

Mahesh Dattani's *on a Muggy Night in Mumbai*:

A Queer Reading

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Abstract

The conspicuous absence of queer reading of the plays of Mahesh Dattani perhaps consolidates the assumptions that India is a tolerant nation and that urban middle class Indian society of which Dattani gives a potent portrayal in all his plays is inclusive in nature though preferring heterosexuality within marriage. A simplistic usage of the term 'queer' neglects its complex signification. When applied as a synonym for 'gay' or 'homosexual' the term queer fails to do justice to the political intervention it sets out to undertake and unfortunately ends up representing the very binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality that it tries to dissolve. Queer theory's emergence in Europe in the early years of 1990 was both an extension and a departure from gay and lesbian studies of the preceding decades. Deconstructive in spirit, queer movement encourages the study of gender and sexuality not from the angles created by patriarchal norms but from every possible side. The significance of queer theory remains in its examinations of social spaces, historical conventions and cultural institutions in the study of sexuality.

This is something Mahesh Dattani has done in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. In this play he shows that if gay/lesbian identities exist in the urban spaces in India it is due to not only the identical economic structure and patterns of social formations evolving in these spaces for an imitation of the West but also for the reason that human desires do not know boundaries and social sanctions.

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, troublant. The term 'queer' itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart ... queer ... is ...*

multiply transitive. The immemorial current that queers represents is anti-separatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange. (xii)

Again Michael Warner in the book *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* emphasises the implications of being ‘queer’ in the manner described below:

Every person who comes to queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatisation is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences.(xiii)

Regarding the distinction between the politics of gay and lesbian perspectives and the politics of queer theory, Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* writes:

Despite their similar challenge to the boundaries of normative heterosexuality, their differences surface in their attitude to power and their strategies for social change – as symbolized to some extent in their very act of nomination. While one might say that ‘gay’ was the name chosen by gay themselves, ‘queer’ was originally a term of abuse within the dominant discourse. Turning it into a self-nomination enacts one of the main modes of queer theory and practice: counter-discursive irony. Gay and lesbian politics have involved an activist, interventionist dimension, in part enabled by feminism as a program of both social change and cultural theory in part provoked by a need to mobilize when AIDS appeared on the scene; queer politics have, instead, meant enacting a constructivist model of identity, framing both sex and gender against essentializing approaches as results of ideological interpellation. Another way to put the difference would be to stress two of the defining features of queer, in contrast to gay: its preoccupations with discourse and performativity. Where gay studies focused on the relationship between lived historical experience and text, queer theory is interested in the intersection between various kinds of discourses. (179)

Therefore, queer theory and practice attempt with the help of irony to demystify, subvert and undo the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The understanding of the full import of the term ‘queer’ would be incomplete if the notion of ‘sexuality’ is not explained in the Foucauldian sense. In ‘Volume 1: An Introduction’ of *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault makes us cautious not to think sexuality “as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover” (105). For Foucault, sexuality is a name to a historical construct and not a furtive reality that

is difficult to grasp. Sexuality is “a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power”(106). Thus, Sexuality embodies the truth of sex and its pleasures. In his further elaboration Foucault expressed his views that relations of sex initiate a ‘*deployment of alliance*’ which he explained as “a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions” (106), and this deployment of alliance, which previously depended on the mechanisms of constraint and complex knowledge for its effective existence, engaged new apparatus in time without completely relinquishing the older ones. Foucault compared the deployment of sexuality with the deployment of alliance and found that the family is locus of “the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance” (108).

Though Michel Foucault was thinking about the western society while writing about sexuality his assertions that the family had been the place where sexuality had its privileged point of development and that affections, feelings and love had their first origin in the family are equally valid for any Indian society. The only form in which the family is allowed to exist in India is the heterosexual patriarchal family the primacy of which even the feminists in India, according to Nivedita Menon’s view in her essay “How Natural is Normal: Feminism and Compulsory Heterosexuality” in the anthology *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, hesitate to attack (36). Feminists in India do not critique the heterosexual, monogamous, patriarchal institution of marriage but they target practices that surround the institution of marriage: polygamy, dowry and domestic violence. In India we are repeatedly reminded in the family as well as in the society at large that heterosexual desire within marriage is the only normal form of desire to be nurtured by grown-ups. As Michel Foucault has argued in *The History of Sexuality*, the shameful and coerced expressions of so-called perverse sexual desire – what he terms ‘the confession of the flesh’ – are exercises in the pleasurable production of licit power and the powerful production of illicit pleasure (1:60-61). So the heterosexual power that oppresses and the homosexual pleasure often conceals itself are interrelated in complex ways. In order to produce true discourses concerning sexual desire queer theory seeks to deconstruct and destabilize the conventional binary of heterosexuality versus homosexuality.

