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Anguish of the Gays in Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

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Abstract

*Mahesh Dattani is a multifaceted contemporary Indian English playwright who stormed the modern Indian theatre with his explosive subjects. Unlike the other playwrights who always dwell upon the beaten track man-woman relationship, he boldly ventures to speak for the gender minorities who are looked down upon by the common people. Dattani writes on the tabooed themes such as homosexuality, lesbianism, gay and transgender. He does not merely write to shock the public but to arouse awareness on the invisible problems faced by sexual minorities – mainly their repressed desires, innermost emotions, loneliness and harassment. Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is completely focused upon the lives of gays. This paper explores the emotional angst experienced by Prakash (Ed) and his gay partner Kamlesh. The entire play is muggy in nature – the characters, the place and its surrounding, the sounds, the ambience and the issue. The play inquires into the ecstasy and agony of the same sex love confined to the gays and lesbians. Like the heterosexuals, the homosexuals too share and nourish their love and trust on their partners. This paper also examines the typical slang used by the gays in their day-to-day conversation and communication.*

Keywords: Gay, Gender, Lesbian, Straight, Transgender

Dattani is a highly acclaimed and celebrated contemporary Indian English dramatist. He dramatizes the tensions of contemporary Indian society namely gender troubles, stereotyping of gender roles, destabilization of sexual categories, communal disharmony, the predatory nature of the society and the like. Through his plays, Dattani visits the traversed and unexplored soil of homosexual, HIV positives, gays, transgenders, physically challenged and gender endangered. Jha remarks, "Mahesh Dattani is to be estimated on two counts: first his concern for the fair sex and second his visit to the virgin landscape, that is homosexuals, eunuchs, etc..." (26). He has created images, characters and plots which reverberate with the reality of today's India. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) are his major characters and his plays are concerned with the challenges they face in the mainstream Indian society. Dattani in his preface to his *Collected Plays* writes, "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background" (xv). Each of his plays carries a noble mission and becomes a voice for the voiceless. Myles in her work, "All the plays of Mahesh Dattani are rooted in realism focusing attention on subalterns, which are the neglected groups of society who are ostracized and suppressed." (32).

Sexuality or sexual orientation refers to sexual practices, the emotional and sexual attraction of an individual towards another individual. A person's individual and social identities are dependent on these sexual orientation or attraction. Heterosexuality appreciates the attraction towards the members of the opposite sex; the attraction towards members of both the sexes is known as bisexuality and the attraction towards the members of

the same sex is known as homosexuality. These are the societal norms for sexual differences. In every society there are a few individuals who do not fit into the culturally dominant classes of sex or gender. Such people are either born inter-sexed or exhibit behaviour applicable for the opposite sex or gender. Many people externally conform to the normative gender role whereas for a few the conflicts are so severe that they cannot cater to social normality, and this leads to a disarray of their lives.

People with homosexual orientation will have intense, complete and committed long term relationships solely with those who share their orientation, and these relationships, like several alternatives, embrace emotional and sexual intimacy. Homosexuals are a minority cluster in India and have to face the social consequences of their choice such as marginalization, humiliation, social pressure to go in for straight marriages, the deception related to their search for partners and the impossibility of moving in public places with their partners.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai was first performed on 23 November 1998 in Mumbai. The play is set at the backdrop of Mumbai skyline, in a flat. It is a tragicomedy which vividly presents the emotional aspirations of homosexuals. McRae makes a hair rising question, “If two men want to love one another, what’s the harm?” (46). The play makes use of invisibility as a strategic tool on the part of gay characters. It portrays the turmoil encountered by a group of homosexuals. The characters include lesbian, gay, straight and heterosexual. They are: Kamlesh, a homosexual who is prepared to claim his sexual identity however is affected by his partner who is not willing to accept this openly; Prakash (also known as Ed), a closet homosexual who is not willing to come out into the open along with his identity; Sharad, an open gay; Deepali, a confident lesbian and other homosexuals. They come together to help out Kamlesh to come out of his guilt and disappointment. This play views the same-sex phenomenon from all possible angles of vision. It presents a realistic picture of society and it is not the tale of one individual homosexual but the whole community of homosexuals and their psychological traits. The play dramatizes the conflicts, anguish, insecurities and frustration that homosexuals and

lesbians face in the isolated and crippled world of shame and taboos.

