

The Emotional and Social Plight of The Homosexual in Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai* and *Mango Souffle*

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani has shown his expertise in handling the sensitive issue of the homosexuals in both his plays – *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Mango Soufflé*. Both his plays have been smoothly constructed without sudden jolts that might shock and flabbergast the readers. Throughout the plays, the readers show a compassion for the sorry plight of the homosexuals – whose emotions are neglected or trampled by the society. Their existence is a shame for the family members and the society which has been smartly executed and projected by Mr. Dattani in both his plays.

Keywords: Indian English Drama, Mahesh Dattani, Homosexuality

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is a complete story about a merry group of homosexuals who gather at Kamlesh's farmhouse at the invitation of Kamlesh. This group had an affinity with each other of such a kind which was outstanding for they were honest to each other about their personal emotional turmoil. Each one knew about the other's problem and looked at it with compassion. The group consisted of Kamlesh, who was jilted by Ed, who thwarted him to lead a normal life by marrying a girl, who was unfortunately Kamlesh's sister, Kiran. Edwin Prakash Matthew alias Ed, is one of the central character, around whom Kamlesh, Kiran and others revolve like satellites. In reality, Ed is a homosexual and has had a close relationship with Kamlesh until he was suddenly overtaken by his innate fear of ostracizing and disliking himself and Kamlesh and everything that reminded of his identity, wanted to relinquish them and become like others i.e. pretend to be a heterosexual. In his desperation, he forgot that he would emotionally shatter Kamlesh, with whom he had gone far in their relationship, and the reality that no matter how much one tries to impersonate, cannot belie and runaway from his own identity. It was his infidelity towards Kamlesh that pushed him to the pit of depression, later filled Kiran with hatred and dislike for him and made himself a laughing stalk for the gathering and the neighbours. In his pursuit for normal manly life, he lost both Kamlesh and Kiran and was left as alone as he was, before he met Kamlesh who had rescued him from committing suicide out of depression. Talking about Kamlesh, the next important and paramount character of the play, who had called the gathering and remained the person in question throughout the play, has been presented as a gentle and amicable sort of person who loved his sister very much and cared for her welfare more than his own. So much so that he fortified

himself against the grief of parting with Ed whom he loved very much. When he got to know about the affair between his sister Kiran and Ed and saw the emotional recovery of his sister from a previous break-up, he decided to swallow his own misery and prepared himself for her marriage with Ed. He had called the gathering of his friends to convince of his separation with Ed and to accept the relationship between Ed and Kiran without disclosing his relationship with Ed. His concern for his sister made him forget his own pain. This magnanimity of his nature endears him to us and fills us with disgust for Ed. Kamlesh, in spite of being delicate and vulnerable as depicted in his character is actually bravest of the lot; for he is neither ashamed to be a homosexual nor did he wish to hide it from the world, which was evident from a piece of conversation between Ed and Kamlesh. Kamlesh's heart-break was very recent and reappearance of Ed though as his sister's fiancé revived his pain of break-up and affected his relationship with Sharad. Hence Sharad as a backlash kept pinching Kamlesh with his venom-dipped words to which, Kamlesh replied with patience. Kamlesh knew that he was being unjustified to Sharad by snubbing his true love for him but he was helpless before his heart and he needed time and patience to recover from the mental turmoil through which he was passing. Kiran was Kamlesh's sister and equally concerned about her brother's welfare. She was worried about her brother's depression, irrespective of the emotional setback that she was undergoing. Her eagerness to know about her brother's discomfiture and attributing it to Sharad and her brother's difference, made her try her best to patch up their ruptured relationship. Hardly did she know that it was she who was partly responsible for her brother's pain. Her sudden appearance at the farmhouse amidst Kamlesh and his friend's was a shock for Kamlesh as he was not prepared to meet her and his intention was thus postponed. But in a way her arrival worked up to the catharsis of the play and thus the revelation of 'Kamlesh- Ed' relationship thawed the tension that existed and both brother and sister united to foil Ed's mean contrivance to use the siblings by playing physically and mentally with both.

