

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai : Themes of Alternative Sexuality

- Kumar Gautam Anand

Abstract: Mahesh Dattani, the first Indian playwright-director of English plays, is the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for *Final Solution and Other Plays* in 1998. Sahitya Akademi award citation reads, "Dattani's work probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and is a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English" (1). He has show-cased Indian Theater to the western audience. He has wistfully experimented with the existing dramaturgy to suit post-colonial, socio-cultural themes in the backdrop of Indian myths and rituals. Like many post colonial critics and writers his efforts focus on restoring the humanity of those who were dehumanized. He represents the social change and the question of identity for the eunuchs, bisexuals, homosexuals and transgendered. Though he takes up the themes of gender and sexuality, he keeps himself away from obscenity. This is what Dattani reiterates in one of the interviews with Pramila N. Phatarphekar at the premier of *Seven steps Around the Fire*. He spells out his views about the 'peeping audience', "But as a writer-director, I carefully avoid rewarding voyers" (2). Alyque Padamsee calls him one of the "most serious contemporary playwrights" (3). *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* he takes up the theme of homosexuality in the changed socio-cultural net work of India.

Keywords: Indian Drama in English, Sexual Identity, Social hypocrisy

In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, like other plays, Dattani uses the stage for a meaningful social message to sensitize society to the marginal group of sexual alternatives, living without recognition, and it is because of their fear, this minority is not able to live its life to the full. The public staging was intended to initiate discussion on social recognition of the gays is more than simple artistic pleasure. His efforts are to bring change in the life of the marginalized group. It also identifies the types of gays, their problems and the search for a solution in the Indian socio-cultural context of heterosexuality. The western gays are privileged enough to have history of their own. Before the dawn of Christianity, there were many ancient cultures- Athens and Rome which considered the male-male relation to be the best sexual relation, so that masculinity might be saved from degeneration. For them sex with females amounted to the loss of virility. They feared the growth of feminine characteristics in males. Spartans, to make a strong group of warriors resorted to homosexuality that was socially acceptable and legally permitted. Sex reflected social and political relations of power. So men were encouraged to use penetrative sex for domination and control of the submissive. Use of penis power against men was considered superior where as to use it against women was inferior and degrading. Dattani takes up the theme of

the alternative sexuality its problems and solutions *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, in the Indian socio-cultural context. The sphere of those, belonging to alternative sexuality, homosexuals and lesbians, is too small and the population is so limited that it rarely draws the public interest to the prominent level. They have found a passing reference in our literature. As same sex marriages have been legalized in India, it has provided a conducive atmosphere to discuss gay issues in a restricted form because it is yet to find social acceptance. Such relations still are clandestine practices because society still distributes power in accordance with the sexuality reflected by people at large. Michel Foucault writes:

An especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population. (103)

Because of these social constraints some characters have crossed the ocean to live a life of their choice; many have taken refuge in the heterosexual marriages to continue their relation with their same sex partners and, some are yet to decide what to do, whether to go for heterosexual marriages in order to be safe in the society or declare their identity as homosexuals. Open discussion of homo-sexuality is still a taboo but Dattani has best brought out the themes of alternative sexualities in the open. Most of his plays are for action, not for narration. Ruth Vanita and Salman Kidwai in *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* states “As far as we know no one has been executed for homosexuality in India” (xxviii). But they (people) recognize same sex love to be a difficult concept, “The first difficulty may be even to recognize and mentally conceive of such love as primary in one's life” (xxviii). In that case, the play passes on a social message for the patriarchal society to find or assign a place to the minority of transsexuals, homosexuals and lesbians in the socio-cultural setup. Dattani uses different dramatic techniques to display the emotional conflict among his characters in order to support his views on the sexual minority. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, muggy is revealed through various characters but, is it a muggy at all or life itself. By dramatizing such themes, Dattani is also taking up the agenda of representation and has opted the role of an activist in favor of sexual marginal. “Being queer is, they argue (the queer), not about the right to privacy, but about the freedom to be public.” (110) His plays advocate the de-heterosexualization of the social sphere /theatrical space which is also “a way of decolonizing of theatre” (14) as viewed by Erin Mee. The story of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* develops around Kamlesh, Prakash and Sharad. They form the love triangle where Kamlesh had affinity for Prakash, whereas Sharad liked the company of Kamlesh. Prakash after spending some time with Kamlesh leaves to lead a life of heterosexuals for which he takes therapy from a psychologist and on the encouragement of Kamlesh who is his boyfriend, courts and plans to marry Kiran, his sister. Kamlesh can't break the heart of her sister (Kiran) at the cost of his own love and affection for Prakash. But other friends don't agree to it. They want things to be revealed and pairs formed in terms of sexual inclinations and preferences. At last, his sister comes to know of their relationship and is finally disillusioned of her relation with Parkash. There

