... cheek to cheek, pelvis to pelvis, Naked" (CP 72). The same photo brings denouement in the end when Kamlesh's sister Kiran sees it. She is almost frozen, disillusioned and broken, "I don't know what to do ... I ... I ... have lost two people whom I love" (CP 106).

In the group of homosexuals, Ed is a victim of his own dual character and uncertainties. It is he who creates havoc in Kamlesh's and Kiran's lives. His relations with Kamlesh cannot continue because of his own weakness. He is a gay but has no courage to accept it. After deserting Kamlesh and taking help from the priest and the psychiatrist, Ed thinks himself to be balanced enough to marry Kiran. But he cannot win over his attraction for Kamlesh. Even when involved with Kiran and planning to marry her, he confides in Kamlesh his inner desire to continue his sexual relations with him, "Once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any ... suspicion" (CP 22).

Prakash (Ed) even goes to the extent of regarding his marriage as a convenient agreement to facilitate his homosexual

desires, "I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me" (CP 23). They hypocrisy of Ed and the psycho-pathetic condition of Kamlesh and their miseries force the reader to explore the causes of their unhappy state. The two human beings are greatly in love with each other. In no way do they harm or threaten society, but are forced to lead a life of guilt and self-torture. Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* opines that it is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime – a cruelty. The burden of social heterosexual hegemony is so much that the homosexuals like Kamlesh and Ed become neurotic. Kamlesh is nervous, full of broken sentences, self-pitying and Ed becomes a victim of guilt, duality and hypocrisy. Bijay Kumar Das's remark is significant in this context,

"There is a binary opposition between their nature and the culture of their society. This dichotomy between nature and culture obstructs their love and poisons their minds" (Bijay Kumar Das, 98).

Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* emerges as an outcry of such people who are suffering for something which is innate to their nature and therefore to resist or change their sexual orientation is not in their control. It underlines the necessity of trying to understand sympathetically the predicament of the class of homosexuals. The homosexuals are in constant fear of social rejection. Even the guard, when he comes with the photo of Kamlesh and Prakash in a passionate pose, warns Kamlesh, "Society waalo ko sab kal complaint karne wale hain! ... abhi aap logo ka kya hoga? Aap yeh sab khullam khulla kyo karte hain?" (CP 105).

The fear of ostracism makes the homosexuals closed personalities. That is why more clever friends like Ranjit and Bunny have to hide their sexuality from people. Ranjit finds India a wretched country where he cannot live peacefully, as a result of which he tends to visit Europe frequently where he has been together with his English lover for a long time. Ranjit's choice to live away from India suggests difference between the two cultures. People in the West appear to be more liberal and free regarding their sexual lives.

But in Indian society, people like Bunny have to adopt camouflage in order to escape the possibilities of social censure and rejection. He is a T.V actor and also a gay, but married happily and enjoying a reputation in society because of his abilities to cover-up his transgression. He is more at peace and balanced while wearing the mask of a normal straight man. He knows the truth that he cannot accept those people in public whom he loves in private,

BUNNY. ... I deny them in public but I want their love in private. I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now – I am a gay man. Everyone believes me to be a model, middle-class man. I was chosen in the part in serial because I fit into common perceptions of what a family ought to look like. I believed in it myself. I lied – to myself first. And I continue to lie to millions (CP 103).

Thus, Bunny can express his real self only to his friends who are like him. He opens his heart to them as to how he has denied his 'self' to himself and to everyone. The

dilemma of Bunny can be summed up in Nadeem's remarks,

“Indian gays are Indian first and gay second. We value and respect the manners and mores of our families, our communities, and our various religious heritages. As a result most gays in India remain, in Western terms, deeply closeted” (Nadeem, 2).

That is why they are not able to develop fulfilling relationships among themselves. Their pursuit of happiness leads them to confusion and they cannot reach any solution till the end. Ed asks in despair, “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?” (CP 111). His friend Kamlesh has no answers to his existential question, “I don't know” (CP 111) is curt reply. Sharad who has lived with Kamlesh as his homosexual partner, is also lost in tumultuous zones of this muggy life of unstable relationships. His search for identity continues, “I ask for myself what I have got and what I am and what I am not” (CP 111).

Hence, it is evident that the relations of homosexuals with one another fail to provide them any meaning in life. They remain doomed to be lonely and dissatisfied with their lives till the end. The play suggests that the fault lies with society, “... which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity” (CP 46).

Thus, the study of relationships between/among the homosexuals reveals that they do not feel like liberated men and are forced to live a life of sham within the norms of heterosexual society. They feel, realize and express the desire to lead a normal life like

others but are compelled to hide their reality and lead a secluded life in their claustrophobic spaces. They seem to be making an appeal to society to embrace the diversity of different sexualities in the changing scenario. Carl Wittman remarks in this context,

“Humans originally put a taboo on homosexuality because they needed every bit of energy to produce and raise children – survival of the species was a priority. With over population and technological change, that taboo is absurd and continues only to exploit us and enslave us” (Carl Wittman 158).

The study of the relationship between and amongst homosexuals underlines that sexual minorities continue to suffer various forms of physical and mental abuse, prejudice and discrimination at the hands of state and society. The harrowing plight of this marginalized section remains unknown to the larger normative society which remains by and large not only indifferent but even unrelentingly hostile to them. What is implied here as remarked by Satish Kumar Sharma, “that it is not only merely the biological state of an individual which makes him different from others but there is also the public response to such a state” (Satish Kumar Sharma 5) which determines his or her status in society.

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