Besides the three important characters, the fourth character who was closely involved emotionally with Kamlesh was Sharad who in turn was dumped by Kamlesh for Ed and left to lick his wounds. Now that Kamlesh was faced with the same situation, he was sarcastically commenting on their relationship which he felt Kamlesh was using to restore his fallen self – pride. Sharad was extremely hurt with Kamlesh's insincerity and was not in a mood at all to pardon him so easily. He felt that Kamlesh wanted to cement their relationship back into shape just to fill up the vacuum which was left with Ed's departure from his life. His own weakness for Kamlesh was putting him in a state of dither regarding his indifference and making him rethink over his decision of relinquishing Kamlesh's company. He wanted Kamlesh to erase every trace of Ed from his life. The last photograph of Kamlesh and Ed together which Kamlesh had retained was decided to be destroyed ritually. The next member was Bunny, who was homosexual but had married a girl and had a family.

Though he had a family and feigned a normal life, was dissatisfied and craved for the company of his types. He was caring towards his wife and children providing them with every kind of materialistic pleasure. Nonetheless, the sexual pleasure required between a husband and wife to strengthen the bond of love between them is missing between Bunny and his wife and it became obvious when referred to it and Bunny deferred from it. Nevertheless, Bunny accepted his fault and showed his remorse at the critical situation thus created in his life. In his pursuit to manage his life in both the worlds, he has lost his hold on both. The playwright has done well to insert the character of Bunny to show that impersonation could never bring positive results and trying to play dual role in life comes to nothing and amounts to failure. It was in a way a warning for the homosexuals to play honest in their lives and prevent themselves from becoming a cause of pain for both their partner and themselves. Next is the character of Ranjit who though speaks less and does not have an over-imposing role in the play does fall in the line with the thoughts of his friends. He wittily remarks to Kiran's impassioned remark that the homosexuals should be allowed to get married with; 'they are allowed but not in the same sex.' Ed's disloyalty towards Kamlesh, fills him with sudden dislike for Ed and he does not hide it by continuously hitting him with verbal poisonous barbs. Moreover, Ed's inclination towards leading a man's life and disowning himself to be a member of the homosexual community too filled him with disgust and distaste for Ed. Another member is Deepali who is friendly and compassionate towards her homosexual friends. She has a husband but maintains friendship with the group. She is the only female member in the group. Her concern for Kamlesh and his sister, Kiran is genuine. She is not only worried about Kamlesh's loneliness and depression but also concerned about Kiran's eventual shock and disappointment on the revelation of the reality of relationship between Ed and Kamlesh and also about Ed's homosexuality. She leaves an amicable impression about herself in the minds of the readers. Her contempt towards Ed's hypocrisy is not hidden when Ed supports Sharad's decision to switch over to a heterosexual life from homosexual. Her eagerness to ease out the imminent emotional upheaval between Ed, Kamlesh and Kiran proves her to be their true friend. She stays on till the end making sure that her friend Kamlesh and his sister are safe and eased.

Mango Soufflé is the theatrical version of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* which further stresses through stage the complexities of mixed relationships placed in the mango-grove, a family farmhouse of Kamlesh and Kiran. Through this play, Mahesh Dattani has tried to justify the feelings and tendencies of the gay. In this play, Kamlesh and Sharad are gay who had a consistent relationship between them till Prakash came into Kamlesh's life. Kamlesh met Prakash one day at a park when Prakash was heavily drunk and crestfallen due to loss of his job. He needed someone to talk his heart out or he had decided to go home and jump from his balcony and commit suicide. He met Kamlesh at this juncture and was saved from the disaster but his vulnerability due

to drunkenness caused him to fall prey to Kamlesh's insinuation to physical relationship between them. Though Prakash rhetorically said at the end of the play that he was not a gay but the readers find it difficult to be convinced by him for he did have physical relationship with Kamlesh and want to carry on with it under the social cover of marriage with Kiran. Ed's outburst at Kamlesh on his showing him their nude pictures together and his sudden awakening to the filthiness of the whole relationship resulted into his walk out on Kamlesh and end of their relationship. For Kamlesh, who was seriously involved emotionally with Prakash, it was a setback and he slipped into depression and couldn't tear himself apart from Prakash's thoughts which kept coming to him again and again. This further aggravated his relationship with Sharad who did not want to play a second fiddle which was hurting to his ego while Kamlesh needed Sharad's support and love to tide over the vacuum created in his life with the departure of Prakash.