Kamlesh, a fashion designer is the occupant of the flat. He had left from Bangalore to Mumbai after encountering a harsh experience with his gay partner Prakash. In the play Kamlesh says, “Three years ago, I moved to Bombay not to make it big in the fashion world – although I did, that wasn’t my intention. I came here to get over a relationship” (68). In Mumbai, he carries on his gay life with Sharad and any man who is accessible to him. Kamlesh bursts out to his friends, “I did a cruel thing by loving Sharad to forget Prakash. I have not succeeded” (68). The play has a shocking opening. Kamlesh is found having sex with a security guard. He pays the security guard for giving him sexual gratification. He is ashamed and is afraid of being a gay. He invites some of his friends in order to get out from his present turmoil and to get some relief. The guests represent different faces of the homosexual commune – Sharad is a gay, Deepali is a lesbian, Bunny is a gay man-married and Ranjith is a gay moved to England.

Before the guests arrive, Kamlesh broods over the life of his widowed sister Kiran. She had a harsh past with her former husband. Kiran shares her past torments in the following words: “I had to get away from him. To escape from those fights at night. ... The humiliation of explaining to friends or neighbours...that black eye was from banging my head against the door. Or the broken rib was from a fall...It was the cigarette burns in my arms” (77). Kamlesh left Bangalore because his sister Kiran had fallen in love with Ed (Prakash wants Kiran to call him with this new name). In order to make his sister’s life blissful, Kamlesh sacrifices his gay partner. But his separation from Prakash brings a lot of emotional tumult. Now, he has invited all his friends in order to make a ceremonial divorce from his former associate Prakash. Sharad is the first guest to arrive Kamlesh’s flat. He is followed by Deepali then Bunny and Ranjit. All these people are homosexuals and they are not embarrassed of being homosexuals. Chaudhari observes, “Sharad is aware of the implications of this insinuations, and this part of the action acquires a deep resonance as the gay man speaks to the lesbian and both are intelligent, open and genuine people unashamed of their sexual choices” (52). They come

to know the problem encountered by Kamlesh and they all come forward to lend him a helping hand. The following conversation between Deepali and Kamlesh show their frankness:

DEEPALI. If you were a woman, we would be in love.

KAMLESH. If you were a man, we would be in love.

DEEPALI. If we were heterosexual, we would be married. (65)

There is an unwholesome air throughout the play. Kamlesh is in a state of flux – he is not able to forget his former lover Prakash; his liaison with Sharad for the last one year; his present associations with any available persons and the impending marriage between his sister and Prakash. The traffic jam, the wedding blare and the air condition create the outer atmosphere. The unexpected visit of Kiran and her fiancé makes the circumstances still worse. The play reaches its tragic tone, when the guard hands over the naked photograph of Kamlesh and Prakash to Sharad.

The play gets into a grim twist, when Kamlesh informs them of his resolution to break away his relationship with his former sexual partner Prakash. The decision taken by Kamlesh shocks them all and none of them favours his decision. They all feel that Kamlesh should not forgo his personal life for the happiness of his sister Kiran. Kamlesh further continues to describe his wretched condition: “I would have understood it if he (Prakash) 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” (68-69). Kamlesh did not take this decision readily and happily; rather, it was thrust upon him. As a gay, he is not permitted by the society to practice what he feels and longs.

For Indians, homosexuality is something abnormal and they do not approve of it. Desperate, Kamlesh began to pick up strangers for his pleasure. Whereas, Ranjit who lives in England enjoys the pleasure of being a gay. 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). Sharad too

is anguished like Kamlesh and sings, “...so many times we have to pay for having fun and being gay” (58). Ranjit gives a sarcastic reply: “Well, this is the price one pays for living in India” (70). Many homosexuals in India are forced to marry and lead the life of a heterosexual. But they secretly keep their homosexual relationship alive.

They all urge Kamlesh not to give up his relationship with Prakash and they try to get him out of his wearied mood and frantic state. Bunny asks Kamlesh to get married to a woman like him, but the others feel that it would be a pretended life. Kamlesh too feels that he does not want to camouflage. Sharad takes out a photograph from his pocket. It is the photograph of Kamlesh and Prakash in naked cheek to cheek pose. They prepare Kamlesh to take his ceremonial oath of divorce from Prakash. Kamlesh looks at the photograph then begins to utter the oath. Suddenly, Kamlesh’s sister Kiran enters the room and shocks all. Without finishing the ceremony, Kamlesh throws the photo out, through the window. Here, Dattani asserts the fact that a gay couple is as faithful and true as that of a heterosexual. Dattani affirms this idea through the words of Sharad; “... the whole world acknowledges two people who enter a union of pact, so they have to stick by that” (72). Similarly, the breakup of a relationship between a gay couple is done in an official manner like the heterosexuals.

