

The Conflicts and Complexities of Homosexuals in Mahesh Dattani's 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai'

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani aims at staging the alternate sexuality, troubles and travails of gays, lesbians, transgender and bi-sexuals. He is probably the first dramatist who is bold enough to present on stage what are generally considered as social taboos yet enjoyed by many. The play, 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai' by Dattani is the finest of the plays which unfold the complexities and complications of the gays and lesbians who have deviant sexual interests. The LGBTQ are generally excluded from the mainstream of society and treated as deviants. Dattani takes the side of these deviants and in every act of the play, he tries to present the conflictual situations blended with potential characterization and thought-provoking dialogues. This paper aims to analyze the complications and complexities of the same-sex desiring individuals depicted in the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. The researchers analyzed how Dattani has succeeded in making a bold presentation of the pains of the marginalized sections of contemporary urban society highlighting the hypocritical nature of the heterosexuals who pretend to accept the other as equal to them but, in reality, they do not. The analysis revealed that Dattani envisions a balance between the wide interests, desires, longings, and beliefs of different people in society. He, through his plays, emphasizes the fact that homosexuals are part of our society and we cannot ignore them. Furthermore, this study suggests that the mainstreams can only suppress the voices of homosexuals but cannot completely obliterate them.

Keywords: Indian Drama, Homosexuality, LGBTQ, Marginalization

Introduction

A playwright with a unique dramatic style, famous for the bold presentation of invisible issues of society, an expert in textualizing and delineating the most delicate and sensitive problems of the victims of marginalization, Mahesh Dattani aims at staging the alternate sexuality, troubles, and travails of gays, lesbians, transgender and bi-sexuals. He is probably

the first dramatist who is bold enough to present on stage what are generally considered social taboos yet enjoyed by many. The themes that Mahesh Dattani deals with are those that are turned a blind eye and a deaf ear too. He makes the best use of human relations to explore the personal choices of individuals. His plays are an assemblage of wide-ranging aspects that question the very foundations and beliefs of society. He covers all emotions ranging from the entertaining humor in *Where There's a Will* to the emotional turbulence of hijras in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* to alternate sexuality and the struggle of same-sex desiring people in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* to *Thirty Days in September* which deals with child abuse and incest. Dattani has always chosen serious issues that need to be paid attention to not just by the critics or the elite sections but the common audience who are the majority. He opines

"I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place, and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally." (2000: XV) The play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is one of his famous plays which unfold the complexities and complications of the gays and lesbians who, according to the straights, have deviant sexual interests. The LGBTQ communities are not fully accepted and are restricted to lead their life on par with the straights in general and in India in particular. Referring to the limitations imposed on LGBTQ people, Judith Butler states that the straights see sexuality as an act that is meant for reproduction and help the human society continue its legacy. And, the sexual relationship between the two heterosexuals is treated as a legitimate one and all other sexual relationships that go beyond the purview of the accepted heterosexual traditions are treated as illegitimate relations which are known as 'other'. Butler opines *"The stable pair who would marry if only they could are cast as currently illegitimate, but eligible for a future legitimacy, whereas sexual agents who function outside the purview of marriage bond and its recognized, if illegitimate, alternative forms now constitute sexual possibilities that will never be eligible for a translation into legitimacy."* (Butler, 2002: 18)

This play, *"On a Muggy Night in Mumbai"* is not only a work of artistic brilliance but also a bold attempt that brilliantly deals with all the complexities and conflicts that LGBTQ people face in the modern urban society of India. The LGBTQ community is generally excluded from the mainstream of society and treated as deviant. Dattani takes the side of these deviants and in every act of the play, he tries to present the conflictual situations blended with

potential characterization and thought-provoking dialogues. He is against the theory of giving priority to the interests of individuals, especially their sexual orientation or choosing the sexual partner to consider them to be normal. His selection of the subjects is not based on what impresses the majority but on what educates them. Beena Agarwal rightly states

“Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure, tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order.” (Beena Aggarwal, Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre, 2011: 34)

The belief that marriage is mandatory for one to be eligible to have sex is no more an accepted proposition. In fact, the Supreme Court of India also gave its verdict in favor of these LGBTQ communities in 2018 by stating that marriage is not mandatory for consensual sex between two individuals. However, in a country like India where the cultural belief system dominates the legislation, accepting deviant behavior is still debatable. Gays and lesbians are always a challenge to the conservative society which is purely dominated by the nuclear family system. Ever since the apex court gave its verdict favoring the LGBTQ, there has been a huge surge in homophobia. On the other hand, Homoeroticism has started emerging strongly with various perceptions such as lesbians rejecting to conceive, gays adopting kids, and transgenders coming forward to study and work countering the established belief and value system of the society which idealizes the ‘heterosexual family’.

