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A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central focus. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside sits on a wooden surface, alongside a red wax seal and a small wooden object. The overall scene is set against a dark, textured background, creating a scholarly and historical atmosphere.

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Mahesh Dattani's 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai': A Critique on Heterosexuality

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Mahesh Dattani, one of the prominent playwrights of Indian writing in English occupies a distinct place for bringing out real life problems into the stage. His 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai' tackles with a serious issue of Indian society. The play enquires the causes of hypocrisy, escapism and introvert nature of the queer people. It also raises a question whether homosexuality is aberrant.

Key Words: Heterosexuality, queer culture, subjectivity.

1.1 Introduction:

In Indian English drama Mahesh Dattani occupies a very distinct and eminent place. His presentation of problems from real life situations is significant contribution to Indian English drama. Among modern Indian playwrights, Dattani stands forth for distinctness, artistic perception and immense dramatic spirit. He tackles some serious problems prevailing in urban India in his plays. Specially, he gives voice to the problems and sufferings of the marginalized people of our society. His plays contain human pathos, passions, conflict and appeal to human sentiment. Dattani plays a vital role to put Indian English drama to the level of world drama. The present study is an analytical account of Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* written in 1998 where he challenges the traditional norms of heterosexuality.

1.2 Objective and Methodology of the study:

The chief objective of the paper is to study the way Dattani criticise the subjectivity towards the queer people in India and challenge the traditional heterosexual

ideas. To achieve the objective analytical method has been applied in the paper. Besides, descriptive and introductory methods have also been applied wherever feels necessary.

1.3. The Analysis:

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai has been well received in urban India despite its unconventional theme. The play is a celebration of freedom in a sense, but it also points out that the freedom is threatened the moment one steps out of the privacy of home. Kamlesh, the protagonist of the play, has shared an unsuccessful relationship with his male friend Ed. The relationship comes to an end due to the traditional social beliefs on heterosexuality which makes Ed to switch to normal heterosexual mode. With a broken heart Kamlesh starts another relationship with Sharad, a very lively, intelligent and confident person. Kamlesh and Sharad live together for some time. But, unable to forget Ed, Kamlesh breaks up his relationship with Sharad. At the same time, following the advice of his psychiatrist Ed starts courting Kamlesh's

sister Kiran. They have fixed their marriage and plan to meet Kiran's brother Kamlesh before the wedding. Kamlesh who is still unable to get over his relationship with Ed decides to tell the truth to Kiran. The play opens with the scene when Kamlesh has invited some of his queer friends including Sharad to his place. Among the people there are Sharad and Deepali; Bunny Singh, a TV actor who secretly enjoys gay relationship while being happily married and presents a macho, heterosexual exterior; Ranjit who thinks that India is not a good place for queer people and so he has gone abroad. All of them have found solutions to the societal oppression and opposition in different ways. In other words, they have employed different survival tactics: Sharad and Deepali by being very upfront and honest about their identities, Bunny by exhibiting a normal married life and Ranjit by escaping to foreign lands. On the other hand Ed consults a psychiatrist who advises him to adopt heterosexuality. Dattani uses this opportunity to criticise mainstream psychoanalysis for being status-conscious. Ed's relationship with the sister of Kamlesh provokes Kamlesh to think Ed has changed and will keep his sister happy. But the queer friends of Kamlesh force him to reveal Ed's secret to Kiran. While Kiran is shocked to learn that both Kamlesh and Ed have been deceiving her, Ed reveals another secret to Kamlesh that his real motive behind marrying Kiran is to remain close to Kamlesh and fulfil his homosexual desires secretly. This is how the matrimonial institution of heterosexual society is used for purposes which are entirely opposite to that institution.

The play ends with Kamlesh rediscovering love with Sharad and humiliated Ed trying to commit suicide. The social pressures are so overpowering that for a person like Ed it becomes impossible to live a normal life.

It is also important to note that through the play Dattani tries to find out reason behind hypocrisy, escapism and introvert nature of the queer people. John McRae, in the introduction to the play, writes, "It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectation society creates. . . . For the fault is not just the characters' – it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity." (Dattani: 45-46) The society does not allow the queer people to live as what they are and forces them to live like what they are not. It creates self-alienation in their life. To prove themselves normal people in front of society Bunny Singh and Ed get married while secretly carrying with their gay relationships. It put them down them in their own eyes by undermining their self-worth. Bunny Singh admits this when he says, "Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist...The only people who know me – the real me – are present here in this room." (Dattani: 102-103) Ed is also under the same social pressure and he decides to marry Kiran to secretly get Kamlesh's love. Then there is Ranjit who leaves India in order to lead a life of his choice. There are others like Deepali and Sharad who are very honest about their sexuality and display it openly.

Throughout the play the heterosexual world peeps in time and again and makes its presence felt. The outside world which

is alien to the insiders of the house keeps on exerting its pressure. The wedding, the children chasing Bunny for an autograph and the neighbours finding out the incriminating photograph of Kamlesh and Ed are all forces of the outside world. On this relationship between the outside and the inside worlds in the play, John McRae remarks, "The outside world's always pressing in – the heat, the sounds, the people pestering Bunny, the kids who find the photo. Very few dramatists are able to give this sense of a whole society touching the participant in the on-stage drama– it recalls Ibsen at his social best." (Dattani: 45) The noisy outside world is a metaphor of domineering atmosphere in which a queer person has to live. The presence of the opposing force in the form of the outside world creates a discourse of opposition to homosexuality. By restricting and suppressing, it shapes the subjectivity of queer people. The dominant discourse of heterosexuality suppresses the homosexual culture. The cultural and social codes within a society further enhance subjectivity towards queerness.

The ending of the play is not on the expected lines. Conventionally, it could have ended in Ed's suicide; but Ed is saved and is shown to get up, although with some help. He starts walking towards the people he earlier dreaded facing.

3.1 Conclusion:

Mahesh Dattani, though not very loudly, makes a plea for an atmosphere of acceptance and acknowledgement for the queer community. He also brings out the gay issues out of the closet into the open. The play stands on the side of gay emancipation, as Chaudhuri notes, "The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India's "queer culture". (Chaudhuri: 51) Dattani projects through the play the problems faced by the Indian urban queer community. He deals with a variety of queer sensibilities, including men and women, showing how they react to societal pressures. Dattani's play thus raises a host of rarely addressed issues and by placing them into the forefront he challenges the traditional heterosexual codes of the society.

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