

Homosexuality: A Taboo in Indian Society

(A Comparative Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friends Story* and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*)

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Abstract

Sexuality, apart from procreative concerns, is considered as a vital factor in the development of human beings as it cements the relationship and association between two individuals of same or different sex. Society sees homosexuality as a sin or a crime but in actual it seems more pure and sacred than heterosexuality. Homosexuality is a social reality that cannot be condemned as unnatural or maladjustment. It is just a distinct form of sexuality. Homosexuals, the marginalized section of the society, always feel socially excluded in India. Though this homosexuality was not much conspicuous in the works of the writers of the past but now the discrimination on the basis of sexuality is relatively grabbing the attention of contemporary writers and they are raising the issue of homosexuality in their literary works.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Relationship, Sexuality, Distinct, Social, Exclusion.

Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are acknowledged as the most radical writers in Indian English writing. Vijay Tendulkar has the credit to produce the first Indian play in the 70's dealing with homosexuality where the protagonist was not a patriarchal male but a teenager girl that too a lesbian. After a gap of 9 years, Mahesh Dattani came with *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) where he exposed the dilemmas and problems faced by homosexuals. Thus it can be said that both are the leaders who have augmented the horizon of Indian English drama by showcasing the bold and daring issue of homosexuality. Both the plays mirror the miserable plight of homosexuals and the difficulties which they face being homosexuals with different approach. Both of them are famous for presenting the reality through their thought-provoking plays where they seem to urge the audience not to just silently sit, watch and enjoy but to think and act.

Objective of the Study

The present paper aims to discuss the homosexual relationship in Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story* and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. An attempt has been made to explore how the homosexuals are treated in the society, whether they are socially accepted or ignored, what problems they have to face and why.

Review of Literature

India, being a secular country, can proudly brag about its diversity. It has people from different race, religion, caste and creed and of different sexuality too. Human personality is an amalgamation of several factors, out of which sexuality is an important one which helps in grooming the human personality. All the cultures and civilizations in the world have shown its interest towards the sexual activities. It can be said from the ethnological history that homosexuality was very common and pervaded all over the world in people's culture or heredity. Some societies acknowledged it while others condemned it. Thus it has received diverse and mixed reactions in its journey so far. If we talk about liberal societies, homosexuality was socially approved and treated as normal as the heterosexuality while it was

considered unnatural, inhuman and a maladjustment in non-liberal societies and received strong disapproval from society too.

Full Text

Homosexuality is considered as a big taboo in Indian society. In both the plays homosexuality is the main theme. In *A Friend's Story*, Mitra does not get any help or support from her family. When her parents get to know about her sexual inclination towards Nama, they start making out plans to get her married soon. On the other hand, after realizing her deviant sexuality, Mitra herself becomes impatient and worried because she knows that her parents would never support her. In spite of several efforts made by her parents, she did not leave Nama. Moreover her being homosexual would not let her uphold a normal heterosexual relationship either.

Dattani unlike Tendulkar favours the homosexual community in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. When Kiran gets to know about her brother's feelings for Prakash, she does not get angry. Instead she supports him and also requests that "they (society) would allow gay people to marry." (CP 98) It proves that she has been a staunch supporter of her brother all through her life and does not bother about the cultured and genteel people of the society. A common thing which was observed in both the plays was that the society did not approve homosexuality and consequently they had to suffer in their lives.

It was a challenging task for both the playwrights to depict the awful condition of homosexuals. It is generally argued that whether the social conventions are formulated to maintain balance and equilibrium or to bring disharmony in one's personal life since those conventions are sometimes forced upon him/her. The mental conflict of homosexuals due to social conventions has been portrayed by both of them. The gays and the lesbians are shown to be torn between social obligations and personal needs. They also find a great mismatch between their own principles and socially acknowledged principles.

Vijay Tendulkar in *A Friend's Story* presents individual's helplessness to conform to the rigid norms of societal culture and tradition. Say for instance whether it's Mitra or Bapu, both feel themselves under the clutches of social and moral codes. Both of them could not go against the society's norms and behaviour and consequently failed in their personal lives. Mitra committed suicide; the only one solution of her sexual urge while her best friend Bapu could not help her in getting through this crucial phase of her life. It happened just because of the social mindset as "Bapu tries to construct her life in the conventional paradigms." (Aggarwal168) Thus he landed himself to a secluded life i.e. a life without her.