In an interview with Raj Ayyar, Ruth Vanita makes it clear: . . . “there is a common bias against any kind of sex discourse in India not just same-sex discourse. The language of condemnation might vary, depending on who’s making a statement. Thus, a Hindi Rightist might use the language of „homosexuality was never a part of our glorious tradition“ 101 while someone from the „left might say „it“s a decadent capitalist/colonial phenomenon“ but both are homophobia and sex phobic. Puritanism and homophobia were certainly a part of the Victorian British Colonial tradition in India and elsewhere. But, you can’t lay all the blame at colonialism’s door.” (5)

Dattani shows sincere interest in how these LGBTQ live, in their trials and tribulations, he boldly challenges the preconceived notions of ‘love’ and ‘marriage’ which are prevalent in

the modern urban Indian society. Love between the opposite genders is the accepted and allowed form of 'love' whereas love between the same gender is seen as evil, an act of violation, and an act of crime. Dattani tries to redefine 'love' by taking it to a different level where it transcends the boundary of sex. Love between the two opposite genders will eventually result in their marriage and they will then be allowed to fulfil their sexual urges. This fulfillment of the sexual urge of two opposite genders is legal and accepted by the mainstream sections of society. On the other hand, people who want to satisfy their sexual urges with the same gender are not allowed to do the same as it goes against the norms of society i.e. also known as going against nature. Mahesh Dattani finds fault with this assumption that not everyone who gets attracted towards the same sex gender does not just want to satisfy his sexual urge but he/she finds themselves secure and comfortable with his/her partner. Dattani sympathizes with this section of the society and through his works he foregrounds their problems and helps them come forward and speak their concerns before the public with no sense of guilt but pride and courage.

The indefinable and inexplicable love that Kamlesh develops for Prakash is boundless and not inferior to the intense emotional bonding that can be seen in the case of a heterosexual relationship. Despite realizing the fact that Prakash is no longer interested in him and wants to lead a heterosexual life, Kamlesh controls his emotions and suffers alone. Prakash hiding his originality changes his name to Ed to start a new life and get married to Kiran who happens to be the sister of Kamlesh. The fact that both Prakash and Ed are one is known only by Kamlesh. When Prakash reveals his identity and lets everyone know his full name i.e. Edwin Prakash Mathew, all are worried about Kamlesh and to help him overcome his grief, they want to disclose the truth to Kiran but Kamlesh stops them.

Sharad : Are you mad? You must be mad!

Deepali : You must tell her!

Kamlesh : You promised! All of you! It doesn't exist.

Sharad : You tricked us! You tricked us to it!

Kamlesh : No. (Dattani 2000, Act 1, 79)

Kamlesh stops his friends from approaching his sister and telling her the truth by exposing the originality of Prakash for he does not want her sister to suffer the loss of a soul mate. Kiran whom Prakash proposes to marry is a divorcee and undergoes severe mental turbulence when she gets separated from her ex-husband. Her marriage is a failure and it leaves indelible

marks on her. This fragile mental condition of Kiran causes Kamlesh more pain than his separation from Prakash. Hence, he decides to suffer in silence. Dattani elegantly explicates the typical brother and sister relationship where a brother sacrifices his love for his sister.

Although there are various themes dealt, the major focus of the play is on same sex relationship which is strictly prohibited in our society. It is highly impossible for same sex relations to bloom in such a society. Thus, they are left with only two options; either they should run away and live in a place where they are accepted or hide themselves and lead a secret life. But, as long as they live in a society where same-sex relationship is seen as taboo, they cannot openly express their interests and lead a normal life. Prakash prefers to hide himself whereas Bunny and Ranjit decide to leave the country and settle in the west where they can live happily. Either of these routes does not really give them permanent relief rather they act as temporary Band-Aid solutions. The decision to live in a society led by heterosexuals is more painful as one needs to dangle between two identities; one, the individual is identified as straight to which he/she does not belong and the other he/she is a deviant that only he/she knows.