It was like jumping from frying pan to fire for Kamlesh to see that the boy who had taken his sister's fancy was no other than Prakash himself under the name of Ed (short of Edwin). Kiran was ignorant to the reality that Ed and Kamlesh had had physical relationship with each other which both hide from Kiran for different reasons. Kamlesh's was a feeling of love and concern for his sister who had an emotional setback after being rejected each time for her plain looks. Her interest in Edwin Prakash and a consequent overcome of depression which had enveloped her recently, tight-lipped Kamlesh about Prakash and he decided as a result to fade out of their lives by leaving them for Canada. Both brother and sister love each other so much that they both touch our hearts. Throughout the play, Kamlesh's mental turmoil thickly surrounds us but one thing he was very much sure about was about his sister's happiness. On the other hand, Edwin Prakash has been presented as a calculative, mean and selfish who was deceptively showing his love and concern towards Kiran who was nothing else but a source for him to prove himself straight to the world as his marriage with her will strike a permanent relationship with Kiran clearly snubbing Kamlesh and whatever of his past was related with their relationship. His dishonesty towards Kiran by hiding the truth of his relationship with Kamlesh coupled with his advances made to Kamlesh in his bedroom fill us with disgust over his vicious two-timing that he was intending to play at. Mr. Dattani here has tried to pin-point the hypocrisy of people who ignore the feelings of others in the pursuit of fulfilling their desires. Edwin Prakash's nonchalant attitude with Kamlesh while he was struggling with his emotions for Prakash, controlling them so that they don't surge out and become a reason for spoiling the smile on his sister's face, make Prakash an absolute villain in our eyes. Ed still had hidden desire for Kamlesh even after being on the verge of marriage with Kiran became known when he saw Kamlesh drifting towards Sharad and his hold over Kamlesh getting loosened. He followed Kamlesh to his bedroom and tried to coax him back to himself by disclosing his evil plan of maintaining a simultaneous relationship with him and his sister. This disclosure of Ed, shattered the mirage of lost love in the heart of Kamlesh

and boomeranged Kamlesh into throwing Ed out of both his and his sister's life for good. He was awakened to the fact that relationship with Ed would make his and his sister's life miserable. Hypocrisy of Ed to get both physical and social satisfaction by using Kamlesh and Kiran, throws light over the predominance of society and its influence in our life. The highhandedness of society makes an evil out of a normal man who is torn between the fulfillment of his desire and public recognition and acceptance. Ed is one of such a character who does not have the power to face the society and its rejection and thus feeling ashamed to reveal their identity, resort to hypocrisy. In this play he has been projected as the hypocrite character who took to viciousness by fleeing both Kiran and society by marrying Kiran as a face-off while he could conveniently carry on with his physical relationship with Kamlesh behind the curtain, who was going to be his brother-in-law. In this case, Ed's homosexual love happened to be the bride's brother who foiled his plan but in other cases the scene may not be the same and as a result, the poor bride will suffer rest of her married life for no fault of hers. Such a divulgence, evoke both anger and pity in the heart of the readers for such characters, who are smitten under the stern gaze of the gigantic society which figures as a powerful element in our life.

The final character of the guard cannot be overlooked as he represented another section of society who not only look upon such relationship quizzically but also with derision. He being a mere employee of Kamlesh and a poor man was forced to play as a foil to deepen the cloud of homosexuality in the play by revealing his proximity with Kamlesh. Moreover his appearance in the gathering, acts as a comic relief when he informs them about the picture of intimacy between Ed and Kamlesh that had reached the children and elders in the neighbourhood and their heightened amusement and resulting questioning about the inhabitants of the farmhouse and their decision to complain about the fact revealed by the picture which was a definite smudge on the face of society and was threatening to endanger the sanctity of the neighborhood. The glimpse of the interference of society in our lives can be seen in the query put up by the neighbourhood upon the visitors to the farmhouse and their proposed complaint to the society about the clandestine meetings and relationships carried out in the farmhouse. Ed and Bunny is such people who are afraid of this society that denounces them and in order to pull the wool over its eyes, they resort to respectable marriages bringing misery over themselves and their partners.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is the detailed drama with the distinct picture of all the characters and their roles whereas *Mango Soufflé* is a concise form of the drama with a little change of situations here and there but in no way have they any less impact on us. Mr. Dattani though brought out the concise version for stage display, he did not miss to deliver the message that he had wished to convey to his readers. One cannot get a critical perspective of the drama without reading *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* before *Mango Soufflé*. The playwright, revealed over a telephonic talk that *Mango Soufflé* was a cinematic version of the

