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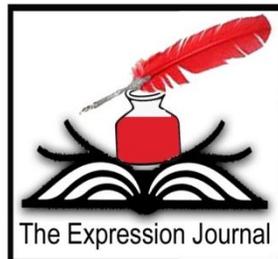
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MAHESH DATTANI'S *ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI*: A VOICE OF HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Until 1990s, the sensitive issue of sexual minority has been almost neglected area in Indian writing in English. Dattani as a playwright has ventured into the theme of sexual minority marginalization by showing how homosexuals are marginalized humiliated, discriminated by the sexual majority in the hetero normative social order. The story of play revolves around a group of homosexual persons struggling to survive in hostile heteronormative society. The play depicts a different face of human relationship which is not liked and approved by society. The present paper seeks to explore how Dattani has dealt with the sensitive and taboo issue of homosexuality in its complexities and intricacies in the play.

Key-Words

Heteronormative, Homosexuals, Marginalization, Minority, Taboo.

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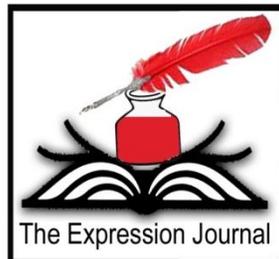
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Dattani as a playwright has courageously dealt with social issues which are considered taboo, sensitive normally by society. Homosexuality is one of them. Through his plays, he has presented the theme of homosexuality in its complexities and forced his audience to think over this issue with broad minded approach. The present paper will try to explore how Dattani treats the issue of homosexuality in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Let us first understand what sexuality is. It may be understood as set of orientation, positions and desires. It can also be called as a psychoanalytic drive in which a person gets attracted sexually towards a person of same sex. As heterosexuality is the dominant sexual orientation in society, homosexual orientation is considered as an alternate sexuality and the persons having homosexual orientation are humiliated, discriminated and marginalized in society

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai unveils the presence of homosexuality in India and the pressure and constraints under which the homosexuals have to live in India. The repressive social norms compel them to embrace hypocrisy as a means of survival. The play provides an authentic representation of the existential dilemma and identity crisis faced by the gays and lesbians. They live under the constant fear of being labeled as “abnormal” or the “pervert” the normative discursive practices are so dormant in our society that whatever

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does not come under these practices is immediately side-lined. On the theme of the play, John McRae in his Note on the play comments, "And the themes of *On a Muggy Night* 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). Dattani shocks the sensibility of audience with his first scene of the play. Kamlesh, a fashion designer, is residing in an apartment in Mumbai. In the first scene, he is shown having sex with the guard of the society. Hence, Dattani indicates the theme of play in beginning itself. After doing sex, he gives money to the guard. Now the question arises why the guard did sex with Kamlesh. Was it due to his sexual orientation or greed for money? Dattani intends to show that Homosexuality is not linked to any class of society. It is found in every class of society. The guard pretends that he does homo sex due to money and poverty. Accepting money in lieu of homosex becomes acts as a defense mechanism for the guard as he does not find himself comfortable in accepting openly that he likes gay activities. Even he is fearful to accept his sexual identity openly even before a gay person with whom he has done sex. So he pretends to be a straight in sexual orientation. The conversation between Kamlesh and the Guard reveals the hidden reality of the Guard:

KAMLESH. Tum, kya...yeh sab ... paise ke liye karte ho?

GUARD. (shakes his head). Nahin. (Realizes the implication of what he said.

Hastily.) Hahn! Hahn, main paise ke liye hi to karta hoo sab kuch!

KAMLESH. You do enjoy it. What you do to me, what I do to you. Don't you?

GUARD (a little nervously). Ab main jaon?

KAMLESH. But we will have to pretend you do it only for the money!

(Collected Plays 51)

It is true that both Kamlesh and the Guard are gay. But their marginalization is not of same degree. Being a poor person, the Guard is more fearful than Kamlesh to openly accept his sexual identity. In case, the Guard reveals his identity, he may lose his job making his survival difficult. There is no doubt that the guard is doubly marginalized being a gay and poor.