The editors, Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, of the anthology *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* have put down their observation of the queer movement in India in the following words:

To speak of sexuality, and of same-sex love in particular, in India today is simultaneously an act of political assertion, of celebration, of defiance and of fear. For far too long, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have simply been the distant and hypothetical subjects of theories and ideas, looked upon either with pity, curiosity or disdain. At each turn, we are constantly described and defined by other people's words as they stand codified in religion, medicine, law, and in the silent assumptions that form the reality of our everyday lives. (2)

"Lesbian and gay studies in the Euro-American academy", writes Ruth Vanita in the Introduction to the book edited by her *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, "by and large take the view that same-sex desire has historically been unrepresented in South Asian languages, and that its representation appears only in the work of recent Indian writers in English, many of them diasporic" (2). Ruth Vanita believes that prior to the invention of identity markers such as 'invert', 'homosexual', 'lesbian', and 'heterosexual' by the late-nineteenth-century European sexologists' and psychologists', terms like 'ganymede', 'tribade', 'sapphist', and even 'lesbian' had been prevalent from the Renaissance onward to 'mark individuals habitually given to same-sex sexual relations'. In the context of South Asia, Ruth Vanita refers to Michael Sweet and Leonard Zwilling's demonstration of the formulation of sexual categories in Hindu and Jain texts as early as the sixth century B.C.E., and to the *Kama Sutra* (fourth century C.E.), where sexual relations between men are casually mentioned and classification of men who prefer men as "the third nature" is made and also to works of the scholars of the medieval Islamicate 'on male-male love and on the representation of female-female love by male writers (p. 1)' to conclude that as 'these essays have not been widely read beyond particular disciplines, such as South Asian studies, their implications for conceptualizing same-sex love have not become apparent to most theorists in lesbian and gay studies'(p.2).

However, Janaki Nair and Mary John in *A Question of Silence* argue that understanding of sexuality in India is largely informed and influenced by discourses of sexuality made in the West as 'we cannot but draw upon western theories, since they determine at an unconscious level, the reading practices we bring to bear on our work'(p. 7). Still they insist on the

importance of understanding the realities of lived experiences and on the articulation of that in discourses. Indian social structure is predominated by hetero-normative ideal regarding sexuality and this hetero-normative ideal in the patriarchal set-up creates ‘rigid notions of what it means to be a man or a woman, how the two should relate and the family unit that should result from such a relationship’ (Narain, Arvind and Goutam Bhan, 2005:3). Deviance from this ideal is seen as a threat to the moral texture of the society and to those in power who create norms, rules and structures of what is acceptable. As humans experience sexual desire in a variety of ways of which the heterosexual is the only one, those who fall outside of ‘normal’ are made to suffocate either by the state and laws or by social institutions like medical establishments and families. Unfortunately, even the 377 section of the Indian Penal Code, introduced by Lord Macaulay, does not recognise the existence of diversified sexual desire. The section reads:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation. Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.

Comment. This section is intended to punish the offense of sodomy, buggery and bestiality. The offense consists in a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by a person with a man, or in the same unnatural manner with a woman or by a man or woman in any manner with an animal.¹

Underlying assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia and the view that ‘normal’ sexual behaviour springs from nature work behind the formulation of this section. However, on the other side of the ‘normal’ remain a host of those that are ‘different’ – the story of queer people in India. The experience of this queer people has so far been written and lived along the fault-lines and margins of Indian history, but now the search for their moment of assertion is gaining momentum relinquishing the preoccupations of a small, mostly Western-educated coterie of people who had the privilege to narrate and describe the lives and experiences of these people.

