

# MAHESH DATTANI'S *ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI* : A DRAMATIC ARGUMENT IN DEFENCE OF HOMOSEXUALS

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**Abstract:** Homosexuality is a practice in which an individual develops sexual interest and attraction for the members of his or her own sex. The majority of individuals in a society being heterosexuals, the homosexuals often become object of social contempt. Their same sex orientation causes many problems in their lives. Like heterosexuals they are not allowed to lead a normal life. Mahesh Dattani is one of those Indian dramatists who try to create awareness in society through their writings. In his plays *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Do the Needful* and *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani raises his voice in defense of this socially neglected community of homosexuals. Along with this issue, the social issues like communalism, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse, marginalization of eunuchs and the suffering of the cancer patients and AIDS victims are dealt freely in the dramatic world of Dattani.

**Keywords-**Homosexuality, Gays, Lesbians, Apathy, Discrimination

## Paper

About homosexuality, it is said, "Homosexuality is romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behaviour between members of the same sex or gender." Hence homosexuality is a practice in which an individual develops attraction and liking for persons of the same gender. The term 'gay' is used to describe the same sex relations among male members where as the same sex orientation among female members is termed as lesbianism. Such type of relationships are not new as they exist in the society since its very beginning. The modern scientific researches consider homosexuality as a normal practice which does not cause any negative psychological impacts. However, many heterosexual societies regard homosexuality as a threat for the harmonious and peaceful development of society. In all such societies the homosexuals often become the object of social discrimination. Their different sexual orientation causes many problems in their

lives. Being considered as abnormal they often become the victims of the apathy and hostility of society.

There are numerous reasons responsible for the same sex relations. Some researchers believe that biological and hormonal imbalance are the causes behind the homosexual leaning whereas the other researchers regard social surroundings such as traumatic childhood experience and disturbed family atmosphere responsible for this same sex orientation. Young girls who are abused and beaten by their fathers or brothers develop fear and repulsion for males and their sexual organs and so they turn out to be lesbians. Similarly, the boys who are deprived of fatherly care and attention in their childhood and have overprotective mothers feel attracted to same sex members to fill the gap which they experienced during their childhood. Moreover, the current social set up in which the young girls and boys live away from their parents in distant cities and share rooms and apartments with the same gender, also develop homosexual relations. Such relations remain free from social suspicion, the fear of unwanted pregnancy and social disgrace. Sigmund Freud's positive and negative Oedipus Complex Theory can also be referred to support the cause of same sex orientation. According to Freud in positive Oedipus Complex Theory a child develops love and liking for the parent of opposite sex while in negative Oedipus Complex, a child feels attraction for the same sex parent which leads to homosexuality:

In pre-oedipal homosexuality, the libido failed to enter the oedipal phase, and simply remained stuck for a lifetime in the homosexual phase. (Le Vay, 29)

Thus on the basis of various studies it can be firmly asserted that there is no exact cause responsible for the emergence of the homosexuality, but it is certainly an exceptional behavioural condition.

From its very emergence literature has been connected to social representation. Hence, social commitment is essential for a literary artist. Thus all the socially committed creative writers try to sensitize their society towards the various prevailing social evils. The post-colonial literature is also remarkable for the representation of many serious social issues. Dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani have widened the scope of Indian English literature by introducing many new subjects in the realm of Indian English Drama. These dramatists liberated Indian Drama from its traditional approach and provided it a new colouring of reality. The social issues like communalism, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse and marginalization of eunuchs and homosexuals find a free and frank treatment in the dramatic world of Mahesh

Dattani. Through his works, Dattani wants to arouse social sensibility for these socially neglected and marginalized communities.

Dattani's play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* is his bold attempt to make society aware about the existence of the homosexuals who still seem aliens to traditional Indian heterosexuals. Dattani himself admits:

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.

Mahesh Dattani considers the strict social norms of morality responsible for the suffering of homosexuals. The fear of social rejection poses a great difficulty for both the gays and lesbians in those societies where only heterosexuals relations are considered normal. The play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* is an effort to reveal the dilemma of homosexuals who always feel sandwiched between their own personal instincts and the strict norms of social morality. This is the first Indian English Drama which tries to uncover the inner struggles and suffering caused to homosexuals by the social demand of moral conduct and ethical behaviour.