Kamlesh is suffering from loneliness and depression after his gay partner Prakash deserts him. It is commonly observed that it is very difficult for homosexuals to continue stable relationships due to hostile social environmental. Kamlesh pines for his homosexual partner like a heterosexual partner does after break up. This shows that a homosexual relationship may be as emotionally intense as heterosexual one because in both humans involve. Human desire to love and being loved is natural. Break up with partner is more shocking and disturbing in the case of homosexual relationship. This leads to depression in many cases leading to suicide. Kamlesh fails to forget his partner Prakash. Even the

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company of Sharad, another lively gay, does not console and comfort him. This brings out the point that homosexual relationship is much more than merely sex. It also carries emotional bonding, care and affection. Sex is merely a part of the relationship. Kamlesh decides to visit a psychiatrist for getting help to come out of depression. But unfortunately he turns out a homophobic. He suggests Kamlesh to reorient his sexuality in order to fit well into society. The psychiatrist advises him that he "...would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change the society...but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself" (Collected plays 69). Through this incident, the play reveals the false myth that homosexuality is a disease and it can be cured with medical help. Many techniques such as aversion therapy are recommended to change sexual orientation. But the many research have found these techniques' failure in changing sexual orientation. In fact, homosexuality is not a disease. The psychiatrist links his depression to his sexual orientation and suggests changing it. So identity of a gay is restricted merely to his sexual orientation which makes him a lesser human being. Kamlesh shares his experience with homophobic psychiatrist:

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? (Pause.) I don't go to him anymore. I stopped taking his pills. The fear has come back. I am obsessed even more by the memory of Prakash. I –I feel I cannot live without him. I am capable of doing anything. (Collected Plays 69-70)

After desertion by Prakash, Kamlesh gets mentally disturbed. Even after doing efforts, he is unable to come out from the pangs of separation. He is feeling compulsion to pick up strangers for relationship. He is trying to establish emotional connection with someone so that he can forget Prakash. But in this process, he is getting more and more disillusionment leading to more frustration and depression. He is even being financially exploited. They fail to fill the void created by Prakash. This shows that maintaining relationship and finding right partner is a big challenge in homosexual life. He reveals his pain, "For the past week, I have been picking up strangers –bringing them over-hoping to connect. Strange men who will call me when they feel the same loneliness, when they grow tired of the pretense. Or when they need more money" (Collected Plays 70).

Dattani presents multidimensional view of homosexuality. He shows how a homosexual person tries to survive in a hostile society which does not accept him. He depicts that homosexual community is not a homogeneous one. The play shows how different gay persons adopt different strategies to adjust in the heteronormative society. Hiding his gay identity and pretending to be straight is one such ploy to get acceptance in the society. Bunny Singh projects himself as ideal heterosexual husband in society and

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become a famous TV actor. By hiding his identity, he is cheating the society and his wife, but he doesn't find any wrong in it. He prefers survival and social acceptance to morality. He believes that society will never accept you if you declare openly yourself a gay. Pretension is the only way to survive in the heteronormative world. So, he camouflages his identity. Bunny Singh represents those gay persons who enter into heterosexual marriage to survive in heterosexual world. He says, "Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can't find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage" (Collected Plays 70).

Invisibility is the main trait of a homosexual life. The invisibility not only reflects the tendency to survive in heteronormative world but also highlights the ignorance, misunderstanding on the part of heterosexual society. In other words, homosexuals are forced to remain invisible in the society due to fear and anxiety. Even if a homosexual dares to come out in light, his/ her humanity and her desire to live his/ her life according to sexual orientation is pushed into dark corners by the forces of prejudices, biasness and discrimination. The invisibility also reflects the ignorance, biasness on the part of heterosexual society. The society largely fails to understand the real nature of a homosexual relationship and does not provide legitimacy, respect and dignity to gay persons. The play tries to throw light on invisible component of homosexual life and makes it visible before the audience/readers. Highlighting the ignorance of society, Kamlesh says, "They can't see us at all, although we can see them. They must be blind" (Collected Plays 81).

Dattani also touches the issue of sexual migration in the play. Many homosexual persons migrate to sexually favorable places in order to escape hostile environment of their native places. In the Play, Ranjit adopts the method of sexual migration as a response to unfavorable environment in India. He visits England and enjoys his sexual orientation there. His identity as Indian is in conflict with his gay identity. He declares, "...Yes, I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can't seem to be both Indian and gay" (Collected Plays 88). Legally speaking, homosexuality is considered illegal in India under IPC section 377. This section treats homosexual unnatural and considers it a criminal act. This IPC section has been a controversial and debated issue during recent times. In 2009, Delhi High Court found this section unconstitutional as it violates the Fundamental rights of LGBT. The judgment was seen as historical moment and victory for LGBT sections. But their happiness was short lived as Honorable Supreme Court reversed the decision of Delhi High court in 2013 and put onus on the Parliament to make law to repeal this act if it desires. That judgment came as shocker to LGBT community. At present, Homosexuality is a criminal act in India under IPC Section 377.

The play raises the issue of homosexual marriage and questions the notion of heterosexual marriage as perfect one. Ranjit considers the marriage 'bloody unnatural' on

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the logic that it is a human creation. Other animals except human don't perform it. Kiran, though a heterosexual has a sympathetic and liberal attitude towards homosexuality. She represents the line of thought which demands right of marriage between same-sex persons. She believes that marriage between same sex persons would create a better environment for homosexuals in the society.

