

Marginalization of Gays: A Study of Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

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Mahesh Dattani

Marginalization Based on Sexual Preference

In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, marginalization of certain community including homosexuals is a major problem that threatens the fabric of our society. Factors like caste, religion, community and gender give rise to social exclusion of marginalized people. The Indian society witnessed this marginalization or social exclusion right from time immemorial when it was divided on the basis of caste. But now the discrimination against people in our society on the basis of gender and sexuality is quite visible to the public through the writings of writers like Mahesh Dattani .

Mahesh Dattani, the most significant Indian English playwright of our country, projects through the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the problems faced by the Indian homosexual community. He deals with a variety of homosexual sensibilities, including men and women, showing how they react to societal pressures.

A Trendsetter

Usually Indian literature has ignored the theme of homosexuality. Being a gay or lesbian in India is still a huge taboo. Often writers have shown courage to suggest homosexuality indirectly only. But Dattani is in no way a trend follower but definitely a trendsetter, dealing with

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the issues of the marginalized in the Indian urban society. John Mc Rae, in the introduction to the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* writes:

And the themes of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deserve to touch the whole society and to be touched by it. 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 victim to the expectations society creates. (45)

Torn between True Self and Traditional Indian Society - India's First Play

The play is the first in Indian theatre to openly handle gay themes of love, affiliation, trust and betrayal, raising serious 'closet' issues that remain generally 'invisible'. Dattani projects the crisis that gays face as they are torn between their true self and what the traditional Indian society thinks and expects of the gays. Their hidden fears and feelings are carefully exposed by Dattani, within the framework of dramatic structure and he tries to investigate the identity crisis of the gays, who occupy no honourable space in social order.

Legal Provisions against Homosexual Practice

In Indian society, the practice of homosexuals/ lesbianism is not tolerated. A consensual homosexual relationship remains a crime to this day, according to the civil law section 337 of the Indian Penal Code. The section refers to "carnal acts against the order of nature". Even homosexuality is against religious values. As per the law, whosoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years or liable to fine.

Societal Opposition

Therefore Indian gays and lesbians are busier in hiding their sexual identities than in leading an active and honest sex life. 'Closed people', 'underground' community, people with 'alternative sexuality' are terms casually used to refer to gays and lesbians. Such language use underscores the need to keep same-sex orientation and preferences under cover or push them under our patriarchal, feudal and fascist carpets. This takes away the dignity of choice and therefore, the dignity of living itself.

Portraying the Identity Crisis

The socio-psychological identity crisis of the gays, who are torn between the social taboos and their personal desires, their conscience and social consciences are discussed in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Dattani examines the psychology of persons who are by

nature or by choice 'gays' or bi-sexuals' and the desire on the part of some of them to turn heterosexual, by hiding their identity.

The play moves through the figures of Kamlesh, Ed, Bunny, Prakash, Sharad, Deepali—the homosexual variations of gays and lesbians whose self-reflexive positioning defines the new metro-sexual identity formation in the newly 'created world', through the assertion of own ideology, flamboyancy and rejection of traditional approach. The play concentrates on the secret private spaces of the bedroom and the deeper space that belongs to the inner thoughts of the characters.

The World of Gays

The gays inhabit a world of their own subject to exclusion and isolation, which is unacceptable to the ideas of homogeneous cultural identity. In the play, Prakash and Kamlesh were deeply in love with each other. The separation between Prakash and Kamlesh causes immense pain and distress in the heart and mind of Kamlesh. Thereafter, he comes in contact with Sharad and develops gay relationship with him. However, Kamlesh can't adjust himself with Sharad, as he is hunted by the memories of Prakash. It is a great shock to him, that he has now changed his name as Ed, and intends to marry Kiran, divorcee sister of Kamlesh. He invites his friends, in order to find a solution for his problem.

The relationship between Prakash and Kamlesh flounders due to societal pressures of heterosexuality, which make Ed believe that he is somehow wrong and should switch to normal, heterosexual mode. Prakash or Ed feels himself as a sinner, according to his religious values. Kamlesh says, "He (Prakesh) 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" (CP 85).

Kamlesh is quite different from Prakash. He is not ashamed of being a homosexual, and is very honest about it, but Ed/ Prakash is ashamed to own the relationship publicly. The society approves of a heterosexual relationship but the homosexual relations are looked down upon by the majority. It is not the individual alone, who disapproves homosexuality, but the high institutions of society like church that do not approve and sanctify such relations, because relations between same sex cannot be procreative and so are seen as unnatural and carnal.