is mutual acceptance of Parkash-Kamlesh relation but Prakash remains uncommitted to the relation.

Asha Kumari Chaudhuri affirms Dattani's contribution to the Indian theatre, "The play is the first in Indian theatre to openly handle gay themes of love, affection, trust and betrayal raising serious 'closet' issues that remain generally invisible." (51) Homosexual love and affection have been deftly handled, as the play successfully walks the tight rope of obscenity and sincerity. Kamlesh has asked his gay friends to assemble at his flat to discuss his position and the psychological suffering, as he is unhappy without Prakash and that he himself has arranged for his marriage with his own sister. Sharad, Deepali, Ranjit, Bunny while Kiran and Prakash later on join them accidentally as they were not expected to arrive. In the very first scene Kamlesh calls the Guard to bring wine for his expected friend. Guard's shoe-lace is loose Kamlesh extends his help almost forcibly. He ignores the Guard's plea and 'places his foot on his own thigh. He looks up at him while he slowly ties his laces' (51). The opening dialogue between them is suggestive of their sexual involvement.

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 hoon sab kuch!

Kamlesh: You do enjoy it. What you do to me, what I do to you. Don't you? (51)

Guard does not like to respond to this question and is nervous. Kamlesh replies again, "But we have to pretend you do it only for the money!" (51) Dattani shows here the example, where the clandestine practice is going on behind the well embroidered curtain of social acceptability without even a single mention in the public. Guard when asked, whether he does it for money he at first says 'nahin' but later out of guilt or unknown fear of society and moral norms he says no he doesn't like it but does it for money. Then Kamlesh says, yes, it is better to hide love in the name of financial need. But even before the emergence of homosexuality as gender category it was largely put as sodomy. David Mancey writes in the *Dictionary of Critical Theory* that "Foucault's theses about regimes of sexuality and the epistemological shift brought about by the emergence of the category of 'the homosexual', when a taxonomy of acts (remarkable vague notion of 'sodomy') was replaced by a typology of sexual identities" (321). Society accepts the things for money which is justified for livelihood but it is not permitted when it is performed for sexual pleasure. How it is possible to allow one activity in certain circumstances and hold it corrupt in other ones. So, unless they are accepted, they will have to pretend that it is nothing but a compulsion. Then, the other sentence takes us to some other pretending people who couldn't declare their allegiance to the sexual honesty. Kamlesh says the Guard, "Go do your duty. You are just like him. He is no different from you... No. he was worse!" (52) Kamlesh along with other such practices in the society clears his stand of such relations which is more than a sexual slavery: it is urge of the body and the need of money only become a medium for its moral justification. It is the society that justifies pretention and sensors open acceptance of homosexuality. He denies that money for sexual gratification does not amount to the sexual slavery because people enjoy

the company of one another. Due to the fear of the society they hold the financial need as a compulsion. Sharad somehow comes to know about their relationship and blames Kamlesh that he has used Guard as a sex object. Then Kamlesh reveals, "He is not married. He's a gay." (63) Deepali also believes that he is doing a terrible thing to himself that is using unknown men for sexual gratification. In a note on the play John McRae's statement clarifies the situation of Kamlesh, Guard and Prakash "...the fault is just not the characters'- it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity" (iv). Guard and Prakash find it hard to accept their homosexual self.