The opening scene of the play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* gives a jolt to the traditional Indians when they watch a security guard accepting money from a fashion designer Kamlesh for some sexual intercourse. Kamlesh's confession that he is still in love with his friend Prakash, a gay, seems something unusual and new in the history of Indian Drama. In the party organized by Kamlesh, Dattani introduces us with the various categories of homosexuals. Sharad, a young and energetic youth is indifferent to the worldly reactions to his gay identity. But he is sad because he does not receive the same kind of love and warmth from his partner Kamlesh who still seems to him in love with Prakash:

Sharad : Oh spare me the lies! You could never love anyone because you are still in love with Prakash. (CP: 56)

This conversation between Kamlesh and Sharad reveals the former's passionate love for Prakash alias Ed who now because of his own guilty conscience and social fear tries to turn himself into a heterosexual and decides to marry Kamlesh's sister Kiran. Kamlesh out of his concern and love for his divorcee sister Kiran decides to forget Prakash and also tries to keep their past relations a secret. Deepali is another homosexual in the play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Being a lesbian she gives great importance to her feminine self. She rebukes Sharad when he uses the word 'bitch'. She says, "Don't-don't use that word (Clenches her fist at him). You can call yourself a dog, call yourself a pig, but never never insult a female. (CP : 59) These words of Deepali

reveal her strong sense of hatred against the abusive language in the name of feminine gender. She protects her real feminine self. Deepali, being a woman and lesbian, is doubly marginalized and so she understands well the pain and suffering of the gays like Kamlesh, Prakash, Sharad, Bunny etc. She knows very well that their position is invisible in this heterosexual world. This conversation between Kamlesh and Deepali highlights the importance of heterosexual marriages. To quote:

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.

(CP : 65)

This dialogue highlights the importance of the institution of marriage and sexual relationship in man-woman relationship. In spite of the love and liking of homosexuals their relationship seem meaningless because it stops the natural growth process of the universe. Though both Kamlesh and Deepali like each other but because of their homosexual leaning they are unable to help each other. To overcome his feeling of alienation, Kamlesh tries to replace Prakash through Sharad. Sharad also takes great pains to achieve Kamlesh's love but he fails badly. The absence of Prakash is quite painful to Kamlesh. Sharad, too, realizes that he can never develop an intimate relationship with Kamlesh because of his passionate love for Prakash. These words of Sharad exhibit his disappointment, "I don't think you will ever succeed. He will keep cropping up painfully in your life - like herpes" (CP. 58). This observation in the play reveals Kamlesh's great emotional bonding with Prakash.

The arrival of Ranjit and Bunny on the stage reveals some other problems of the homosexual world. Ranjit, a homosexual, considers India an unsuitable land for same gender relationships. To enjoy tension free sexual relationship with his gay lover, he frequently moves to a foreign land where homosexual relations are perceived as natural. Bunny, a popular T.V. actor, behaves as a straight before the world. To avoid social disgrace, he pretends to be a heterosexual – a loving husband and a caring father. He too hides his gay identity from the world because the revelation of the fact will spoil his popularity as a star. He says, "Do you think I will be accepted by the millions if I screamed from the rooftops that I am gay" (CP : 70). These words of Bunny reveal his societal fear. He advises Kamlesh to pretend as a straight before the world because only then he would be able to lead a happy life.

At the advice of his friends, Kamlesh tears all the photographs which revealed his close intimacy with Prakash except the one picture which clearly reveals the close sexual intimacy between them. It is decided that the photograph will be destroyed by Kamlesh through 'a little ritual' because in the heterosexual world rituals have great importance. But the very moment Kamlesh is about to destroy the picture, Kiran enters in the room. She seems very happy in the company of his new friend Ed alias Prakash. All the friends of Kamlesh ask him to reveal the truth of their relationship to Kiran but Kamlesh hides the fact just for the happiness of his sister. These words of Kamlesh reveal his sense of great fear regarding his sister, "I don't think it ever occurred to her in her wildest dreams that we were lovers. She never even asked me whether Prakash was gay. She just assumed he wasn't" (CP : 86). Kamlesh knows it very well that the truth of Prakash's gay identity will be very difficult for Kiran to bear. But Kamlesh's own situation too is very miserable. On the one hand, he is concerned deeply with the happiness of his sister and on the other hand, he is unable to bear the separation from Prakash though he tries his best. He even consults a psychologist to overcome his agony and fear but the psychologist too advises him to change himself "... he said I 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" (CP : 69). These words of the psychologist reveal Dattani's view that the strict social moral norms often become the cause of human suffering.