KIRAN. I really wish they would allow gay people to marry.

RANJIT. Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex.

KIRAN. That's what I meant. I don't think my brother would suffer so much if only he allowed to marry his partner. (Collected Plays 98)

This concept of same sex marriage is being approved in many nations across the world. But it is also very debatable issue. The persons who oppose this concept argue that same sex marriage is unnatural as it does not perform the function of reproduction which is considered as the main function of marriage and family. On the basis of this argument, they even consider same sex marriage as a threat to human species.

Dattni seems to put question mark on the argument that a homosexual person may be cured of his/ her deviance, if he/she does heterosexual marriage. In fact, such marriage alliances are more dangerous for society and humanity. Both the partners have to suffer in this marriage. In the case, a gay person marries a woman; the poor woman becomes victim of such marriage badly. The ironical statement of Kiran suggesting Sharad not to enter into heterosexual marriage is a powerful statement on this issue. She says:

He loves you, Sharad. What more do you want? You will never be happier than this. You will end up being lonelier if you tried to be anything else other than who you are. And think of the poor woman you may end up marrying just as a cover-up for your shame. I know how it feels to be unloved. God knows I have suffered enough in my marriage. The scars are never going to leave me. But I am thankful now that I have Ed. And I wish the same happiness for my brother and you. (Collected Plays 102)

Ed turns out to be the most pathetic character in the play. He is shown as a very emotionally weak character who finds it very difficult to adjust and survive in the society. Despite the love of Kamlesh, he gets crumbled under the pressure of heteronormative society and decides to transform himself into a heterosexual person. He leaves Kamlesh and enters into relationship with kamlesh's sister Kiran. But despite all his efforts, he could not leave his gay identity. In the process of transformation, he stoops to the lowest level of morality when he thinks to use marriage with Kiran as a way to satisfy his homosexual desires with Kamlesh.

ED. You fool. Can't you see? My marriage with Kiran is a start.

KAMLESH. What do you mean?

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ED. Once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any...suspicion. (Collected Plays 104)

His behavior creates repulsion in the minds of audience towards him. But he cannot be blamed entirely for his behavior. It is the society which forces him to live a life of duplicity and hypocrisy. His attempt to do suicide reflects his troubled and depressed state of mind.

The title of the play is suggestive of the theme. In a muggy weather, the characters feel uncomfortable or tired. As a matter of fact, all the characters in the play are feeling ill at-ease due to their alternate sexual orientation and they want to set themselves free from suffocation, frustration and isolation. Night symbolizes the darkness in the lives of homosexuals which makes them invisible in the society. Mumbai city represents a modern big city in which homosexuals seems to be pushed into a small flat of Kamlesh. The characters feel isolated in even in the densely populated Mumbai city. The exteriors keep exerting pressures, intruding into the 'other' spaces occupied by the characters in the play perpetually reminding them of their isolation.

Deepali who has a lesbian relationship with her partner Tina takes pride in her identity as a lesbian. Her approach remains sensible throughout the play. She attacks the concepts of dominant patriarchy and masculinity through her witty comments. She says, "You men! All you do is screw around like bunnies!...I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men!"(Collected Plays 60) She represents that school of feminism which considers lesbianism as revolt against patriarchal system and a useful way for female liberation and empowerment. She expresses her woman's pride and says with dignity, "I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank God, I am a woman" (Collected Plays 66).

Dattani has created different characters to understand the complex nature of homosexuality. These characters underlines the fact that homosexual world is not homogeneous. Dattani has successfully captured the psyche of such characters in the play. The characters look real. Critic Bijay Kumar Das aptly remarks, "In the play, Dattani examines the psychology of persons who are by nature 'gays' or 'bi-sexual' and the desire on the part of some of them to turn heterosexual. This may seem to be an unusual theme in the Indian contexts. But in real life such characters do exist" (23).

To conclude, it can be said that Mahesh Dattani has effectively tackled the sensitive theme of homosexuality in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. He has presented various shades of homosexual identity while avoiding the stereotypes about it. The play depicts marginalization of homosexuals and poses certain relevant questions before the audience.

A number of questions are thrown up. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* lifts the veils of secrecy that shrouds the marginalized cultures, sexualities and lifestyles. Can homosexuality change to heterosexuality? Is homosexuality an unnatural aberration of human society at all? Or is Dattani himself

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'substituting one sexual stereotype with another? What, for example, happens to bisexuals? On a Muggy Night in Mumbai attempts to pose these questions knowing that final answers are hardly possible. (Chaudhuri 51)

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