Kamlesh reveals the occasion for which all of them have been asked to assemble together. He says that when he moved to Bombay he never thought of making it big in the fashion world but it was a success. He shares that when he came here it was also an escape from the relationship of Prakash that had developed in Bangalore. He tried hard but he couldn't forget him. He apologized to Sharad that he desperately tried to love Sharad but he failed. He is sorry that he had hurt Sharad. 'I made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that I was trying to get over.' (68) He was disappointed with the relationship, because Prakash did not leave him for another man but 'he (Prakash) was ashamed' of their relationship.' (69) At this juncture, he at times, felt that he was not a gay. But he explains this complex situation a repercussions of his treatment for this syndrome with a straight homophobic psychiatrist. The psychiatrist used different techniques like aversion therapy, though, medicines helped him cope up with the depression, he was still struggling. The doctor once 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." (69) The nature cannot be changed by the single message from the doctor that pushes him again in the same situation. Normative features of the society and the nature of a man are two different things. A man can slightly reoriented but he can hardly be corrected. Kamlesh is really the case study of a homosexual's suffering where he has his own doubts, "Could he help me cope with my loneliness and fear the same way he would help a heterosexual cope with his?" (69) It is also suggestive of the need of a homosexual doctor treating homosexuals as he is skeptical about the understanding of his case by the heterosexual doctors. He says that life without Prakash is unbearable and that, he cannot work or live without him. Bijay Kumar Das says irrespective of heterosexual love, "Same-sex love could be as demanding as heterosexual love relationship" (19). Kamlesh has other problems associated with his anxiety on one hand he is suffering from the pain of the absence of Prakash on the other he is suffering from guilt consciousness for what he has done to Sharad. He is depressed and confused. In order to get over this monotonous life he picks up strangers from the street and tries to put bait before them to get satisfaction. Now, it is the turn of the solutions for Kamlesh. Bunny believes that he should marry because this way he may camouflage from the society and still practice his homosexual life under the cover of the heterosexual one.

Bunny is in the lead role of the much watched TV show 'Yeh Hai Hamar Parivaar'. Kiran who happens to be the sister of Kailash admires him as a man whom she takes for an ideal husband and an ideal father. Bunny Singh can be compared to Nitin of *Bravely Fought the Queen*. He had relation with Prafull:

... and I would go back to Praful's room ... and kneel At times he would lean forward to look at him. Close enough for my breath to fall gently on his face. And he would open his eyes... I loved him too. He is ... was attractive. And he responded. Oh! But how ashamed he made me feel after. He made me cry each time. That was game he played. And I was caught in it. He told me to get married... how could I? And to whom... (314-5)

He was ready to live this way but Prafull wanted it the other way round. Prafull compelled him to marry Alka, his own sister. In *Do the Needful*, a radio play aired by BBC, Radio 4, Alpesh agrees to the marriage if Lata brings Mali as dowry. Lata caught Alpesh in a homosexual act with Mali and runs to Salim. Lata listens to groans and darts towards the noise,

Lata: You! | (*I thought.*) They (Alpesh and Mali) were ... doing it!
(*Speech.*) You are a homo! (153)

Mali is frightened and says that Alpesh forced him in the act. He shows his curiosity to comply to let her keep the truth to herself. He feared that once the dark secret is out, he will not be able to move in the society and no one will marry him. To escape the stigma of being called a homosexual, Ranjit migrated to a foreign country where homosexuality is no taboo and no guilt. He proudly says that he has been living with his white partner for twelve years. Ranjit is all hopeful about the west but his pessimistic thoughts about gay situation in India provoke his friends. It is not that his Indian counterparts do not believe that their condition is dismal but the way he is disowns his homosexual identity becomes a subject of ridicule. That's why the group teases by naming him coconut- outer brown and inner white. He deliberately and desperately denies his Indian identity. He suggests this to be a method of following body and nature rather than pledging allegiance to own country. Triangles of Kamlesh-Prakash-Sharad and Nitin-Praful-Sharad enforces opinion of Natesan Sharda Iyer, "Homosexuality can enslave as well as liberate" (238).

