



Mahesh Dattani's On A Muggy Night In Mumbai – A Celebration Of Gay Life

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ABSTRACT : Social discrimination is a worldwide phenomenon; marginalisation on the basis of caste, religion, community and gender often forces groups of people or communities to occupy the fringes of the society. In India, such inhuman exclusions of people are on the increase and this in fact threatens the very fabric of the Indian society. Mahesh Dattani, the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998, externalises the trauma experienced by the subaltern, especially the homosexuals. Using theatre as a tool, Dattani dares to voice the plight of such neglected and unrecognized individuals who are also a part of the society. This paper is an attempt to portray how Dattani pictures and voices his characters – both gays and lesbians – in his play 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai'; how he places them in the various phases of "coming out"; and how he has succeeded in stirring compassion in his audience for such differently sexually oriented individuals.

KEYWORDS : Gender, marginalization, homosexuals, coming-out

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INTRODUCTION

Social discrimination is a worldwide phenomenon, especially in a multilingual and multicultural country like India. Marginalisation on the basis of caste, religion, community and gender often forces groups of people or communities to occupy the fringes of the society. In India, unlike other countries, such inhuman exclusions of people are on the increase and this in fact threatens the very fabric of the Indian society. On such a scenario of social marginalization and exclusion comes the significant contribution of Mahesh Dattani, the first and the only Indian English dramatist to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1998. This honour was a way to recognise his efforts in depicting the plight of the neglected and unrecognized, who are a part of the society.

Dattani's plays are closely in touch with the changing socio-economic and cultural scene of contemporary India. Acknowledging this, he is described in the Sahitya Akademi Award citation as:

[Dattani's work] probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender... a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.

Through his plays, Dattani expresses his protest against the injustice meted out to the downtrodden and discriminated sections of the society. He externalizes the problems and feelings of the subalterns in a very authentic and realistic manner and thus manages to delve deep into the hearts of his audience to recreate characters with authenticity and liveliness. However, by raising such realities, Dattani's aim was not to change the society but to bring out the fact that such realities do exist amongst us and he hopes that his plays will give the audience an insight into their own lives – to identify their natural inclinations and assert it.

Dattani fights shy of being labelled as a 'gay writer' or 'women's writer'. Dattani, in his interview with Angeli Multani, clarifies that he didn't consciously choose to write about these marginalized people but these people "happen to be marginal people amongst others" (Multani, 166). They are people who cannot live as they are and so Dattani tries to make their reality visible amongst others. His major concern in plays depicting homosexual situation is the identity crisis which results from being marginalized and oppressed. Dattani chronicles the behaviour patterns and struggles of such characters when faced with pressures from outside as well as from within them. At one level the confrontation is directed outwards, facing the prejudices and rejection of the society and at the other, it is directed inwards where the confrontation is with the divided self – the product of social conditioning and sexual impulses. The ensuing struggle therefore is for visibility, voice and social space; not to be frozen into stereotypes but to have freedom of choice as individuals.

'Coming out' and pride parades have remained an important part of modern LGBT movements. Coming out refers to the act of 'coming out of the closet', i.e., the voluntary public revealing of a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. It is generally described in three phases. The first stage is the phase of "knowing oneself" – the realization that one is open to same-sex relations as exhibited in Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The second stage involves one's decision to come out to others including family, friends and/or colleagues. Dattani's radio play, *Do the Needful* which was broadcast in 1997 by BBC Radio 4 can be placed in this phase. As the title suggests, the gay hero and the notorious heroine get into a marriage of convenience with a secret understanding that they will be free to follow their natural inclinations thereafter.

The third phase more generally involves living openly as a LGBT person. In this paper, I will be analysing the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) which is a celebration of gay life, and hence can be placed in this third and final phase of 'coming out'. Dattani openly handles the issue of homosexuality. The play was the first play in Indian English to handle the theme of homosexuality and so to Dattani goes the distinction of writing the first Indian play openly depicting the 'gay' scenario in India, an issue which has been pushed under the carpet as far as Indian drama is concerned. Dattani's recurrent depiction of homosexual characters also makes him an important figure in South Asian gay culture. The play shows what happens to members of a gay community when they are forced into a closet because of the stereotyped expectations from the society. The various shades of gay are also shown -- the escapist, the overt, the comfortable and the hypocrite.

The play is set in a posh Mumbai flat of Kamlesh, a rich fashion designer and a well adjusted homosexual, who is waiting for a group of his friends to arrive to sort out a problem in his life. His lover Prakash has left him to become 'straight' and marry another woman, and this frustrates Kamlesh:

I would have understood it if he had left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship. I was very angry. I left my parents and my sister to come here, all because of him.... (Dattani, 69)

After living like a recluse in his flat for some time, Kamlesh tries to overcome his trauma in the companionship of his homosexual friend Sharad but fails. So he decides to discuss his grief with his friends for they "are the only friends" who "have all been through the pain of separation." (Dattani, 67)

Kamlesh's world is confined to his friends who, like him, are homosexuals. The strong bonding between these friends is seen in the spontaneity with which all of them respond to Kamlesh's request for help. People with similar sexual identities have managed to create a safe cocooned world of their own – the world of the homosexuals. On stage, this is offset by the Mumbai skyline in the background, representing the outside world which, throughout the play, tries to intrude into the world of the homosexuals through devices like a marriage party outside, children following some of the characters, the noise of firecrackers and so on. In this world of the homosexuals, the homosexuals freely express their feelings, discuss their problems and try to resolve their inner conflicts.