Dattani too questions the deplorable state of affairs of homosexuals in the society in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. According to him, only the society is responsible for it as the homosexuals, in fact the whole LGBT community has not yet been accepted. They are born to be put at the fringes and to lead an isolated life in their confined spaces. All the characters are homosexuals but some of them do not

dare to expose their actual sexuality just because of the society. Bunny Singh feigns his sexuality by getting married just to survive in the heterosexual world. Pranav Joshipura speaks about the actual state of Bunny Singh as; "His mind is torn by a conflict between the desire to be truthful and the need to hide the truth for the fear of social disapprobation." (Joshipura 11)

Similarly Ranjit is a gay who gets settled in England because he knows that he will not be accepted in Indian society. Prakash also plans to get married with Kiran. Though Kamlesh is not ashamed of his sexuality yet he tries to avoid his attraction towards Prakash. Society's cultures and traditions are so overpowering that the homosexuals just cannot think of living normally. Out of despair, they prefer to commit suicide rather than to survive with the main stream society with their self-devised rules. For them to follow those rules are worse than committing suicide. In a way, Dattani actually criticizes the so called pious social institution of marriage where he presents the hypocrisy which is much more than that is considered in homosexual relation. Even in the second instance the guard of the society warns Kamlesh; "Society waaloko sab kal complaint karne wale hain! ...Abhiaap logon kakyahoga? Aapyeh sab khullamkhullakartehain?" (CPT 105)

In Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story*, the protagonist, Sumitra is a lesbian character who is sexually attracted towards Nama. Based on the real character of Mitra whom he had seen performing in a play in the mid 50's, Sumitra is shown as a character possessing masculine traits because of physical imbalance. She breaks all the traditions and does not believe in the societal norms. The rest of the characters are heterosexual and belong to the so called acceptable and dominant section of the society. On the other hand, Dattani focuses on the pathetic condition of whole community of gays in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Kamlesh is the central character who is deceived by his male partner Prakash as the later feels ashamed of his sexuality publicly. As far as the other characters are concerned, they all are homosexuals except Kiran and they are reluctant and conceal their real sexual orientation which means that they are not true to themselves. But it does not mean that they should be neglected and ill-treated. In fact Mahesh Dattani appeals the audience that they should respect and support them. Homosexuals should also be given freedom to choose and marry the person of his own choice. Though Dattani's characters possess courage and conviction yet they have to suffer in the society to live their life because of its culture and tradition. In an interview given to The Hindu, Dattani comments:

I talk about the areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand this space. They live on the fringes of society and are not looking for acceptance but are struggling to grab as much fringe space for themselves as they can. (March 9, 2003)

But the main difference between the protagonists of both the plays can be pointed out in terms of their nature. Kamlesh has accepted the truth and has left himself to his fate i.e. he adopted withdrawal policy while Mitra is shown as more aggressive, adamant and too rigid just like a male. Both of them presented the chaos in the mindset of the characters. Beena Aggarwal points out:

The difference between the homosexuality of Mitra in *A Friend's Story* and Kamlesh in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is that Kamlesh out of the considerations of the sentiments of her sister makes desperate efforts to suppress his love for Prakash but Mitra ignores all personal relationship out of the intensity of her passion. (Aggarwal180)

In both the plays, one can easily notice the bond of friendship which all the characters share with one another. In Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, all Kamlesh's friends have unity and come together to help him when he gets emotionally disturbed. Initially Prakash and Kamlesh were the gay partners and used to love each other intensely. However after their breakup, Kamlesh could not cope up and he invites all his gay friends at his flat. They all viz. Sharad, Bunny, Ranjit, and Deepali come and try to solve his problem.

