

Alternative Sexualities and “Other” Gender Identities in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani (“on A Muggy Night in Mumbai”, “Bravely Fought the Queen” and “Seven Steps Round the Fire”): A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Indian society, from times immemorial, has had certain reservations about alternative sexualities and third gender identities, viewing them from the stereotypical viewpoint of being a disease and it is no wonder that literature too, being but a mirror of society has always treated them as taboo topics. Mahesh Dattani had been the first Indian playwright to receive the Sahitya Academy award and his plays have always been different and revolutionary in ways more than one. One of the reasons for his outstanding popularity among the common man as well as students and critics of literature alike is that he has given a voice to certain sections of the society which had forcibly been deprived of one---like the gays, lesbians as well as the members of the transgender communities. He has thrown the stereotypical and clichéd notions that society had had about them into the nearest dustbin and has deconstructed and reconstructed their identity from an entirely new perspective. How he has done so is what I propose to analyse in my research paper with reference to three plays of his “*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*”, “*Bravely Fought the Queen*” and “*Seven Steps Round the Fire*”

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, Alternative Sexuality, Gay, Transgender, Eunuchs

Introduction

“I wish more people would explore aspects of sexuality rather than just Sex, to that extent I am alone.”

Mahesh Dattani

In a country like India whose linguistic and cultural variations are so vast, marginalisation of people on the basis of caste, religion, community, gender and even sexuality is a major problem that threatens the very foundations of the Indian society. Till today, being a gay or a lesbian is a huge taboo in our country and is even considered as some kind of disease or deformity and the transgender, or the eunuchs are considered, not as the “third gender”, but as some kind of hateful beasts unfit for existence in the civilised human society . Consequently, since literature is a mirror of society, it is of little wonder that Indian English literature has also largely avoided dealing with such “tabooed” topics of alternative sexuality and “other” gender identities.

Mahesh Dattani, the first playwright to receive a Sahitya Academy Award has probably been a trendsetter in this respect and through his iconic plays like “*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*”, “*Do the Needful*”, “*Seven Steps Round the Fire*” and “*Bravely Fought the Queen*” gives homosexuals and members of the transgender communities in India a voice to articulate their hidden fears and desires which had so long been suppressed by the homophobic traditional Indian society.

Among all his plays dealing with the forcible suppression of homosexual desires by social norms, “*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*” (which was later adopted as a film *Mango Soufflé*) is perhaps the best and

most complex, because it discusses with varying layers of complexity the socio-psychological identity crisis of the gays who are torn between the social masks that they are forced to put up and their natural (and socially unacceptable) sexual desires, their conscience and social suppression. John McRae, in the introduction to the play writes:

"And the themes of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deserve to touch the whole society and to be touched by it. It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre 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)

The play, whose actions take place on more than one level, juxtaposes the contrasting scenarios of a flat where there is a gathering of gays going on, on one hand, (which is the seat of all the action) and of a wedding going on off-stage from which the sounds of celebration can be clearly heard. The wedding is the sanctification and social acceptance of a heterosexual relationship and "the whole world acknowledges two people who enter a union pact, so they have to stick by that." ² (p. 72) However, the social stamp of validity is denied to the homosexuals and this causes the homosexuals to attempt to negate and suppress their inherent homo-eroticism. Kiran, the heroine of the play says: "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry" and the reply that she gets from Ranjit sums up the essence of the entire play:

"They do, Only not to the same sex."²(p.98)

We meet a host of gay characters in the play and each of them represents a different façade and a different aspect of the homosexual community. They are all extremely complex characters who cannot be bracketed together and be judged by any single formula simply because of their outward gender preferences. Each of them has his own unique personality with his own fears and fantasies, cares and concerns, conscience and consciousness. They have gathered together at the invitation of Kamlesh who lives as a "recluse" in the heart of Bombay and is unable to forget his lover Ed/Prakash. Kamlesh is not a closet homosexual and hence, the very thought of hiding his sexual orientation from the world for fear of ostracism disgusts him:

"How long shall we continue to hide? We can't hide forever!" ²(p.91)