The fear of social rejection becomes the main cause of the suffering of all the homosexuals. Deepali also expresses this fear in the words, "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" (CP.89). These words of Deepali express the social hatred for the alternate sexuality. Prakash also pretends to be a straight simply to avoid social contempt. Like Kamlesh Prakash too has deep infatuation for him but he decides to marry Kiran because after his marriage with Kiran his relationship with Kamlesh will be free from social suspicion. He makes it clear to Kamlesh, "I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me" (CP :105). These words of Prakash illustrate his emotional crisis. However, in spite of his best efforts Prakash is unable to turn himself into a heterosexual. The hypocrisy of Prakash is revealed to Kiran through the picture which shows both Kamlesh and Prakash in great intimacy. The revelation of this long hidden truth is quite unbearable to Kiran. She seems almost frozen. She feels that she is deceived by both, her brother and her friend. Prakash says, "I am... sorry. I didn't mean to harm you. I only

wanted to live” (CP:110). This observation in the play reveals the fact that the idea of heterosexual pretention is not intentional but they pretend to be straight or heterosexual because homosexuals are always looked down upon in traditional Indian societies. Prakash’s attempt to commit suicide clearly shows his disappointment with the world. He knows it well that his survival in this world with a gay identity is almost impossible. So he tries to pretend a heterosexual. His inner happiness, as a human being rests on his gay identity but the world out of its contempt for the homosexuals, does not allow them to enjoy their lives. All the homosexuals are always at war with the rigid norms of social morality.

Mahesh Dattani, being a lover of human values tries to speak in favour of the human beings who are considered morally degraded. His play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai* reveals his humanistic approach for the homosexuals. When Bunny says, “All I am saying is that we should all forget about categorizing people as gay or straight or bi or whatever, and let them do what they want to do!” (CP:88). Here Bunny clearly shows the sympathetic attitude of Dattani for the gays. Dattani takes a lot of pains to dramatize the inner struggle of the homosexuals on the stage. Like heterosexuals, the homosexuals should also be accepted as normal human beings. They should not be looked down upon for a mental condition which is beyond their control. Both Kamlesh and Prakash want to lead a normal life like other individuals but they fail to adjust in the society only because of their homosexual leanings.

Dattani uses his dramatic talent to root out the orthodox conventions of society. In his play *On A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani tries to suggest that love between the members of the same sex is as normal and natural as the love between the members of opposite sex. He admits that like heterosexuals the gays and the lesbians should also be allowed to lead a normal life. The fear of social hatred and rejection compel the homosexuals to hide their real identity. Homosexual marriages being banned in society many homosexuals marry with the persons of opposite sex and pretend as heterosexuals simply to lead a respectable life in society whereas secretly they try to continue their practice of homosexuality for their own satisfaction.

Dattani draws the conclusion that the prejudice against homosexuality cannot be conquered by external human efforts only. It involves the question of acknowledging the identity of those who lead a life beyond the fabric of social conventions.

The analysis of the play helps us to draw the conclusion as follows-



1. Homosexuality is a normal human behaviour but it is not accepted in heterosexual society for the paradigms of marital harmony.
2. Dattani in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* establishes sympathy and harmonious bonding with homosexuals for his anthropological vision of human society.
3. Dattani explores that homosexuality is not an abnormality but an outcome of the discontent of society. It is a negation of rigorous norms that leads to frustration and disgust in individuals.
4. Dattani directly or indirectly confesses that homosexuals are in search of alternative identity for their better survival against the orthodox conventions of society. Hence, they require love, sympathy and understanding instead of humiliation, ignorance and rejection.

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