



# Deconstructing Homophobia: A Critique On The Peripheral Sexuality As Represented In Mahesh Dattani's *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai*

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## Abstract

*Mahesh Dattani, the versatile Sahitya Academy honoured playwright, excelled his charisma in constant delineation of the burning issues through his plays. His works depict various levels of turmoil; internal as well as external, social as well as behavioural, emotional and well as practical; layering with individual predicaments in a crude society which does not permit a 'man to be a man' himself. Homosexuality is such a taboo, which not only hinders a specific set of people within the typos of otherness and marginalization, but also restricts their potentiality and self-esteem to some extent. "On A Muggy Night in Mumbai", first performed at the Tata theatre, Mumbai on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1998; is an erudite portrayal of a group of homosexuals in a microcosmic flat in Mumbai and their aspiration, love and fruitless hunt for self-recognition. With keen insight, Dattani theatrically advocates the setting as well as the characters to eke out an aesthetic effect with compassionate touches for this peripheral gender.*

**Keywords:** Biasness, Homophobia, Gender-role, Otherisation, Social-exclusion.

## 1. Introduction

Social exclusion is a demoralizing naturalization of hapless phenomenon nowadays. Factors like caste, creed, religious ethnicity, gender biasness etc. have created a detrimental power-structure in every orb of subsistence. Dattani's socialism all-the-go is reflected through his reflexive writings for the unjust victims of the societal norms. Almost all his plays describe with scrutinized minuteness the issues of minority discourse and the excruciating mishaps that actually happen in our everyday life. In *Tara*, he portrays the inhuman deprivation of the female child in favour of the male one, where Tara was deliberately made disabled by her own mother to have a healthy male child Chandan. In *Dance Like A Man*, the focus is on the age-old debate between tradition and modernity. Another of his plays, *Thirty Days In September*, pathetically portrays the sexual exploitation of an innocent kid in his own familial relations. Dattani is, thus, a serious master-artist who explores the issues of contemporary racial and unconventional perceptions befitting to Indian milieu to herald a positive attitude in social change. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a tragi-comedy of the homosexuals who always formulate a better go to form their distinctive identity, but detained at the end by the masculine majority as shameful exclusions. Their penchant as well as hatred for the influential mainstream signifies their wretched vulnerability. Dattani does not suffice any gratifying illumination

to their end; rather he left them to the audience's perception to cope with these ignored section with considerate love and permissive acceptance. His genius lies in here.

## 2. Discussion

The play begins like an odyssey of the homosexuals. In three acts, Dattani describes a set of characters- Kamlesh, Prakash (sometimes presented as Ed), Sharad, Kiran, Deepali, Ranjit and Bunny— epitomising different economic and cultural chores, sharing the same doom of the homosexuals. Their phobia lies in their detrimental treatment by the mainstream majority. Sexuality, like gender, is formed by the chromosomal order or disorder. But in societal facet, like gender roles, sexuality too is predetermined by the majority discourse; and the bi-sexual or the transgender only get the title 'queer'. Gender roles basically privilege masculinity and categorize the female to be their 'other' for their lack of male phallus. Gender critics rebuff the view of gender-construction to be a natural construct and prefer to call it a production of social restrains, accepted cultures and its institutions. In other words, gender is not the biological sexual difference; it is rather a forceful cultural imposition, a severe stricture which people are obliged to obey. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedwig in their book titled, Key Concepts in Cultural Theory have brought out the difference between 'gender' and 'sex' in the following words:

*The concept of 'gender' is typically placed in opposition to the concept of 'sex'. While our sex (female/male) is a matter of biology, our gender (feminine/masculine) is a matter of culture. Gender may therefore be taken to refer to learned patterns of behaviour and action, as opposed to that which is biologically determined. Crucially, biology needs not to be assumed to determine gender. This is to suggest that while what make a person male or female is universal and grounded in laws of nature, the precise ways in which women express their femininity and men express their masculinity will vary from culture to culture. Thus, qualities that are stereotypically attributed to women and men in contemporary western culture (such as greater emotional expression in women; greater tendencies to violence and aggression in men) are seen as gender, which entails that they could be changed. (158)*

Dattani's effort here is to unknot, if not legally endorse, primarily, homophobia; an unreasonable fear of the homosexuals with their sexual orientation. His attempt is to treat every individual primarily as a distinct persona, a human with considerable human goodness-compassion, love and fellow-feeling. Like western culture, non-procreative sex is prohibited in Indian constitutional practices, and therefore, after so many attempts, IPC has not yet legalised same sex marriage in our country. So, Dattani is a voice for those unfortunate minorities whose suffering is a mere laughing syndrome to the ordinary lot. This play shows several incidents where the homosexuals try to abhor their homo-erotic love to have a status-quo of living like the common people. The theatrical stage represents simultaneously two contrasting worlds in miniature; one, inhabited by the usual lot celebrating a marriage ceremony with huge laughter, noise, lights and crackers; while the other describes the activities of the homosexuals limited within the flat of Kamlesh. Almost, all the male characters have tried more or less to live like an ordinary individual quitting their homosexual identities, but they are interrupted and insulted in every move by the heterosexuals. Their sexual overtures are looked down upon as criminal offence and this upset their lot utterly to the repulsive heterosexuality. Moreover, Dattani has depicted a set of fruitless love affairs: between Kamlesh and Prakash, Sharad and Kamlesh and finally Kiran and Ed. They react in frustration in the same way as the heterosexuals do, yet their love remain proscribed for others. This dichotomy between adequate and inadequate, ideal and the real, happening and the annoying constitute their tragedy.