But his gay lover Ed has left him because he wanted to hide his gay identity behind the garb of a heterosexual one and therefore, had intended to marry Kiran, who was Kamlesh's sister. This, according to him, would enable him to keep in touch with Kamlesh through Kiran without revealing the homo-erotic within him to the public sphere, because the church and his psychiatrist had convinced him that his carnal desire for Kamlesh had been "the work of the devil. Now the devil has left him." (p.85) Ed's assurance to Kamlesh is that "Nobody would know. Nobody would care...I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me."² (p.105) It is what Bunny Singh, another homosexual character in the play calls "Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the

surroundings." ²(p. 70) What becomes clear from the above words is the identity crisis of a gay who does not want to be publicly stamped with the social stigma of "homosexuality" Ed even defends himself in his intentions of pretending to be "straight" in his arguments at the party when he says:

"Look around you. Look outside...there are real people men and women out There."² (p.99)

What emerges from his words is almost an existential crisis—"To be or not to be [a publicly acknowledged gay]" because, in the eyes of traditional Indian society the desire of a man for another man is conflicting with the ideas of masculinity. After all, a homosexual cannot be a "real man".

It is this desire of homosexuals to be considered a "real man" that ruins, not only their own lives, but often also that of another heterosexual woman who is often tricked and sometimes even forced to tie the knot with the homosexual and provide the much needed "cover" for the gay relationship, thereby masking it from society. This deception and betrayal features in yet another of Dattani's plays---"*Bravely Fought the Queen*". Like Ed, Nitin Trivedi in "*Bravely Fought the Queen*" marries Alka so that he could continue his homosexual relationship with her brother Praful. Before marriage, Kiran had come to know that her would-be Ed is none other than the homosexual partner of her own brother and the fraudulent marriage is aborted. However, the same information, regarding the homosexual marriage between her husband and her elder brother reaches Alka too late, after her marriage and by then it was too late to make amends. Nitin himself confesses to a sleeping Alka how the homosexual relation between the two of them (Nitin and Praful) had been continuing ever since Alka's maiden days:

"Those times when I used to spend the night at your place. And he [Praful] would sleep on a mattress on the floor, beside me...When all lights went out, I would lie on the cot. Waiting for at least an hour...And I would go back to Praful's room...and kneel...And at times he would wake up immediately. At other times I would lean forward to look at him. Close enough for my breath to fall gently on his face. And he would open his eyes...I loved him too. He is...attractive. And he responded." ¹(p. 101)

Since no normal conjugal relation was possible with her husband, her sufferings were immense and it is clear that her husband had not even the least bit of love or concern for her and she was no more important to him than a useless piece of furniture in the Trivedi household, whose presence or absence made no difference to him:

"...Alka can stay here, or go away, or drink herself to death, I don't care. It doesn't make a difference to me!" ²(p.305)

Uncared for and wanted, as she sees her whole life being destroyed in front of her eyes and all her dreams and aspirations crumbling like a house of cards, she drenches herself in liquor and becomes an alcoholic, so that she doesn't have to face the reality. She considers every person (including her mother-in-law Baa) who could have had an inkling of Nitin's attraction to men and had yet not warned her or had made any attempt to stop the marriage a part of this treacherous plan in which she had been used as a scapegoat and holds all of them responsible for her miserable and childless existence, as is proved by her snide remarks that Nitin had not been a "competent husband" or her releasing of her pent-up

frustration by engaging in fruitless verbal duets at her mother-in-law: "Alka: You [her mother-in-law] can win so easily with me because you have two sons to protect you.

Baa: Yes! I have been blessed with two sons. I thank God.

Alka: And I? I have been cursed because I don't [read can't] have children.

