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The Plight of Homosexuals in Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

Abstract: Mahesh Dattani, the famous Indian playwright through his plays presents the issues which are deemed as taboos, the issues which need to be identified, addressed, accepted and to be solved without preconception and contempt. The cultural, religious and social structure of Indian society has been biased which has not only made the social structure feeble but also a suffocated one where the individuality of a person may be a child, woman, transgender, eunuch, homosexuals is not recognised and thereby marginalising them. The society always eager to curb the expressions of the homosexuals. Dattani has boldly presented the plight of the homosexuals through his writings. Through his plays he urges for homosexuals' identity and also to deal with their identity crisis. The traits the persons show or the sexual inclination they have is natural and for that they have to deal with the identity crisis, suppression of their emotion and guilt. They try to find their own common group for their revelation of true

identity. Through his play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani interrogates and demands answers on the treatment meted out to Homosexuals.

Keywords: Homosexual, India, Society, Identity, Crisis, Plight

Introduction

The representation of the changing aspects of the society has been the motive of the literature and so also it has been the mute observer of human tendencies that are changing rapidly and recognising its imprints on the world literature for their identity, recognition and acceptance. The literature from half of eighteenth century has been giving cues of a new stream that dealt with alternate sexuality and in nineteenth century it gave affirmation to the existence of consciousness of a homosexual individuality.

The terminology –‘homosexual’ has its origin from Greek word ‘homos’ which means ‘same’ signifying sexual acts and affections between same sexes. According to many studies on homosexuality, sexual orientation of an individual is not attached to his sex or socially constructed gendered implications. It is the biology of the individual which is the chief reason of one’s characteristic traits that cannot be changed. It is more associated with the individual’s psychic inclination towards the sex, sexuality and beliefs with which he is born that cannot be changed. These fundamental aspects of self are the factors of determining the sexual orientation of a person as heterosexual or homosexual.

India is growing at a very fast pace and the changes taking place in the society is brought forward through literature. Mahesh Dattani is the first dramatist to mention the predicament of homosexuals in his plays. He was criticized and also appreciated for his endeavour. Dattani’s plays decode the sexual relationships of sexual minorities in Indian society, which is contemptuously looked upon.

Plight of homosexuals

Dattani's play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is the first full-fledged drama based on the theme of homosexuality. It deals with the complexities of the lives of main character Kamlesh and his partner, Ed. In the play the protagonist arranges a gathering of his friends at his flat. Among all the guests gathered there, Sharad and Deepali are the ones who are very happy and satisfied in their own sexuality. Sharad is seen as a jolly and flamboyant person happily singing the gay anthem, "So many times we have to pay. For having fun and being gay"(56). He is also specific about his sexual orientation and asserts himself as a gay. When Ed another gay character assumes that Sharad might be a bisexual, he very clearly replies that, "No, I am not bisexual, I am as gay as goose"(100). Although Sharad's relationship with Kamlesh has ended, he is there for him to help him out.

Deepali is a happy lesbian who is often seen talking to her partner, Tina on phone. At Kamlesh's flat, during friendly exchanges of argument with Ranjit she proudly says to the gathering of gays, "I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank god I am woman" (66). She is proud of her feminist identity and also supports homosexuality. She understands the internal turmoil of homosexuals and supported the gay men and says, "I am all for gay men's cause. Men only deserve men!"(60). Here Sharad and Deepali are the courageous homosexuals who show their strength to come out of the closet and confidently flaunt their identities before the world.

Apart from Sharad and Deepali, Kamlesh and Ranjit have also identified and accepted themselves as gay but are quit unhappy. On one side Kamlesh is unhappy on account of his broken relationship with his homosexual partner Ed who is ashamed of his identity and aspires to be a straight man. The matter gets complicated as Ed gets engaged to Kiran who is sister of Kamlesh. Kamlesh finds himself in crisis and he fights with his irresistible passion

towards Ed and has let him go. As N. Sharda Iyer opines, “Homosexuality can enslave as well as liberate” (Iyer: 57).