Leading a life that one does not really love is the toughest choice that one can ever make. Ranjit who has decided to leave the country and settle in the west is happier than his friends back home. He has made a choice to live his life as he wants without worrying about and fearing society. He is completely content with how he leads his life and need not hide his identity. He can openly express his interests and sexual urges without any fears or worries. The following words of Ranjit make it clear that he is a happy man in a foreign country.

“Ranjit: 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!” (Dattani 2000, Act I, 71).

On the other hand, Bunny, a married man, advises and encourages Kamlesh to marry a girl and continue to hide his identity as a gay and satisfy his sexual urges secretly. Bunny follows this style of leading a life that makes both society and himself happy. By doing this, Bunny is following societal norms and at the same time satisfying his sexual urges without causing any damage to the standards of society. He tries to convince Kamlesh by emphasizing the fact that he is part of a society where his sexual urges are seen as abnormal. Hence, he suggests him “Bunny : Since you want us to help you let me give you some advice. You are looking in the wrong place to forget your Prakash. Get Married” (Dattani, 2000, Act I, 70).

Although both Bunny and Kamlesh are same sex desiring individuals, their understanding of 'love' is totally different. Bunny could not really understand the emotional turmoil that Kamlesh is facing. Kamlesh does not just want to satisfy his sexual urges with Prakash rather he treats him as his soulmate and is determined to live with him forever. Kamlesh suffers in silence as he knows that his past relation with Prakash will certainly jeopardize his sister Kiran's marriage. He also consults a Psychiatrist and undergoes treatment but unfortunately, this helps him a little only. His suffering cannot easily be cured as it is not about the physical attraction between two bodies but rather the emotional bonding of two souls. Kamlesh says "Kamlesh: I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while, I believed him because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself." (Dattani, 2000, Act I, 69).

Kamlesh is utterly disappointed with the advice of the doctor as he tries to guide Kamlesh to stay away from the thoughts of Prakash which Kamlesh finds to be highly impossible. This is the focal point of the play as the entire play revolves around Kamlesh's inability to free himself from the thoughts of Prakash. All the characters including Deepali, a feminist, try to help Kamlesh forget his past relationship and lead a new life of hope. Dattani makes use of an emotionally conflictual situation to present the sensitive relationship between a brother and a sister. When Sharad asks Kamlesh to destroy the photograph of Kamlesh and Prakash in which they are seen hugging each other nude with intense, Kamlesh hesitates it and this conversation between Sharad and Kamlesh turns out to be the most painful moment of the play as at this moment Kiran enters and tries to introduce Prakash as her fiancé to Kamlesh. Kamlesh tries to hide his pain and maintains a smile on his face to ensure the happiness of his sister. He unconditionally sacrifices his love to make his sister happy.

Dattani makes it clear that same-sex desiring individuals readily sympathize with one another. Deepali, who is a lesbian comes to the rescue of Kamlesh. She wants to help Kamlesh by revealing the truth to Kiran but she is objected to by Bunny. Through the character, Deepali, Dattani underscores the aversion that deviants develop towards the straights. Deepali hates the male community as she believes that man deliberately deceives and takes liberty with a woman. She, being a strong and bold woman, wants to lead a life without the influence of a man. When she understands that Kamlesh is deceived by Prakash,

she feels happy because she wants kamlesh (a man) to understand how it feels when you are deceived by your partner which generally a man does to a woman. Here, Dattani tries to present the pains of women besides describing the suffering of homosexuals. He implies the fact that when one starts feeling suppressed or marginalized, one starts hating society and tries to find people with whom he can share his feelings.

Dattani is against the concept of looking at lesbians and gays as aliens considering their relations as wrong or evil. He makes a realistic portrayal of the characters that are trapped in complicated situations. Both Kamlesh and Sharad undergo severe emotional turbulence and are forced to accept that their interest in leading a life with the same gender is against nature.