Primarily, the play moves round the theme of homosexual love and the heaviness, sighs, and the deception resulting from it. Kamlesh is undoubtedly the central protagonist of this play. He is seen at the beginning having an overture with a guard, to forget his ex-love Prakash. Sharad, who is committed to Kamlesh and loves him deeply, only gets desperation in return as Kamlesh never reciprocated his adore. Sharad, characteristically behaves like a jealous wife not getting equal love responsively: *"I am like a brother you always wanted . . . You threw me out . . . And I am not being a drama queen. Now this is being a drama queen. I wasted a year of my life being a housewife for you*

*and all I get is a kick in the ass! You beast!*" (56) He even whimsically acts like rubbing off sindoor as the widows do after the deaths of their husbands. These jealous contours of Sharad not getting responsive love from Kamlesh increases the dramatic effect further. He expresses vehement rage for pretending to be a faithful partner of a person who is least concerned about his feelings. Thus, possessiveness, resentment, suspicion, distrusts which find place in heterosexual relationships breath heavily here too. Apart from these male personas, the play includes one lesbian character, Deepali, who is their common friend and stays on the stage almost to the end. Lesbianism does not mean only the sexual relationship between two females; rather it is a bond of universal sisterhood. Lesbianism is also matter of choice- it is an anti-patriarchal choice, a denial against patriarchal authority. In the play, Deepali is seen supporting the gay relationships, "*I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men!*" (60). She is critical about the supremacy of the male organ and boastfully announces that: "*I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman.*"(66) Another interesting fact that Dattani tries to probe here is that the opposite sexes never feel any physical need to the other sex, which is evident from their conversation:

*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)

The play includes two minor characters, two common friends of the trio, Ranjit, a European immigrant and Bunny, a film star, who turn up at the flat and discuss about the yet unrevealed mysterious cheating of Prakash. Ranjit too, getting maltreatment from the mainstream heterosexuals, finally decides to move back to Europe which gives him a licence to have a free sexual identity unlike India. Bunny, who is a film star, in reality, is afraid of the typos set against the homosexuals; and therefore hides his 'gay' identity' by marrying a girl and pretends to be 'happily married'. While, they are severely disturbed about their identities, the noise of 'Shehnai' makes the air 'filthy' and nauseating. The complication heightens to the extreme when it is exposed that the Prakash who is the catalytic factor behind all the mishaps, is actually Ed, the partner of Kamlesh's sister, Kiran. He has left Kamlesh not for any detestation but only to get a status in the society to live like a man himself: "*I am . . . sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I only wanted to live.*" (110) At the end, every secret gets untied, all the relationships shattered, and the conjugal photo of Kamlesh and Prakash together is exposed to the 'Baraatii's' who are about to launch a complaint against all the homosexuals to steer them away from the community. The play thus ends with a fundamental question that Dattani leaves to the opinions of the seers: "What makes A Man A Man?" (111). Are not they man? Don't they have individuality? Therefore, where lays their existence? Don't they have the basic right to live their own life? With these persistent questions the light fades on the stage.

### **Conclusion:**

Homosexuals are generally treated as perverts, having psycho-social disorder in their mental orientation. But what the majority does not understand is that the identity of a woman is not to desire a man, nor masculinity is confined within the physicality between two opposite bodies. Homosexual relationships practically mirror or replicate one another. Homosexuality is essentially a revolt against the stigma attached with the heterosexual practices. It is a postmodern fighting back against the stereotyped 'grand narrative' which Lyotard had talked about. If heterosexuality is 'fixity', set by the prevalent norms, then following Derrida we can say that nothing constitute a fixed identity. Derrida's concept of 'Deconstruction' incorporates two terms, one is to 'differ' and another is to 'defer'. As a result of this difference and deference; the centre is lost, and if the centre does not exist, then no question of fixity comes to the fore. Judith Butler too, following Jaques Derrida seeks to deconstruct all fixed identities. Paradoxically, identities are repetitions of performances. Heterosexuals consider themselves to be at the centre by putting the homosexuals at the periphery. But if deconstruction never accepts of the existence of the centre, then the notion of margin too, altogether vanishes. Therefore, we can conclude that like gender, sexuality is nothing but a social construct.

The play ends with an existential dilemma of all the characters. Kiran breaks up with Ed knowing him to be the ex-lover of her brother, but the remembrances of the tortures of her ex-husband epitomize the fruitlessness of the marital institution worshiped by the majority. All the characters Kamlesh, Sharad, Prakash, Ranjit and Bunny undergo a moral dilemma for their liminality. Dattani actually pictures real crises of the homosexuals as they face in real life and their fervent attempt to come out of their ensnared misery. The whole play spins round the identity crisis of gays in Indian society, as well as how they find out their own gender orientation midway through fulfilling their parental and social expectations. The marginalization of people in the name of culture, customs, community, and gender, is questioned by Dattani, and though he could not provide a fairy-land existence for the homosexuals, his venture of speaking for this unfortunate lot pleading helplessly for their existence, individuality and acceptance in the common flow of society appals the reader.

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