Kamlesh introduces his sister to all the four. Kiran shares her nightmarish experiences of her first marriage and how Kamlesh helped her to get the divorce from her former husband. She informs them about her next wedding with Ed and requests them to attend it. When Kiran tells the full name of her fiancé (Ed. Edwin Prakash Matthew), they comprehend that Ed is none other than Prakash himself. They try to alert Kiran about her brother’s depression and who Ed is, but Kamlesh reminds them of their pledge. Kamlesh tells them; “You promised! You promised that we will never bring it up!” (78). Sharad, Deepali, Ranjit and Bunny are desperate to inform Kiran about the relationship between Ed (Prakash) and Kamlesh; and save the lives of both Kiran and Kamlesh.

SHARAD. You are selfish. You want to rid yourself of his memories, but you are ruining her life! ...

KAMLESH. She loves him. She told me.

SHARAD. You love him. You told us.

KALESHP. (weakly). You promised.

RANJIT. No. It's different now. (83)

Sharad becomes annoyed and leaves the house.

Kiran is able to smell some difference in the atmosphere, but she is not able to understand what it was.

Ed makes his appearance towards the end of the play. His surprise visit creates a dramatic situation. His entry creates suspicion, anger and hatred among the guests. They all in unison stand for 'a gay man is always a gay man'. He can never become a heterosexual. If at all, a gay man says that he has become a heterosexual, it will mean that he is a hypocrite and a liar. Bunny tells them that he only lives a pretended life by marrying a woman. He tells them: "I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now – I am a gay man" (103).

Kamlesh goes to the bed room to find some pills for Ed's headache. Ed follows him. The concealed conversation between Ed and Kamlesh in bed room evidently proves that Ed has agreed to marry Kiran only to maintain his gay relationship with Kamlesh.

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

KAMLESH. What do you mean?

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

Sharad gives the naked photo of Kamlesh and Prakash to Kiran. Kiran becomes frozen after seeing the photograph. She cries out in dejection. Kamlesh becomes worried after knowing the intention of Ed. He grabs Ed by the throat and shouts to Kiran: "Kiran, don't marry him! I think you ought to know..." (106). Ed asks Kiran to come with him and he promises to make her life happy. He wants to get out from there with Kiran. But, Kiran sees that there is no meaning in marrying Ed. She is sure that Ed will wreck her life. She asks Ed to get out from there. Ed becomes frantic and tries to commit suicide by falling down. Kamlesh, Bunny, Ranjit and Sharad overpower him. The guard comes and takes Ed along with him. The guests of Kamlesh withdraw one by one by leaving alone the sister and brother. The play's startling end make the audience go home with their own conclusion.

All the characters in the play are caught up in the web of social tangles and are torn between their true personal identity and the social pressures they experience. Through this play, Dattani tries to heal and comfort the psychological scars experienced by the gays and lesbian. Every one is sure to become compassionate and kind to the alternate sexuals after watching the play.

Dattani's plays are pregnant with identity crisis which results from being marginalized and oppressed. He records the struggles of characters who face constraints from outside as well as from within. He further establishes that gays and lesbians have their own concepts of sexual relationship but they cannot escape the need of sexual differences determined by nature. Traditional India is well-knit by different sub-systems such as family, caste and marriage system. In particular, family and marriage systems are affected by alternate sexualities. Through Dattani's remarkable handling of the social issues with immense human sympathy, we get the idea that all his plays are committed to the portrayal of the sufferings of those who are subjected to marginalization on the basis of class, caste, gender, sex and religion. Lobo in her article remarks, "His (Dattani's) plays offer biting critiques of issues like gender, sexuality, communalism and dysfunctional families as they exist in Indian society" (26).

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai evaluates how human aspirations are insignificant in contrast to social faiths. History is a witness to the fact that the invisible clutches of social forces can never permit an individual to crave for his own designs beyond the patterns recommended and accepted by society. In recent years, however, attitudes towards alternate sexuality have seen a slight change. There have been more illustrations and dialogues of alternate sexuality in public spaces and in media. Though they have not attained social acceptance and equality on par with the heterosexual community, these people are treated with more compassion and respect.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code vehemently condemns and antagonises any sexual act against the natural order. The section states that: "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with 1*[imprisonment for life],

or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine" (168). In the past two decades, the alternate sexuals have gained more and more forbearance and acceptance in India, especially in cities and towns. However, majority of them still remain closeted fearing their families, relatives, friends and the society. The government of India and the Supreme Court have always played a pivotal role in safeguarding the rights and dignity of the sexual minorities. Homosexuality is part of human sexuality; therefore, every one is bound to treat them with dignity, respect and dignity.

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