Kamlesh: He 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.

Sharad :Now the devil has put him on to your sister. I'll tell you what. Show her the photograph. Let her know who the devil is. (Dattani, 2000, Act II, 85)

Dattani has made a beautiful portrayal of the dilemma of Kamlesh. Kamlesh, unable to deal with the emotional tumult, accepts the opinion of the straights that his love for Prakash is unnatural and is harmful not only to himself but also to society. Mahesh Dattani boldly presents the naked truths of these marginalized sections by highlighting their plight most conspicuously. Kamlesh, who is constantly warned and thrown into oblivion by a society dominated by heterosexuals, finds no solace to cope with his distress. The only moments that he cherishes are his past memories with Prakash.

Dattani makes the best use of symbols to represent the ideas. The third act of this play is full of symbols that represent the dark side of the life of homosexuals. Their life is full of darkness as they cannot live in the light happily like the straights. In one of the scenes, Ranjit closes the window to muffle the vociferous noises of *Baraat*, a marriage function. Through the process of shutting and opening the windows, Dattani tries to represent how homosexuals keep themselves away from the external world. The closing of the windows is symbolic to their keeping themselves away from the outside world. This gesture implies that the world of homosexuals is so small and limited to only the four walls of the room. It is an indication of how scared they are to openly express their interests. They do not have the freedom to make decisions for their life as they should lead their life adhering to the principles set by heterosexuals.

Prakash, being a smart individual, realized the truth that to lead a life of comfort you should pretend to be heterosexual though you are gay. He changes his name to Ed and tries to convince Kamlesh to follow his path and start pretending to be a heterosexual. He says

“Ed: Look around you, Look outside. (Goes to the window and flings it open.) Look at that wedding crowd! 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.” (Dattani, 2000, Act III, 99)

Dattani reiterates the harsh reality that the safe survival of homosexuals in a conservative society depends on the interests of heterosexuals since they are the majority and the lawmakers. He further tries to juxtapose the lives of heterosexuals with homos through the concept of marriage. He argues that all heterosexuals are not happy with the conventional marriage system. Kiran’s failed marriage is a point to discuss. She had a horrible past and could not lead her married life well. She got divorced and now planning to marry again. On the other hand, Bunny who is a homosexual is happy with his married life and secretly continues to satisfy his interest in the same sex. Hence, marriage is purely a personal choice and one needs to have the freedom to choose whom to lead his life with. Here, Dattani raises a question of whether marriage be it conventional or unconventional will certainly fail when the partners are not happy with it, then, how homosexuals can be forced to change their interests and live like heterosexuals.

Dattani elegantly explicates the confused state of mind of Indian homosexuals who are trapped between the entwined thoughts of a gay and heterosexual. He shows his exquisiteness in defining the confusion of Indian homosexuals who have different influences on them. There are a few who want to live like heterosexuals enjoying all the benefits that heterosexuals have. The other category is the ones who are happy with their image of a gay. Here, Ed and Bunny have chosen the path of living the life of heterosexuals by muffling their original interests. In contrast, Kamlesh and Deepali remain to be homosexuals.

Conclusion

Dattani envisions a balance between the wide interests, desires, longings, and beliefs of different people in society. He, through his plays, emphasizes the fact that homosexuals are part of our society and we cannot ignore them. His plays are a realistic representation of the hard realities of the modern Indian urban society. His plays instil courage and give hope to the marginalized sections that they can reveal their interests and fight for them. He strongly

asserts that the mainstream can only suppress the voices of homosexuals but cannot completely obliterate them. Rather, by accepting and extending a helping hand to these marginalized sections, they can make their life better which will eventually help society strike a balance between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Dattani though not explicitly finds fault with the hypocritical nature of heterosexuals who cannot accept the interests of homosexuals and restrict them severely from expressing themselves. This blatant restriction of homosexuals makes them feel constantly marginalized and this feeling encourages them to find other alternatives through which they can satisfy their desires. They know that they cannot openly acknowledge their longing for being a gay as this will mar their reputation and also their families. Dattani boldly presents how difficult it is for gays to survive in a conservative society. All the characters that he chooses conflict with society aiming at equality and respect.

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