This endeavour to re-tell the experience of people practicing alternate sexuality also encompasses an effort to give voice to a concept, an identity and a politics as “to speak of sexuality, and of same-sex love in particular, in India is simultaneously an act of political

assertion, of celebration, of defiance and of fear' (Bhan 2005: 2). The term 'queer' which has recently got the status of an academic descriptor, is historically a derogatory term used either to describe homosexual people in the West or to convey the meaning of 'odd' or 'strange' in the English language. In this way, the term itself bears with it a history of oppression. 'Queer', unlike the terms 'homosexual', 'lesbian', or 'gay', does not indicate an ontological category or substantive entity. Rather, as Judith Butler has argued in *Bodies that Matter*, it refers to the mobile and relative interests that are at work in what is now described as performative constitution of subjectivity. Consequently, 'queer' does not designate a particular direction of sexual desire but reinstates the heterogeneity and contingencies of the desire at work in the formation of any subjective identity. The queer perspective asserts an antagonism to essentialism and a corresponding radical social constructivism in relation to sexuality or sexual identity and it aims to deconstruct the ideologies that have produced the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality. Instead of normalising homosexuality, queer movement questions heteronormativity by rejecting its authority to judge queer people. Nivedita Menon, in this regard writes that in India the best response to question of sexuality has been in the form of respecting choice. But, "such a response", writes Menon, "leaves unquestioned heterosexuality as the norm – that is most of us are heterosexual, but there are others out there who are *either lesbian or gay or B [bisexual], T [transsexual], or K [kothi]*". Menon continues:

The alphabets proliferate endlessly outside the unchallenged heterosexual space. But if we recognise that this 'normal' heterosexuality is painfully constructed and kept in place by a range of cultural, bio-medical and economic controls, precisely in order to sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender, then we have to accept that all of us are – or have the potential to be – 'queer' (39).

This possibility of being 'queer' is well anticipated by Mahesh Dattani in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* which was first performed at the Tara Theatre, Mumbai, on 23 November 1998 and its film version titled *Mango Soufflé* was released in India on February 2002. The play centres round the idea that queerness is a reality to some people in India and the matrix of Indian society is not yet ready to accommodate people having alternate sexuality. The play not only maps the that try to render such people invisible but describes also how painful life can be when they are either forced to suffer alienation, disdain, ridicule and even persecution for practising their sexual desires in the patriarchal social set up, or to reorient themselves according to the expectations of the society. The play is "the first" one,

writes John McRae in “A Note on the Play” in Indian theatre to “handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates”(P. 45). Though Dattani avowedly denies his preoccupation with anything political, his presentation of the experiences of his characters bears political connotations. The realities of their non-normative experiences with the desire of their body contest with the embedded nature of heterosexism in our society and in their search for space free from the intruding tentacles of social repression they also focus on issues like the constructions of gender identities, sexual practices and sexual identities which are not often addressed in their entirety. The play unsettles the heterosexual assumption that people around us are heterosexual till they are proven otherwise. In making the presence of gay, lesbian and bisexual people visible on the stage, Dattani extends our understanding of gender and sexuality and stresses the importance to overcome the binaries of male/female and homosexuality/heterosexuality.

However, Indian patriarchal society invalidates any sexual desire outside the regime of heteronormativity and any representation of such desire is a taboo. Dattani admits to Anita Nair, “You love to talk about feminism because in a way that is accepted. But you can’t talk about gay issues because that’s not Indian. That doesn’t happen here” (24) Yet for Dattani the strict categorisation of same-sex desire into neat and often exclusionary boxes of identity categories like gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, kothi, hijra, camp and the like is a fallacy because if any indication of sexual desire has to be instantly codified or named our understanding of sexuality remains incomplete. What gets priority in the process is the codification or description itself. The present play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* through the speech of one of the characters, named Bunny Singh, indicates that an attitude of acceptance is necessary for these people to live:

BUNNY. All I am saying is that we would all forget about categorizing people as gay or straight or bi or whatever, and let them do what they want to do!(*Collected Plays*. 3: 88)

The above observation criticises the prevalent tendency of creating division among people in the name of sexuality as if other factors like race, religion and ethnicity are not enough. The motif of the play is, to some extent, revealed to a reader from the following 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)

Evidently, Kamlesh is a gay and Deepali is a lesbian. Their conversation indicates that only heterosexual marriage is accepted in the Indian society and that both of them are in search of companions, ready to reciprocate their love. What Dattani wants to convey is that love between persons of same sex is a reality that should be given its due recognition because it is as natural as heterosexual love between two consenting adults. The other characters of the play, namely Kiran who is the sister of Kamlesh and is a divorcee, Ed/Prakash who is a closet homosexual, lover of Kamlesh as Prakash and fiancé of Kiran as Ed, Sharad who is also a gay and the new lover of Kamlesh, Ranjit, a gay settled in England and working with HIV counsellors, Bunny Singh, a gay family man and a popular TV actor, and the Guard who is a partner in Kamlesh's sexual uphold the impression that though there is a variety of the gay, each gay person need to hide the truth of his sexual inclination for the fear of social disapprobation. Even within the gay in this play, there remain a subtle hierarchy: Kamlesh can exploit his guard to satisfy his sexual hunger and can have Sharad to fill the void when Prakash does not reciprocate him; Bunny Singh can easily prove how his popularity among the mass certainly allows him to get special attention; Ranjit can prove how more oppressive the situation is for the gay in India compared to the gay in England.