The gays in Kamlesh's party represent the varied faces of the homosexual community. Kamlesh's lover Prakash is a coward, who fearing ostracization from society, decides to walk out on his lover. He is convinced of his own sexual preference but decides to choose a life of hypocrisy and deception rather than come out and face society upfront by marrying Kamlesh. He chooses the path to lead a clean life. The audience only hears about Prakash until the end of the play. Prakash represents the usual problematic homosexual, who begins to doubt his own reality and tries to reorient himself towards being 'straight'.

Bunny is a clandestine homosexual who plays the role of an "ideal husband and father" in the Hindi serial, *Yeh Hai Hamara Parivaar* and also in real life. Bunny is a traditional Indian gay man – a closet homosexual who is married and ostensibly looks and behaves to be happy. He admits his homosexuality to his friends; but denies his sexual preference publicly. Instead he gloats about his success in leading the double life of a heterosexual and a homosexual. Unlike Bunny who is a hypocrite, Ranjit has been living happily and openly as a gay with his "English lover" for the last twelve years; not in India where such same-sex relationship is looked upon as illegal and 'unnatural' but in Europe where homosexuality is accepted. He regrets "being an Indian", because he "can't seem to be both Indian and gay" (Dattani, 88). In his country, he cannot "be himself", he cannot come out in the open and so he finds an easy way out which is to move to Europe where people like him are accepted. There he is at peace with himself, with his sexual identity. Sharad and Deepali are very comfortable with their sexuality. Deepali lives boldly and happily with her 'significant other', Tina who is a lesbian. Sharad, the flamboyant gay, is not bothered about what the world thinks of him or how it views him. He is the very antithesis of Bunny who is hypocritical. And unlike Prakash, we see Sharad asserting his identity as a homosexual, "No, I am not bisexual; I am as gay as a goose" (Dattani, 100).

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai begins with the assumption that homosexuals and lesbians are an established, though still an invisible fact of the Indian milieu. The plot is further complicated with shocks and surprises, when Kamlesh's sister Kiran, the only heterosexual character in the play, come visiting and tells Kamlesh of her decision to marry her new boyfriend, Ed. Kiran and Kamlesh are very close to each other. Kiran

is a divorcee; a victim of male violence. Later in her new boyfriend, she finds a loving and caring man; a total contrast to her first husband. Kamlesh is very protective towards his younger sister and would like to see her happy 'at any cost'. Kiran an innocent girl is in the dark about her brother's real self and is unable to even sense her brother's present predicament. The friends are invited now to help Kamlesh discuss Kiran's marriage as she is set to marry Prakash, Kamlesh's former lover who has a new name Ed to suit his new identity of a forced heterosexual. His sister's happiness means a lot to him but neither does he want her to live a life of misery with Prakash who is a confirmed homosexual. He knew Indian marriages well enough to know how difficult it is to come out of it and what a hell it can be to remain within it especially when the partners are not sexually compatible.

For Kamlesh, familial obligations take precedence over his self interests. Though he loves Prakash, he doesn't want it at the cost of his sister's happiness. He is caught in this double bind and it is only a chance happening of the discovery of the photo of Prakash and Kamlesh in a deep embrace that makes it possible for Kiran to discover the truth about Ed and Prakash being one and the same person. It is soon discovered that Prakash hatches this devious plan to marry Kiran so that he can conveniently, under the cover of respectability which marriage will confer, continue his love relationship with Kamlesh.

Thus in this play, from the outside we see all the characters as self assured – with good jobs and economic- social power but deep down they are caught in different kinds of struggles. Dattani was interested in seeing how the characters behave when caught in difficult situations. People like Bunny continue in an unhappy heterosexual marriage, deluding themselves that they are happy, so that family reputation is intact even if it means misery for them. Bunny's hypocritical life is only a weapon to defend himself from the hatred of society, should they discover. He loves the assured securities of traditional structures too much to let it go but at the same time, his need to satisfy his inner urges leads him to adopt this double life. He has succeeded in keeping everyone happy and to believe that he too was happy. His outburst of angst at the end of the play is indeed very poignant. The realisation and acceptance of his sexual identity takes a further step when he decides to come out into the open and tell everyone out there in the world the truth about himself and his life. Bunny stands for all such hypocritical people in society who live with split selves and suffer on account of it.