Kamlesh is liberated of his inner turmoil regarding the sexual orientation when he meets Ed as he had found a partner in Ed to share his feelings and thoughts initially but now he is heart-broken. It is a severe blow to the homosexuals when the trust between the couple is shaken as they have to deal with triple agony – with the society, with the broken relationship and also the turmoil taking place inside them. To come out of his grief he has no other option than to take psychotherapy sessions.

Dattani portrays the society which condemns homosexuality and forces an individual to live in oblivion. When such spaces are denied homosexuals often tend to revolt or take an easy route to escape and live in more accepted and receptive social space. To live free life, they even leave their own country and settle in other country like Ranjit , who settles in UK and is living happily with his English lover.

The society has always approved and socialised the heterosexual way of living. The sexual way which can reproduce is considered to be the natural way and the sexual act between the same sex is considered as sodomy or erotic. The patriarchy has always ignored the reality behind the sexuality, which depends on the self and cannot be changed or modified. Beena Agarwal has aptly expressed her views on the conflict of heterosexuality and the internal compulsive forces of a homosexual person:

The basic idea of homosexuality is against the nature instinctive behaviour. It is deemed unethical. Homosexuality is a guilt and heterosexuality is ideal. It results in terrible anguish and suffering. It represents conflict between internal creative principle and social compulsive forces and it subsequently results in the strong upheaval of human emotions appropriate to move the theatre with extreme flow of human energy. (Agarwal: 47)

The principles and codes of conduct of the society are rigid and hard to come up with. The social expectations and assertion has made the lives of homosexuals very difficult. The individual who has identified himself as a homosexual has already fought with his inner self and has come out of it but to fight against the society seems a challenging job that would gain nothing but lose one's self-respect.

In the play, Ed who is Edwin Prakash Matthews, is a gay but whose craving for societal acceptance has a severe impact on his mind. The problem starts when Ed finds himself in the whirlpool of identity crisis and fall in the web of the world and alter himself to fit accordingly in the concepts of the society where there is less acceptance for the homosexuals and to accept oneself as gay is ridiculed and rejected. Although he found a great partner in Kamlesh, yet due to his inner sufferings and societal pressure, he rejects his life with Kamlesh and opts for the straight way of living. As he admits before Kamlesh, "I am not happy with being who I am. And I want to try to be like the rest" (92).

In his efforts to become a straight person, Ed adopts the religious and psychiatric ways. Kamlesh observes that the society is also helping Ed to become a heterosexual. As he tells his friends, "He goes to the church every week now. They put him on to a psychiatrist. He believes his love for me was the act of the devil. Now the devil has left him" (85). The social unacceptance forces Ranjit, another character, to emigrate in UK. He is a staunch believer of the fact that in this country, one cannot live openly without criticism about their homosexual identities.

The society has never approved the gay relationships and treated homosexuality medically, religiously and psychologically as a disease but treating a conscience which lies beyond our control, which is not changeable is pathetic. The rejection of the reality of his identity affects Ed and also others who are associated with him. Sonia Iyengar opines , "Clearly there is no reconciliation in his mind and his capriciousness in this regard is inimical

to all those who come in contact with him. Such wavering has a collateral effect on his partner Kamlesh” (Iyengar: 143).

The break up with Ed leaves Kamlesh depressed and has a severe effect in his psyche so much so that he could not connect with anyone else than Ed. Kamlesh too has tried to fix his broken heart by visiting a psychiatrist which he calls as a ‘straight homophobic psychiatrist’ (69). But the biased psychiatrist was of no help to Kamlesh as he suggests Kamlesh to reorient himself because acceptance by society is an impossible task. Dattani has projected in the play that how the patriarchal domination hounds a person who is struggling with his inner self but finally succumbs to the values and norms which are socially acceptable. But those who, very courageously have accepted their sexuality also face the burns of the society by getting a negative treatment from the society. Kamlesh who goes to see a psychiatrist in search of cure for his depression, gets a morality lesson by encouraging him to shed his sexual orientation. The homosexuals are in search for help to get out of the depression of broken relationships but they find themselves on the periphery of the society who urges them to shed their real self and become the member of normal society.