theatrical presentation of 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai' hence its concise form. Coming back to the conversation that took place among the inhabitants of the farmhouse, we are shown the immense control of society over our thoughts and action and how our lives revolve around the society like its satellites. The imperativeness and dictatorship of the upholders of society is revealed by the play. No individual has any right to lead his life independently without the consent of the society. The society takes upon itself the responsibility to dictate the lives and relationships of people and consequently, the elements of society i.e. people do not dare to defy it and try in any way to eke out a niche of their own without its knowledge and assent. The pathetic situation of Ed, do arouse our anger over his hypocrisy towards Kiran and Kamlesh but at the very next moment we are sobered down by reckoning the circumstances that led him to undertake such a treachery. The moot point is that, feelings between homosexuals or heterosexuals are the same and no one has the right to trundle it at any cost. Mr. Dattani has also brought the society into it by bringing in the children in the mango-grove who get hold of the nude photograph of Kamlesh and Prakash and show it their parents, who sneer and laugh at the people in the farmhouse. Maqsood, the watchman brought in the photograph and handing it to them and leaving with a sarcastic salaam add a flavour of general inacceptance of such relationship.

This phase of the play confirm that homosexual relationship is considered as a stigma by the society and the people of all the class denounce and reject it absolutely. The pairs, who bravely declare their homosexuality, have to face ostracism. Kamlesh had the courage to accept their relationship before all and he had mentioned in the play once to Prakash that people would know about them sometime so why hide their relationship at all. It was Prakash who was not ready to face the sneer in the faces of the people or listen to their mock comments. Therefore to save himself from disgrace, he decided to play straight and marry Kiran to lead a normal heterosexual life. His cowardliness became obvious to the readers when he showed his jealousy towards the rebounding of the relationship between Kamlesh and Sharad. To have his love (Kamlesh) back, he offered to take care of both Kamlesh and Kiran. Obviously, his relationship with Kiran would be eyewash to his relationship with Kamlesh. The revelation of Prakash's intention fill both Kamlesh and the readers with distress and Kamlesh at once decides to tell his sister about their relationship before she gets another setback and this time from her own brother which may be dangerous for her. Kamlesh wanted to tell her more for the reason to dissuade her from marrying Ed as their marriage he now knew would be a disaster bringing happiness to no one. Kiran's endearing love and concern for her brother becomes evident when she sees the photograph and comes to know about the relationship. She could then co-relate her brother's discomfiture and sadness as a result of the break of his relationship with Ed. Brother and sister both driven with sibling concern for each other, join hands to punish Ed and as a consequence, tell him to go out and face

the people eye-to-eye now that they know about his relationship with Kamlesh. The feeling of shame and rejection by both Kamlesh and Kiran, shake him to the roots and cause him to hurt himself by falling from his motor-bike. Though injured, he comes back to accept his love for both Kamlesh and Kiran separately. This attitude of his, smother our feeling of annoyance for him as we realize that he was a puppet in the hands of the strong society which still does not accept this relationship though court has legally endorsed it. All are not as strong as Kamlesh who is ready to face the society. Many like Edwin Prakash bend before the pressures of the society and jeopardize not only their own life but also the life of their partners. Mr. Dattani wants to tell us that there are many such characters amongst us who go unnoticed and unknowingly and compulsorily not only harm their own life but also those who are related to them. Society has to be changed with the changing times and we being the ones who make the society should take the initiative to reform it for our welfare.

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