That's what you want to say." ²(p.284)

But the irony remains in the fact that Nitin had, while ruining Alka's life for the sake of his own happiness, never thought that his own life would also be destroyed in the process and the happiness that he had been hankering after would remain unattainable to him. Nitin's life of homosexuality in the garb of heterosexuality, because he too, in spite of being a homosexual himself had inherited society's homophobia, was gradually becoming claustrophobic and unbearable to him:

"Praful tricked me into marrying her...I hate him now...get him out of my life."² (p.305)

Somewhere at the back of his mind lies an awareness that he and Alka were on the same footing because both had been "tricked" into marriage by the same person and it was due to Praful that he was now reduced to fulfilling his sexual fantasies with random auto-rickshaw drivers or making it out with casual men lovers on the office sofa or the outhouse and Alka with a non-existent substitute cook Kanhaiyya. In this context, it would not be beside the point to quote a section from Nitin's monologue to the sleeping Alka:

"That was a game he played. And I-I was caught in it...He told me to get married...How could I? And to whom?...He told me that you knew. And he had told you...about me. And that it didn't matter to you. You only wanted the security of a marriage. He...told me everything would work work out fine...But you didn't know! He tricked you! I-I...am sorry. It wasn't my fault."¹ (p. 101)

The question of whose fault it had been is really irrelevant in this case because it cannot change the fact that Alka's life had been ruined and she had been doomed to suffer all through her life due to no fault of hers.

In his play "*Seven Steps Round the Fire*", which was a radio play commissioned by the BBC, Dattani shifts away from homosexuality to explore yet another topic extremely relevant to the modern Indian society yet largely ignored by Indian English literature—the concept of the "other" gender identities by portraying the plight of the communities of the eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu. The degenerated and almost animal-like condition in which the eunuchs are forced to dwell by false and un-scientific social conventions is portrayed by Dattani with such vivacity that it seems as if blood from his veins is almost flowing into ours. The eunuch community in India have, for ages immemorial, been locked within certain specific and stereotypical patterns of existence characterised by their mode of speaking, clapping and singing. Through this play, Dattani explores the emotional and existential crises of these eunuchs which is partly because of neglect

and the social stigma attached with them from their very existence and partly because of the multiple layers of power domination within the Indian society.

The play centres around the murder of a eunuch, Kamala. Uma, who is the wife of the Superintendent of police, Suresh and the daughter of a Vice-Chancellor investigates the real condition of the *hijra* community in India in the process of probing into the supposed murder of Kamala by another member of the transgender community--- Anarkali. As Uma continues unveiling the real and harsher truth behind a seemingly open-and-shut murder case, she comes face to face with another naked truth--- the inhuman, pathetic and ostracised life lead by the neutral gender in India. Anarkali is deliberately referred to as "it" by Munuswamy, the constable, with additional emphasis, thereby stripping her of any gender identity whatsoever and relegating her to the position of a non-human entity. He asserts:

"She! Of course it will talk to you.

We will beat it up, if it doesn't"² (emphasis mine, p.233)

Uma's question of why Anarkali had been put into the male prison draws forth a nonchalant answer from her husband:

"They are all castrated men."

Uma's helplessness in establishing that human identity is far above sex determined social identities shows the force of the established social norms. Anarkali's firm assertion "I didn't kill her [Kamala]. She was my sister, would you kill your sister?" proves that the determining passions of love and friendship are no less present in them than in the other two genders. Gradually, the secret behind Kamala's murder, for which Anarkali had been framed, is unfolded and it stands thus--a certain powerful politician Mr. Sharma's son Subbu had fallen in love with Kamala and the couple had got married secretly, but Mr. Sharma, unable to accept his son's marriage with a member of the transgender community, had got Kamala burnt to death by contract killers and had laid the entire blame on Anarkali, and society, as always, was ready to believe any transgender guilty of any heinous crime under the sun. Munuswamy, the constable responds to this by saying "marry? Who would want to marry...? Tchee! What kind of people are there in this world ².(p.263) He represents the traditional social consciousness which finds the very thought of the marriage between a man and a member of the transgender community repulsive and nauseating.

Thus the social taboos surrounding homosexuality and transgender are deconstructed by Dattani in his plays "*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*", "*Bravely Fought the Queen*" and "*Seven Steps Round the Fire*" from social, economic as well as sexual perspectives. It is in this context that these three plays of Dattani cease to be works of fiction any longer. Rather, they become sagas of human life that touch us and burn us.

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