Sharad believes he has a right to live a normal life and this inner belief gives him strength. On the other hand, Prakash is insecure; he feels ashamed of his difference but can't help it. His feelings are natural and real, not abnormal as the society views it. Through the character of Kamlesh, Dattani works out the problematic identity of the gay man who visits a psychiatrist to rid himself of depression until the day he was told by the psychiatrist that he "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" (Dattani, 69). So the only other option is what Bunny suggests – camouflage, to "blend with the surroundings" so that no one discovers you. Dattani suggests that this is the typical Indian manner of constructing an acceptable identity as a cover for one's true self. Ranjit, however, counters this by saying that nothing can be more destructive of the self than keeping quiet about one's reality and declaring to the whole world that you are a "straight" which is something you know you are not. But Bunny is sure that in India, he will not be "accepted by the millions" if he screamed from the rooftops that he is gay (Dattani, 70). Deepali puts her finger on the problem when she says, "It's not shame, is it? With us? ... It's fear...Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be." (Dattani, 89)

Thus we see that among the homosexuals assembled in Kamlesh's flat, it is only Prakash/Ed who tries to deny and hide his sexual identity. All the others accept and assert their reality as a homosexual. Even Bunny, who has been so far living the false life of a heterosexual, decides to come out to the society. Ranjit, though in Europe, lives openly as a gay. We see Kamlesh, Sharad and Deepali as individuals proud of their homosexuality. So that leaves Prakash. Kamlesh accuses Prakash of being too "concerned about the whole damn world!" and he tries to patch things up with Prakash:

Prakash, I beg of you.... It can work out fine between us if you had some pride in yourself! Please! Don't turn your back on yourself. You are wrenching your soul from your body! (Dattani, 93)

But Prakash keeps on to his stand, "I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest" (Dattani, 92). Even Kiran tries to persuade Prakash into openly accepting his homosexuality because the truth will come out one day or the other. Kiran, initially presented as a naive, victimized and weak character turns out to be one of the strongest, basing all her ideas of the self on openness and truth. She shows compassion for gay people and wishes they could marry for happiness of her brother, who she now knows was a homosexual. She says, "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry" (Dattani, 99). She also tries to convince Sharad that Kamlesh still loves him and so persuades him to continue his relationship with Kamlesh. Before Kiran unexpectedly gets the photo of Ed and Kamlesh together, Kamlesh and his friends try to tell Kiran what happened between Kamlesh and Prakash but she stoically rises above her own sorrow to advise him against Sharad's decision to be a 'real' man. The mature Kiran warns him:

You will end up being lonelier if you tried to be anything else other than who you are. And think of the poor woman you may end up marrying just as a cover-up for your shame. (Dattani, 102)

The wedding music heard constantly in the background in the final Act is an ironic commentary on the lives of these homosexuals for whom 'marriage' can only be a 'doubly dirty twice-four letter word'. The explosion of the crackers can be seen as the explosion of the inner struggle in the hearts of these homosexuals which finally leads to their realisation of the necessity to assert their identities and to make a place for themselves in the society. So finally, we see Ed attaining his tragic grandeur in introspecting his life and in expressing his desire to live. And this is proved by his last words to Kiran in this play, "I am Sorry, I did not mean to harm you, I only wanted to live" (110). And in addition to this, the play ends with Sharad singing the anthem; however it is not the Jana Gana Mana, but the gay one: "I ask myself what I have I got And what I am and what I'm not..." (Dattani, 111)

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai is, thus, a play on a theme often not touched upon – gay relationship and their need to assert their true identity in society. Dattani lays open the hypocrisies of social life which impose stereotypical roles to men and women, and acknowledges and legitimizes only these roles. Male and female are the only sexual categories which have secured social existence and society's approbation. People who do not fit in these two classes either keep trying to fit into the rut and suffer throughout their lives. With a fine delineation of characters like Ed, Bunny, Sharad and Kamlesh in a lively and witty manner, Dattani brings out the psychological pressures and fears of social ostracisation that gays have to live with.

The play was made into a film, *Mango Souffle* and its producer, Sandeep Shah states that the film hopes to cater to the urban English speaking audience in India as well as the Indian diaspora all over the world, along with the Western art house film goers. Here also, the audience that Dattani targeted were hardly the mainstream cinemagoers in India, but those that were ready to see something in English that is Indian and reflective, in some ways, of their own lives. Hence we see that Dattani wrote as well as directed his plays for the people of his milieu – to make them reflect on the things around them which is a real part of the society.

Through this play, Dattani has tried to stir up compassion for this class and to soften attitudes towards the gay. And the audience, which was Dattani's main concern, did go through the classic cathartic emotions of pity and fear. If Mahesh Dattani's plays perplex or disturb an audience, it is part of the effect of being successful in having taken his audience forward on a journey where they face the questions, scenes and issues that they may prefer not to see. His plays are not comfortable, nor were they ever meant to be. Defending his choice of theme, Dattani in the interview with Erin B. Mee says:

If we look at the statistics of a gay population in any given society, even if you look at it as a conservative five per cent (people put it at ten, but even if you take five per cent), with a population of 850 million people we're talking about 50 million people, and I think it's a real invisible issue. Almost all gay people are married in the conventional sense, so I think there are invisible issues which need to be brought out and addressed.

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