Edwin Prakash Mathew alias Ed, wants to hide his gay identity and, therefore, he loves Kiran, Kamlesh's sister. The fact is that 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" (105). It shows he does not want himself to be branded publically as a gay. He justifies himself,

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. (99)

Consequence of Hypocrisy

This shows the identity crisis of Ed and for the sake of society, he pretends to be 'heterosexual'. Similarly, all the gays in the play are facing the same crisis. This society, in which gay and lesbians have to necessarily live, does not accept them as what they are. It tries to make them what they are not, with often disastrous results. It brings about their self-alienation, through a complex web of discourses.

The typical reaction against the situation is that of Bunny Singh and Ed who get married to prove to the society that they are normal while secretly carrying with their gay relationship. Hypocrisy is, thus a part of the damaging discourse, Bunny Singh admits,

Just as the man whom my wife does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me-the real me-are present here in this room. And you hate me for such a hypocrite....I have try to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either. (103)

Bunny continues to perform the role of a straight male to gain acceptance in his professional circle, which expects him to be an ideal husband, a family man.

Sharad, who loves Kamlesh sincerely, is the antithesis of Ed. He is vocal of his gay identity. Like him Deepali, a lesbian, boldly accepts her true self. As McRae observes in "A Note on the Play", *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* in *Collected Plays*,

Of the characters, Sharad and Deepali are comfortable with their sexuality, and have different ways of being gay. Sharad is camp, flaunting; Deepali more restrained, perhaps more stable. Kamlesh is anguished and Ed the most obvious victim of his own insecurities. Bunny, the TV actor is a rather more traditional Indian gay man- married. (he would say happily) while publicly denying his own nature, and Ranjit has taken an easy way out by moving to Europe where he can, 'be himself' more openly. (45)

Interpersonal Affairs and Conflicts

Kamlesh is caught up into the frustration and anger resulting from the betrayal of Prakash. Though he lives with Sharad, he is not able to forget Prakash. When Kiran introduces Ed/Prakash to Kamlesh, he was approved and encouraged. He has sacrificed his feelings for his sister. At the same time, he is not able to love Sharad sincerely. It is understood in the following conversation between Sharad and Kamlesh.

Kamlesh : I wanted to love you. I tried for a whole year.

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Sharad : But you couldn't

Kamlesh : I do love you.

Sharad : Oh! Spare me the lies!

You could never love anyone because you are still in love with Prakash.

(CP 56)

It shows that the homosexuals have strong bond of love and affection like heterosexual. At the same time, it is difficult to find a life partner easily in India, because the established notions of love and marriage of our society only permit heterosexuals. That is why gays like Ranjit leave India for keeping his gay relation and identity intact and safe. He says, "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).

Reflection of the "Mainstream" Behaviour in the World

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 ghettoisation within society, little spaces, to which the marginalized are pushed. (47)

Pressure of Traditional Culture Consciousness

Dattani tries to show how gay people behave and act under the pressure of traditional culture consciousness which forbids them indulging in it. He used the symbol of a photograph to highlight the identity crisis of marginalized people as gay, in the play. It is the photograph where Kamlesh and Ed are hugging each other. It is the only photograph left with Kamlesh as he has returned all the other similar photographs to Ed along with the negatives. He was hiding this one in particular in the bathroom, behind the mirror which Sharad discovers and takes out to show it to other friends.

Characterization of Bisexuals – Are They Hypocrites?

There is a different opinion between Kamlesh and Ed, about the photograph. Kamlesh finds it beautiful whereas Ed calls it ugly and a piece of filth. Ed's calling it ugly shows that he was not ready to leave any proof of his gay identity with Kamlesh. He also tries to commit

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suicide when he comes to know that Kiran and other people at the party and the wedding have seen the picture and his gay identity that he wanted to hide was revealed to the people. The fear, the loneliness and the conflicts of playing the traditional gender roles are fully displayed in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.

