

A PANORAMA OF SUBALTERN ETHOS: A STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI'S *ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI*

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Rightly Maya Angelou has remarked in her poem:

“We wear the mask that grins and lies
It shades our cheeks and hides our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile
With torn and bleeding hearts.....”

The Mask, Maya Angelou

Theatre is not a mute and mechanical representation of social dynamics but it is a lively representation of social dynamics and the voices resounding in context of totality of human experience that consciously effect the existing dynamics of human sensibility. Colonial discourse on gender and sexuality thus contributed simultaneously to both an erasure of sub continental homoerotic traditions as well as a projection of disruptive male chauvinistic, especially in response to the colonial conception of effeminate natives in regard to theatre.

Mahesh Dattani, a fresh arrival on the Indian dramatic scenario, has carved a niche by giving us vent to the pent up frustration and anger of the long suppressed and recognized, marginalized gender. His multi directional talent and his progressive parenting of dramas need no introduction. Dattani, as one of the major exponent of modern English drama, talks about those issues related to ‘Others’ which puzzle the Indian audience. His dramas are heart wrenching which compel us to introspect. Dattani deals with the theme of sexuality and gender issues which are focused as taboo relations by the mainstream society. The hollowness, pettiness and ugliness of

contemporary modern society have been brought forth by Dattani in almost all of his plays. Dattani has made use of multi-level stage to represent the different spaces of household representing the mental spaces of the characters and the different realities which they possess. The hollow pricey avenue represents the mental anguish and dilemma of these characters while the open space represents the action in the context of external thoughts.

Identities are created by difference, exclusion and social injustice. It is the struggle of the long stressed people against the powerful and privileged with those historically denied people which have created identities and the demand for rights-human, social, legal, cultural and political. If we talk our Indian traditional society, the identity and existence of Alternate Sexuality: gays, lesbians, eunuchs and homosexuals have not yet been recognized as valid. The most important aspect of this research paper is to highlight and to address the “*invisible issues*” of modern contemporary Indian society. For instance, the branching out of feminism into same-sex love relationship like homosexuality and lesbianism which are unacceptable to Indian society even today, try to find out a space in modern culture. The problem of present research is focused on the issues of others and what is the role of culture in making of these ‘Others.’

Social exclusion is a worldwide phenomenon. In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, it is a major problem that threatens the very fabric of our society. Factors like caste, religion, community and gender give rise to social exclusion. But social exclusion as a concept emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, though the Indian society witnessed this right from the time immemorial when it was divided on the basis of caste. The upper caste hegemony was instrumental in saucing the exclusion of the lower caste people from the rank of the society. Mahesh Dattani, the most significant Indian English playwright of our country deals with the themes of social exclusion in his plays not on the basis of caste but gender. How gender relationship based on sexuality causes social exclusion becomes a prime concern for him in some of his plays. Neuter sexuality, gay relationship and homosexuality cause social exclusion in our country. This is the stigmatic cause of concern in the contemporary society.

The important aspect discussed in this paper is- how the characters of Dattani’s play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* seek an identity for themselves which is both lovable and enduring. Engrossed in contemporary reality, Dattani’s characters seek a remedy of their ills and suffering caused by the moral, psychological as well as social discrimination. Dattani advocates the plight of the subalterns to whom life never offers a bed of roses. Following the tradition established by the prominent English dramatists of the 20th century like Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar, Dattani bares the naked reality before our eyes emerging as a sensitive writer; Dattani prefers to write more about the realistic problems rather than indulging in romantic and fanciful notion.

The significant objectives of the present paper are to recreate the crisis of those relationship that are not rigidly demarcated in terms of socially accepted gender construction. His play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* provides the social inequality and violence faced by these subaltern. The theatrical validity gets transferred to legitimate social responses. Dattani is a radical thinker who endows the others/subalterns with self-dignity, inner strength and the courage to endure their pains and struggles thus intend to shatter the social norms. Dattani's genuine concern and interest in demanding justice for the transgender is itself a stream of quest for identity and self through literary protest. To break the margin and build the spaces for these 'Queer' objects. He looks like to demand a social equilibrium for subaltern and transgender to make them stand with mainstream society. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with the sensitive gay relationships and homosexuality. The play presents a group of well-to-do homosexuals in Mumbai, their changing mutual relationships, their revelations, their self-delusions and self-discoveries. Through this play, Dattani has tried to soften the attitudes of society towards the gays and has subtly tried to arouse compassion for this class at large.

Dattani's play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* may give some jolts to the Indian audience to venture such themes of sexuality presented barely in public. The story of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* comes across the stark reality of life when the protagonist Ed decides to scoop the humiliation of Kamlesh, a gay. The play becomes much more gripping when Dipali gets to know that Kamlesh was identified as she has committed a blunder of marrying Ed already his brother's boyfriend. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani questions the age old conviction of sexual relationship. The play reveals though the gays and lesbians are proud of their being, they have a type of hidden anguish suppressed among them. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* seriously expresses the concern of society where same sex relationship i.e. homosexuality has no authenticity. The Play portrays how Ed and Kamlesh deceive their surroundings and their relations stand only for their convenience of a kind of sexual compromise. Through this play Mahesh Dattani succeeds in persuading the audience to examine their individual and collective consciousness raising several pertinent questions stressing on the need of introspection of liberal minded people or who blindly follow the pre-determined laws rather prejudices of family and society at large.

In the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani represents the mental agony of persons who are by nature 'gays' or 'bi-sexual' and desire on the part of some of them to turn heterosexual. This is an opaque and unusual theme in the Indian context. But in real life such characters do exist. Hence, Dattani has re-created the characters in their own situation. One thing is crystal clear. All the characters of this play are honest to themselves and bold enough to confess their sexual exploitations and preferences as well. They, in course of time, try to understand their problems and come out with astounding disclosures.