To get the respect and acceptance from the society the homosexuals mould themselves as a heterosexual but they practise homosexuality in their own secluded areas. They live openly in their peer groups and try to live a dual life where they get respect from both the worlds. Kamlesh’s friend Bunny is happy to be a celebrity on television having wife and children. He too advises Kamlesh to marry to get out of depression. Bunny preaches to all the friends, “Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can’t find you. You political gays deny yourself the basic instinct of camouflage” (70). In this effort to keep up to their necessities, homosexuals have to lie to the society, to the near and dear ones. But the frustration of the failure to live openly and satisfactorily has a deep impact on their

life. Bunny who lives a life of heterosexual accepts that he is guilty and unhappy in his pretended life. Bunny says:

I know. Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me—the real me—are present here in this room. And you all hate me for being such a hypocrite. The people who know me are the people who hate me. That is not such a nice feeling. I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either. (102-103)

Dattani through the play depicts the plight of homosexuals who are left with nothing but despair and regret. The society modulates the feelings of an individual by imposing their own norms of sexuality and those who don't assign themselves to the prescribed norms are not considered as normal. The views expressed by T. Marx depict the miseries of homosexuals in Indian society. He opines:

The main problem that remains for Indian homosexuals is traditional thinking about marriage and posterity. Young gay people are often forced into heterosexual marriage by their family. More and more sociologists and psychologists are educating the public by stressing that homosexuality is not a disorder but a natural phenomenon, that forced marriage is harmful to all parties involved, and that denying the existence of a gay population will be harmful to society as a whole. (Marx: 86)

The suppression of their identity has affected their relationship and their sexual needs urges them to seek its fulfilment beyond their attachments to their partners. They keenly follow their heart's relation but can't control their bodily needs which forces them to resort to adultery. Kamlesh lives alone after his break up with Ed and Sharad. But his inability to control his attached emotions towards Ed depresses him. He establishes relationship with

strangers for his sexual pleasure to come out of the depression, he admits to his friends, “for the past week, I have been picking up strangers—bringing them over—hoping to connect” (70).

Most of the homosexuals experience a vacuum in their life by trying to be one they are not. Ed apologises to Kiran for deceiving her, “I am ... sorry, I did not mean to harm you, I only wanted to live” (110). Ed loses both the relationships. Neither Kamlesh nor Kiran is with him now. He is dejected by his own decisions. Ed finds no solution to his agony. He is on the periphery where he cannot accept his sexuality in which he is immersed so much and does not want to shed the sexuality with which he finds no adherence to. Ed asks Kamlesh, “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?” (111).

Ed too like Bunny succumbs to the expectations of the society to fulfil their roles as a normal being but it results in depression and regrets. To be worthy in the views of society is everybody’s ultimate aim for which homosexuals try to modify themselves in vain and face frustrations. Dattani represents the dilemma of the homosexuals, the cry of their psyche on one hand and the fear of ostracism in the eyes of the society on the other which makes them take up the path which is alien to them but the passion and identity which is ignored sprouts up anytime and leads to frustration and despair.

The homosexual community expects from the society to let them live their own way and accept them as they are and not by changing them who they are not. They are tired of being invisible. In the play Kamlesh has a conversion with Ed in his mind where he asserts that Ed cannot keep his identity invisible and he has to come out to people. He asserts, “let them talk. If two men want to love one another, what’s the harm?” (91). Kiran also expects that law should accept the marriage of gay people so that they do not suffer.

Conclusion

Dattani has thus daringly presented a subject like homosexuality in literature, as homosexuality is the very much part of the mainstream society. Through his plays he has daringly put forth the plight of homosexuals by voicing their difficulties and dilemma to face the world with the accepted identity. He stresses on the efforts they have to take to assert themselves in the society. Dattani in his play expresses a genuine concern for the homosexuals. He dives deep in their lives and tries to discern their agonies. The attitude of the people towards homosexuals and Lesbians are untold tales of anguish of subalterns. The fear of stigma on the entire family makes one reject the identity of the person in the family also. Sexual minority's desire is never taken into consideration.

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