Sharad comes once again with a helping hand, as he had helped Kamlesh to come out of his break up with Prakash, but he puts a condition before him that he will have to tear the last saved photo of Prakash where they are kissing each other in the tight embrace. Kamlesh is not able to oblige him, however, he tries his best but he could not. Kamlesh doesn't like that people should even mention the name of Prakash. Sharad says that he still loves Kamlesh but he never loved him, though he tried hard but failed. Sharad is agitated at the response of Kamlesh and says, "I wasted a year of my life being a housewife for you and all I get is a kick in the ass!" (56) Sharad reminds him that after living together for one complete year, he threw him out of his life but he affirms that "She (Mrs. Diamond Merchant) can't throw him out of her life". (57) Hopefully, he thinks that there should be legal and forced circumstances on the homosexuals in order to provide stability to protect the relations which often break at will and whimper of anybody. Deepali says, "I am all for the gay men's cause.

Men deserve only men!" (60) Entire stage seems a place to debate one of the most sensitive issues of the Indian society. So, the stage seems displaying the concern either for the social researchers of homosexuals and lesbians or gays at large. All are drinking, even Deepali is drinking with all the present over there. Lesbians and drinking girls are taboos that Dattani presents on the Indian stage not to make things sensational but to sensitize people to the movement and direction of the society. It also reflects on the maturity of the stage where characters are talking about their sexual preferences, drinking with a girl and talking about condoms. When all of them were sitting together, Deepali says, "That couple (Mr. & Mrs. Diamond Merchant) are watching TV. He is channel surfing ... She is just ... staring." (65) Does Deepali meant that she does not have to stare like her in her relation or does she mean that she is lucky enough to be honest and live the life of a lesbian. Unlike a woman who is watching TV with her husband, she doesn't have to hide her secrets because she proclaims that she is a lesbian and stands by her declaration. When Dipali says, "They are watching Bunny's serial" (65), she comments on most of the serials which are stories of a family, men and women. Dattani is full of statements regarding marriage and married life. Deepali thinks that Kiran must know the truth that her-would-be husband and her brother were one time lovers, and his brother. He is unable to come out of the love that virtually strangles her brother he is being treated for depression. Kamlesh feared that the news will once again shatter her sister's life. Somehow, the photo carrying the kissing scene of Prakash and Kamlesh, flies out of the window and reaches to the people on the ground.

While discussing the problems of Kamlesh, there is sincere discussion about gay and India as a nation. It is assumed that gay and India do not fit together. They were desperately trying to find a breakaway path to be contented. Ranjit, who has shifted abroad, says, "I can't seem to be both Indian and gay. But you are simply ashamed. All this sham is to cover up your shame". At last Kiran comes to know that Kamlesh and Prakash were intimate friends. Ranjit throws obvious question on marriage when he says, "Why do people get married?" (95). It indicates the need of new value system and practices in the society. Kiran says, "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry." (98) Prakash like a crusader tries to say that out of bubble we should march with the world. That's why he says, pointing at the people participating in the marriage procession, "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." (99) After this, Sharad takes the argument to a different level, where he argues that he is a gay and he is a real man too. Bold acceptance on the stage of being a gay by him and Kamlesh, points to the vision of relations in the emerging societies which was running parallel to the heterosexual society believing in the binary value system. Deepali happily accepts her lesbian status which is a mark of new trend to look at gender identity. Judith Butler first saw gender identity as performative act. Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson in their edited work *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community* have rightly tried to trace the development of queer theory which is reinforced by appeals

