

Invading the Forbidden Domain of Queers

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“Current research indicates that our sexual orientation, the ‘imprinting’ that dictates whether we are sexually and affectionately attracted to men, to women, or to both sexes is probably set by the age of 5 or 6. In the ‘imprinting theory’ of John Money, our sexual orientation is irreversibly set once and for all in early childhood, though it may take an individual many years to recognize and accept his or her sexual orientation.”¹

Some people feel that their gender is the opposite of their biological sex and are referred to as being transgendered. They may suffer great psychological stress and try to live in a body that is alien to their gender-identity. Because society places much importance on people conforming to the norms regarding gender-roles, “...many transgendered struggle with the realization that they do not fit psychologically with the way their bodies appear physically.”²

In debating sexual orientation, much still remains illusive to our understanding and knowledge. Charles Darwin seems to be very much to the point when he asserts, “...we do not even in the least know the final cause of sexuality. The whole subject is hidden in darkness.”³ But this very fact is the source of interest and explorations for scientists, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and even men of literature. Artists since ages have dealt with this

theme in very subtle, nuanced and probing manners laying bare not only its varied forms and expressions but also its multiple causes and consequences. In modern literature, this theme has received a more extensive, frank and free treatment.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the playwrights who exemplify this tendency of exploring frankly the hitherto tabooed issues and concerns of human relationships. It appears that he is drawn to probe deep into the life and experiences of queers in Indian society, revealing their desires and fears, tensions and conflicts, struggles and tribulations from inside out. His 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 insight into a rule-based society where people have been brought up with the feeling that homosexuality is wrong, thereby causing in the transgender strong feelings of shame and self-loathing leading to low self-esteem. Furthermore, his plays show that suppressing one's sexuality involves denial of an important part of one's identity and can have serious impact on one's life and relationships.

Dattani's plays aim at tearing the veneer of such filthy realities and expose 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."⁴ His plays become the outcry of the queers, sexual minorities such as gays and hijras, the marginalized members of society, the excluded and subalterns, who in their futile efforts to be connected with society are reduced to pathetic creatures with their guilt-ridden, tortured psyche and opposing socio-ethical background. John McRae in his note on the play *The Muggy Night in Mumbai* expresses similar ideas: "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 expectation society creates" (p.45).

In this play, we meet a group of gays belonging to the urban society who assemble in the flat of Kamlesh, a fashion designer, who throws a party to them to announce the engagement of his dear sister, Kiran. They freely discuss the problems here and while they talk, their pains, turmoil and travails are unfolded. The atmosphere inside the flat and outside is muggy and full of suffocation. The noise outside, the music and the din indicate lack of peace symbolic of their inner turmoil. The gays are forced to meet in darkness of a closed area. They are unable to cope with their situation in open society where they are a butt of laughter and ridicule.

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

Kamlesh's friends start gathering for the party and 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, after staying with Kamlesh for sometime, has deserted him. Prakash believe that he can't be happy with his state and starts nurturing a guilt complex. To get rid of the whole unusual situation and his obsession with Kamlesh, he plans to marry Kiran who is none other than Kamlesh's sister. Kamlesh feels totally broken at his betrayal and is doubly hurt with the behaviour of Prakash (who has changed himself 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.... (p.68-69)

He feels so much tortured and unhappy at his own being gay that his agony bursts out: "...for the first time in my life I wished I wasn't a gay" (p.69). To come out of his loneliness, fears and anxiety, he also seeks the help of a psychiatrist but it proves futile:

KAMLESH. 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? (p.69)

Kamlesh's words and the doctor's attitude to his problem is a testimony to the viewpoint that a doctor or society never accepts homosexuality as natural. Kamlesh's predicament is that he cannot resist his sexual orientation as it is deeply rooted in his body and psyche.

The play emerges as an outcry of these 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 the queers. In the play there is "...a passionately spun but essentially sane and rational argument that no human being should suffer from inhuman social attitudes, just because the nature of his sexuality is different from that of the majority of mankind."⁵

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, which he got from the people outside, warns Kamlesh:

GUARD. Society waalo ko sab kal complaint karne wale hain! ...Abhi aap logo ka kya hoga? Aap yeh sab khullam khulla kyo karte hain? (p.105).

The fear of ostracism makes the homosexuals closeted 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 in England 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 a society like the one in India, 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 façade 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. (p.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 and his ilk 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.”⁶

That is why, they are not able to develop fulfilling relationships among themselves. Their pursuit of happiness leads them to confusion and they can not reach any solution till the end. Ed asks in despair: “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?” (p.111). His friend Kamlesh has no answers to his existential question, “I don’t know” (p.111) is his curt reply.

Sharad, who has lived with Kamlesh as his homosexual partner, is also lost in tumultuous zones of this muggy life of unstable relationship. His search for identity continues: “I ask for myself what I have got and what I am and what I am not” (p.111).

Thus 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” (p.46).

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 also is “that it is not merely the biological state of an individual which makes him different from others but there is also the public response to such a state”⁷ which determines his or her status in society.

Notes

¹Robert T. Francoeur, "Human Sexuality," *Handbook of Marriage and Family*, ed. Marvin B. Sussman and Suzanne k. Steimetz (London: Plenum Press, 1987), p.511.

²Tasha R. Howe, *Marriages and families in the 21st century: A Bio-ecological Approach* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publications, 2012), p.72.

³Ryan D. Johnson, "Homosexuality: Nature or Nurture," *All Psych Journal*, 30 Apr. 2003, 08 Aug. 2007.

⁴Sangeeta Das, "The Sensational Issues in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani," *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response*, ed. R.K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant (New Delhi: Prestige Publications, 2005), p.11.

⁵Pranav Joshipura, *A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays* (New Delhi: Sarup Books Pvt Ltd, 2009), p.23.

⁶Nadeem Ahmed, "Indian Gays Unite – The Cyber Way," *Hindustan Times* 13 May 2001, Sunday Times: 2.

⁷Satish Kumar Sharma, *Hijras: The Labelled Deviants* (New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 2009), p.5.

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Mahesh Dattani, *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000).

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