Obviously such attempts are never smooth and are often jeopardised by the way in which queer individuals themselves integrate the homophobic disgust that is associated with images of homosexual urge. Dattani is always keenly aware of these predicaments and shrewdly analyses them in a play like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* where these problems play a pivotal role in the central dramatic situation. Those who are familiar with the play must know that two of the protagonists, Kamlesh and Ed were a homosexual couple before the eventual collapse of the relationship. One of their intimate conversations, during their time of togetherness, is suggestive of this essential attempt to perceive the beauty of such relationships, however, obnoxious that may seem to the heteronormative majority. The present dialogue exhibits the mental agony of these characters:

Kamlesh: If only they could see how beautiful we are together.

Ed: Are we?

Kamlesh: What?

Ed: Beautiful?

Kamlesh: Yes

Ed: I don't know. (Points to the people on the road) They wouldn't think so.

Kamlesh: They don't really see us. (Dattani: 2000, 81)

Actually Ed is failed to cling to the approach of the supposed admiration of his relationship with Kamlesh as he is totally persuaded to believe that not only was his wish for Kamlesh a product of waste idea to whom society is not going to accept. He is told that Kamlesh was merely suffering from a psychological trauma that can be medically cured. Ed becomes yet another example of how individuals can become unfortunately interpolated by the predominant heteronormative discourse that proliferates through religion, medicine, social practices and off course, the current legal formation. As a result, his own previous relationship with Kamlesh as well as his perception of other homosexuals becomes almost incorrigibly violated, as evident from the following outbursts against Kamlesh and his friends:

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, 99)

Thus these self-deceptive effusions stress the extent of probe and betray the protagonist's own agitation brought about by the concern of public revulsion to know the hidden stark reality. The fear of main protagonist's identity prompts him later to assault physically to his gay partner Kamlesh that he totally forgets in a fit of anger what he really is! He uses very expletives that homophobic use against Kamlesh when he remarks at the end of the play: —Faggot! Pansy! Gandu! Gandu! (CP: 110) Thus Ed psychologically seizes up into tears after this painstaking explosion, he sadly exclaims! —“I only wanted to live” (Dattani: 2000,110). The idea of Ed's confession unearths on stage that the entire counterblow of stigmatic fear, resentment, pretence and identity crisis that a gay in India has to tackle with when he is trying to hide his homosexuality beneath a veil of heterosexual perusal. Dattani repeatedly presents the decisive fiasco in the play when a confidential photo of Kamlesh and Ed falls out of the apartment and comes into the presence of the people who were engaged in the marriage ceremony going on in the ground floor of the same apartment.

GUARD: Aap log apnakam sari duniyakobatanachahte haikya?

Aapka wo photo baraat wale ke compound maigira?

Sab bachedekhrahe the! Sab hansrahe the!

Aur phir badonne bhidekhliya. Sab nedekhliya!

Mujhe pooch rahe the yahakaunkaunaatehai.

Society waloko sab kal complain karne wale hain.

(Dattani: 2000. 105)

Dattani condemns the dishonesty and insincerity in relationship. He does not criticize homosexuality as sexuality is identified as one way of realizing one's self. The consciousness of one's social desires and its recognition is almost similar to being conscious of one's sexual desires and forms of its realisation. Sexuality is another aspect of one's identity of which if there is a denial in terms of recognition, self-suffers and affects the society. In an interview Dattani explores the crucial issue of homosexuals in our society to be discussed—“If we look at the statistics of gay population in any given society, even if you look at it as a conservative five per cent (people put it ten, but if you take it five per cent), with a population of 850 million, we are talking about 50 million people, and I think it's a real invisible issue... I think it's there, and very much a part of my society, it happens to be there.” (Erin M, Bee 24-25).

In fact Dattani does conform to the characteristics of the subaltern ethos. However, the effective unsettling quality of his very human and equally social characters, and their fusion of realism and non-realism distinguishes Dattani's artistic signature from those of other writers of the age. It is human events and actions, as also social events and actions

that remain unexplained or appear apparently illogical or unmotivated that makes the world seem capricious and malevolent. However, 'man' and 'society' are marked indelibly everywhere. There is evasion and stealth on the part of 'the other', who evades issues and refuses to reveal himself or herself as gay or lesbian. The statement of the universal predicament is reached only at the height when they cover up a mask in society:

SHARAD: We-ell, let me see how I can put it. You see, being a heterosexual man- a real man, as Ed put it- I get everything. I get to be accepted – accepted by whom? - well, that marriage lot down there for instance. I can have a wife, I can have children who will all adore me simply because I am a hetero – I beg your pardon- a real man. Now why would I want to give it all? So what if I have to change a little? If I can be real man, I can be king. Look at all the kings around you, look at all the male power they enjoy, thrusting themselves on to the world, all that penis power! Power with sex, power with muscle, power with size. Firing rockets, exploding nuclear bombs, if you can do it five times, I can do it six times and all that stuff. (Thrusts his pelvis in an obscene macho fashion.) Power, man! Power!

Thus Dattani forces us to introspect. He, sometimes emerges as a writer, violently attacking age old belief. In his own words.....

“I write for milieu for my time and place-middle class and urban Indian....my dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire to freedom from society....I am not looking for something sensational, which audiences have never seen before....some subjects which are under-explored, deserve their space. It's no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalized, including the gays. Each of us has a sense of isolation within given texts. That's what makes us individual...”

To see this play performed on stage, obviously readers feel how each character proves his/her lot unremittingly the worst. In fact Dattani has alluded the extreme requirement for same sex marriage. His contribution lies bringing everyday problem in contemporary society and taboo subjects into the realm of drama.²

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