to deconstruction and the theories of postmodernity that seek to undermine all binary oppositions and to free desire from its constraints.”(157) He puts a big question mark, who the real man is? He just thrashes the arguments of Prakash by asking whether, being a real man is to exhibit penis power, “Power with sex, power with muscle, power with size”(101). He also says that being a real man also means exaggeration of masculinity in walk and gait that they exhibit. The discussion here centers on the man that what makes a man 'a man'. A man is what society considers him to be. So, Sharad questions the norms formed for a man and conveys that it violates the very basic need of body and the psyche of individuals.

After revelation, Kiran comes to realize that she always wanted to be a woman but Prakash has limitations because their relation is based on the lies, and so she cannot bear it any more. She questions the very basis of the love of Prakash. She sensed that Prakash will fail to impress as a man or a husband. She argues that they are the stereotypes, “Because we don't know any better, do we? We just don't know what else to be!”(107). Kiran tries to force Prakash to see the world not as a pretender but as a believer. She argues that people who show his photo in embrace of Kamlesh kissing each other will destroy his life whenever any of them come across because they will know his real self, a homosexual. So, she argues that his pretension is muck and that it always will be by his side. Out of rage, confusion and frustration Prakash gets drunk and starts hitting Kamlesh while others try to stop him. Prakash finds it hard to come to the terms of his real self. Fight stops as Deepali hits at the head of Prakash that makes him stagger and stop. Ranjit leaves and gives a meaningful look at Prakash and suggestively says, “Why do you think I left this country?”(111) Prakash is crossroads, “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?”(111) Confusion is not for Kamlesh and Prakash but Sharad too:

“What Makes a man a man | I ask myself what have I got | And what I am and what I'm not...” (111)

The play leaves us with many questions. Apart from the main theme there are various other curious and interesting questions raised in course of the development of the play. It raises the question of liberty in sexual conduct and many other practices like extramarital affair, watching blue films and drinking habit in women. The marital affairs were the outcome of the spiritual knot between a man and woman. Forgotten needs of the body, was held by Dattani to break social norms, and the need of new mind set to accept these changes. Kamlesh suggests Sharad that instead of pressurizing his eyes, he should have watched blue film as he is looking at a couple in sexual act. Here, blue film has not been mentioned with all the negativity the society adds to it, but something that is for amusement and entertainment. When Deepali comes to the flat, she asks for a drink and enjoys with all relish which is hardly palatable in an orthodox society. Lastly it seems that Dattani, may seem advance and right when he promotes the idea that people should proclaim their identity in public and people should be tolerant enough to understand the sincerity of the affair. In one of his interviews he confesses to Aditi De, "I write for my milieu, for my time and place — middle-class and urban Indian... My dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire for freedom from the society." Gay

culture is developing and there are ever increasing number of categories that mark the gay society like switchers who are gay and heterosexuals at the same time. Flexibility in the expression of sexuality is most reasonable way to come to terms with dynamics of human psyche and human needs. In spite of a weak plot *On Muggy Night in Mumbai*, the theme of alternative sexuality is taken to its safe ground. The marriage and failing AC are suggestive of failing marriages and the suffocation of gay life and the life at large where mug has taken charge of everything. In the background of marriage and married couple (Mr. and Mrs. Diamond merchant) the truth of the pretending society is exhibited on the stage. Dattani goes a step ahead when he directs Mango Soufflé that deals with "metro-sexual love story" was the adaptation of "*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*". Naik's comment on Dattani is an apt closure and comment on the playwright and the growth of plays in India, "Contemporary in tone and spirit, alive to the pressures of the present, and eminently stage-worthy, Dattani's play squarely gives the lie to the popular notion that Indian English drama is at best only a hothouse plant" (210).

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