Likewise Tendulkar too presents a strong friendship between Mitra and Bapu in spite of different sexuality in *A Friend's Story*. Mitra always gets support from Bapu even when her parents desert her. She is left to her fate and leads rest of her life in women's hostel. RohiniHattangady's words in 'Note on *A Friend's Story*' clearly describe their friendship as: ". . . it is impossible to picture Mitra without Bapu, and Bapu without Mitra." (CPT 593)

Both the playwrights explore the lack of self-identity in the lives of their central character. In a traditional society like India where it is much difficult even for a heterosexual to find his identity, one can imagine the problems that a homosexual faces. It is said that gender is not produced but is constructed because of social conventions and practices. It depends upon society as well as it's all the other powerful institutions like college, church, temple, family etc. which promote the concept of gender. Tendulkar showed his protagonist struggling between her actual 'self' and her identity which has been created by the society. The lesbian character Mitra is portrayed in a state of mental chaos. By doing so he seems to demonstrate that it is very difficult and challenging for a homosexual to live in a society which is not congenial at all. Mitra finds her surroundings completely hostile and different from others. Judith Butler quotes;

It is possible to make a choice since we become the gender we perform. In other words, gender identity is not fixed and permanent. It is a sequence of acts and utterances and there are ways of doing one's identity which may upset the conventional binary oppositions of masculine/feminine or straight/queer. (Butler 131)

Dattani too depicts the identity crisis of Kamlesh along with his other homosexual friends. After being deceived by Prakash, he feels completely

lonely and depressed. To fill this mental and physical void, he makes his relationship with Sharad and the security guard. John McRae compares the outside and the inside worlds as:

The outside world is always pressing in – the heat, the sounds, the people pestering Bunny, the kids who find the photo. Very few dramatists are able to give this sense of a whole society touching the participants in the on-stage drama– it recalls Ibsen at his social best. (A Note on the Play, 45) Not only Kamlesh but also his friends struggle to find their self-identity. They are torn between the outside society and their own conscience. This contradiction between the inner self and the society leads them to the lack of self-identity. Thus both the playwrights project the latent fears and feelings of the homosexuals sensitively in their plays.

To give an Indian flavour to his plays, Dattani amalgamates English and Hindi languages significantly. He even does not hesitate to use the most offensive words which are disliked by the people openly. He openly uses words like faggot, dickhead, pansy, love bites etc. which are very common in gay vocabulary to present the actual feeling experienced by them. At several instances of the play, he also makes use of Hindi and English songs and refers to a tv serial too to create an amusing effect. The title of the serial *YehHaiHamaraParivaar* itself suggests how much values are ascribed by the Indians to their families.

On the other hand, Vijay Tendulkar, though violent, was not as bold as Dattani in terms of diction of his plays. His character Dalvi has used a little bit less offensive words like bloody, bitch etc. for humiliating Sumitra. Some other words used by the dramatist are like worm, termite, bastard, pig, whore etc.

Conclusion

After considering the above aspects in detail, it is quite obvious that both the playwrights have become successful in displaying their sensibilities towards marginalized communities in a multilingual and multicultural country like India. They are the realists like Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw and present the reality as it exists in the Indian society. They have a soft corner for the marginalized section of the society. It shows that they give equal importance to homosexuals by including them in their plays. Both the plays uncover the psychological as well as social position of homosexuals in the society. Their hardship and struggle leave an indelible impact on the mindset of the audience as well as the readers.

Homosexuality should not be considered as an abnormality rather it is other form of sexuality which is a little deviant. They all want to live normal life like the other heterosexuals. They should be given freedom for coming out of this taboo and to break the shackles to proclaim the sexuality. We all should live together in a positive environment where everyone has equal rights and choices to live our life. Ruth Vanita says:

People who managed to express same-sex love in this way displayed tremendous creativity in

shaping their own lives as well as patterns of community. (Preface xxviii)

Both Tendulkar and Dattani unmasked the sufferings and plea of homosexuals. Their daredevil attitude for exposing the actual state of affairs in the society is certainly creditable. Both of them seem to eradicate the social issues prevalent in the society. Both the plays portray the exasperation, dilemma and conflicts in their thoughts and relationships. Both the writers took the courage to bring fore the taboo issue which remained hidden under the thick layer of the culture and tradition of society. Though they do not approve or disapprove the homosexual relationships yet they appeal from the audience to create a healthy and congenial atmosphere for them. Dattani through one of his characters expresses his desire and also the heart-felt need of homosexuals. Bunny Singh very appropriately sums up the idea that ". . . we should all forget about categorizing people as gay and straight or bi or whatever , and let them do what they want to do!" (CP 88) Instead of categorizing people on the basis of their sex, we should treat each other as human beings and positively contribute for the betterment of the society.

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