This subtle hierarchical positioning of the gay characters in this play proves that the queer movement need not be seen as homogenous and that each may have his individual notion regarding love. Gayle Rubin in her essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex", published in 1975 in R.R. Reiter's edition of *Towards an Anthropology on Women*, writes, "Hunger is hunger but what counts as food is culturally determined and obtained ... sex is sex but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained" (165). Nevertheless, what we witness in this play is exactly a validation of her observation along with a psychological understanding of sex: for some of the gay characters like Sharad sex can abide only with love while for some others like Kamlesh sexual commerce is possible even without an emotional bonding.

In tune with the politics of queer movement, the play is full of irony that wants to subvert any stable notion of identity. When Kiran says, "We need more men like Bunny to make this a better world." (76), the dramatic irony in her utterance is obvious. Kiran unaware of the dichotomy between the popular image of Bunny in society and his knowledge of the nature of his sexuality. Irony is also an aspect of the speech of Deepali when she says, "I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men! (60). Here, though the sincerity of Deepali is

beyond doubt for she cannot approve promiscuity, what she wishes is exactly the opposite of reality in India. Again when Kamlesh after paying the Guard for making love with him asks him, “Tum kya ... yeh sab ... paisa ke liye karte ho? (51), the Guard answers evasively and at last agrees with Kamlesh. The situational irony works at three different levels here. Initially the answer from the Guard reveals his original sexual inclination but realising that his truthfulness may implicate him, he takes the cue from Kamlesh’s question. Kamlesh who desperately wants to know whether the Guard also requires somebody like him to materialise his sexuality, fails to draw any straight answer from him and when Kamlesh, a little later admits that it is necessary for the Guard to cover his sexual orientation in the garb of necessity of earning something extra, the prevalent trend practising one’s sexuality in a hidden manner is indicated. The Guard is thought to be ‘straight’, his sexual encounter with Kamlesh is seen as an outcome of his poor economic condition, and Kamlesh is presented as if he insisted him to ‘do’ sex.

Thus, working with queer realities Dattani has opened a whole new way of looking at gender and sexuality and in the process of doing that he also demonstrated how religion, biology and medicine want to suffocate people with alternate sexuality. Kamlesh in the present play seeks medical assistance when he miserably fails to forget Prakash. But what he gets from the psychiatrist is a suggestion formulated by the heteronormative regime:

KAMLESH. I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while, I believed him. Because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change the society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself. (69)

Evidently, this is the general plight of the homosexuals in India and homophobia is a feature in the psyche of most of the Indians. The same experience was awaiting Prakash/Ed when he sought the assistance from religion to overcome his gayness so that he could marry Kiran. In this way, he wants to prove to the world that he is a heterosexual to get acceptance in the society. In the words of Kamlesh, “He goes to the church every week now. They put him on to a psychiatrist. He believes his love for was the work of devil. Now the devil has left him.” (85).

Soon it will be clear that Prakash/Ed wants to derive advantage from his marriage with Kiran by using the relationship as a useful mask for meeting Kamlesh. Irrational and inhuman social stigmatisation towards homosexuality, in this way gets approbation from religion.

Sharad appears to believe in internal hormonal imbalance for the desire of his friends including him (60). To be both Indian and gay or lesbian is not possible and that is why everybody except Kiran has to wear the mask of a heterosexual to avoid ostracization, but in doing so not everybody can be true to himself or herself.

Prior to Dattani's dramatization of the lives of the gay and the lesbian, we lived with the complacency of the notion of sexuality as a biological reality and never questioned why all bodies had to necessarily fit into being male or female. Dattani has shown us that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a particular sex and a particular gender, there are people who do not identify with gender categories and there are many kinds of people and many kinds of realities that demand a humane atmosphere, space and rights.

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