In many cases, homosexuality may exist side by side with heterosexuality. If they hide their true self, act like heterosexuals and get married, it will result in many problems. The heterosexuals do not love their wife, because they love their friend of their own sex. Both Ed and Bunny are branded as 'hypocrite' of cheating another woman's feelings. When Ed decides to marry Kiran, to secretly get Kamlesh's love, he forgets the emotional harm he would be doing to Kiran. Kiran asks him, "What did you want from me? What did you want from me so badly that you could not care how much you hurt me for it?" (CP107). Bunny and Ed thus translate the oppression they receive at the hands of society into deception and victimization of their wives: the chain reaction begins, without any point in sight at which it would end.

Mixing Red and Blue

It is very difficult for a gay or lesbian person to decide about putting an end to hypocrisy and pressures of society that he or she cannot decide for himself or herself. Samuel Delany speaks in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* about the problematic desire to identify homosexuals as a conflict between ontological and epistemological concerns. While some want to understand the behaviours associated with being gay, others want to know what causes homosexuality. The question at the 'epistemological level' is given by him as in the following:

What qualities do we possess, that signal the fact that we partake of the pre-existing essence of 'gayness' that gives us our gay 'identity' and that, in most folks' minds means that we belong to the category of 'those who are gay'? (187)

Privacy and Hetero-normative Spaces

Privacy is another construct of negotiation between queer and hetero-normative spaces. In the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani has made use of multi-level stage to represent the different spaces of household representing the mental spaces of the characters and the different realities they live in. The dark expensive area represents the mental anguish and dilemma of the characters while the open space represents the action in the context of external thoughts.

All the action takes place in Kamlesh's flat that is divided into three spaces- the living room, the bedroom and the non-realistic expensive state. The flat is situated at the Marine Drive which gives the idea of the luxurious life of Mumbai. There is a contrast between the glorious view of the 'Queen's Necklace' and the isolated flat of Kamlesh which shows the contrast between the public and private life of the gays. The second is the bedroom of Kamlesh, which is hidden behind the wall which gives it an image of mystery and privacy. The third area is the

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space where the characters immediately suspend and their innermost thoughts and feelings come out. Chaudhuri comments in *Contemporary Writers in English*,

Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make his audience. But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatizes and peoples the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with, facing genuine, real life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India's 'queer culture'. (51)

Dattani's Approach

It is clear that Dattani feels the need to establish a firm connection between the possibility 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 gay people expecting public participation on the problem under discussion.

Bravely Fought the Queen

The homosexual wants to be powerful and commended like the real man of society. They want to belong to the world of real man and woman. But there is deception and betrayal prevailing in the world of gays in order to hide their true identity. They behave like heterosexuals, and they may spoil women's life too.

It is well seen in Dattani's another play, *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Like Ed, Nitin Trivedi, a gay, wants to marry Alka, in order to continue his gay relationship with Praful, Alka's brother. Before the marriage, Kiran comes to know that Ed is none other than the gay partner of her own brother and she stops the marriage. But in the case of Alka, after the marriage only she comes to know that her husband has homosexual relationship with her own brother. Her sufferings and agony are immense, and her whole life is spoiled due to his 'gayness'. Because of her problems with her marital life, Alka takes to drinking and she drinks heavily in order to forget her sufferings.

Alka suffers severely due to her husband's true identity as a gay. It is his selfishness that makes him not to reveal the truth. For the sake of society, he marries her, as did Ed. As a result, Alka is childless, lacks decency and qualities of an ideal wife. Further she is an alcoholic and thus an immoral woman. But it is her brother and her husband who had indirectly forced her to suffer and become alcoholic. They are themselves at fault and are guilty persons but they do not suffer. Alka suffers. She is victimized and she becomes a totally different person. Kiran's life would have been spoiled just as Alka's, if she married Ed. But the truth about Ed and Kamlesh prevented her to marry him.

Inner Recesses of Gay Characters



A scene from the play

Dattani takes a plunge into the inner recesses of the characters who desire to be gay. It appears that they are puzzled about their identity in society and they feel marginalized. If they fulfill their longing to be gay individuals, it will damage their identities and recognition in society which disapproves such a relationship and promotes marriage between heterosexuals. Their sexuality is endangered and engulfed by the rules and regulations of the society.

Torn between longing and identity, the characters try to find out their alternatives. The clash results from their conflicting nature with the culture of the society to which they belong. As Bijay Kumar Das comments in *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*:

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. The note of revolt against the society is unmistakable. In the page of globalization, nature triumphs over culture. (97-98)

Dattani's Realistic Exposition

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*

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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.

Abbreviation

CP- Collected Plays

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