

16
**MAHESH DATTANI'S *ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI*:
 A CRITIQUE OF (HETERO)SEXISM**

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Abstract:

The present paper tries to explore the plights of homosexuals and females in the garb of heterosexism and sexism respectively from the perspective of present scenario of queer world in reference to Dattani's well-known play 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai'. The paper makes a parallelism of study taking into consideration the characters of the play with real life characters. The paper also tries to make a theoretical discussion over the problem of division as regards sex and gender on the social surface in reference to Butler's queer theory. Dattani has not left any stone unturned to deal with the problems and issues of queer people. There are hardly any action in the play, instead it starts and develops in a flat which is also self-identical with the identical world of queers. The play is discussion like and it covers a varied number of homosexuals who are involved into many glaring issues and sub-issues related to their life. In order to bring light to the marginal life of non-normative sexualities including women as a subaltern identity in hetero-normative system of patriarchy, the paper also tries to bring into surface almost every issue, from subtle to major related to queer identities generally overlooked in the present hetero-normative social setup.)

The term 'Sexism' and 'Heterosexism' come in contrast not by kind but by degree as both of them appear as suppressive as well as repressive power as regards gender and sexuality. As a term 'Sexism' defines prejudices and discrimination based on one's sex and gender and women are the most victim of it. On the other hand, heterosexism stands for a system, bias and discrimination that establish the superiority of opposite sex sexuality over same sex sexuality and for this, homosexuals are made victimization of it. In post-colonial theory, both sexism and heterosexism play the hegemonial role of power and 'self' over subaltern sexual identities defined by 'other'. The problems and issues confronted by the present world given rise by the politics of sexism and heterosexism are becoming major issues in post-colonial literature. Patriarchy is in the root of both sexism and heterosexism. Just as females are discouraged, violated and exploited by the ambiguous norms and practices of sexism, likewise heterosexism, though refers to the sexual attraction to opposite sex with the co-participation of both male and female, is in reality, regulated by the will of patriarchy. As a matter of fact, patriarchy is the all dominating force behind both sexism and heterosexism. Sustaining sexism and heterosexism, patriarchy glorifies the institution of marriage and motherhood and clings to them. Heterosexism calls itself normative and defines other sexual identities as non-normative and as a result of this, division of sexualities arises. Outside heterosexuality, there are a wide range of sexual practices in the form of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender which are also another part of sexual instincts commonly seen among human beings have become unidentified and invisible due to the division of sexualities. In order to bring about erotic justice to sexual subalterns from the hegemony of heterosexism, queer theory arose. Contrary to conventional idea of sexual binary that defines two kinds of sexual identities- hetero-normative sexualities and homo-non-normative sexualities and asserts importance of one more than the other, queer theory that emerges in the 1990s, neither gives the privilege to one sexuality against the other nor considers the traditional idea of sexual binary as fixed and absolute, instead it claims that heterosexual and homosexual are not the only ways to think about sexual identity besides of which there are many other non-normative sexual identities which also need attention. Queer theory covers whole range of humanities, be it hetero-normative sexualities or homo-non-normative

sexualities and claims the sexual freedom of both. As regards sexism, the queer theory seeks the gender equality between male and female instead of judging superiority of male over female keeping the former inside the Derridean circle and the later outside of it as per gender binary. Drawing all non-normative sexualities (lesbian, gay and bisexual) and non-primal genders (female and transgender) on the same plane of equality which hetero-normative sexuality and primal masculine gender already have attained, Butler, the father of queer theory in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* gives the idea of gender and sexuality a new turn. Following the footsteps of Butler, many queer theorists at the end of last century and in the beginning of present century appear who are trying to win the case for non-normative sexualities and non-primal genders. Their reaction against the essentialists that sexual gender and identities are, “natural, fixed and innate,” (Jagose 8) and their assumption of the idea that identity is rather “fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models of understanding oneself” (Jagose 8) gives a new dimension to the idea of gender and sexuality. Opposite to Marxian ideal society which would be the outcome of ultimate overthrow of classless society, queer theorists believe that a true ideal world would be created only after the end of gender and sexual divisions as defined by sexism and heterosexism respectively.

Queer theory which is the result of western philosophy has exerted a tremendous influence upon the Indian writers and critics. Ratna Kapur finds queer as one of the subgroups of sexual subalterns. She has applied queer insights in postcolonial perspective. To her, the term queer is identitarian despite its largely anti-identitarian practices and claims. Her “sexual subalterns” include varied non-heteronormative sexualities and identities:

[G]ay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, khush, queer, hijra, kothis, panthis and many more. They have also included sexual practices and behaviours such as adult and consensual pre-marital, extra-marital, non-marital, auto-erotic/ masturbatory, promiscuous, and paid-for sex, as well as MSM (men who have sex with men). It is this diversity of identities and range of practices that cannot be captured within the acronym 'LGBT,' and why there is a need to articulate the politics of sexual subgroups from within a postcolonial context rather than to borrow theories or politics from elsewhere, a move that is both decontextualized and dehistoricised. (Kapur 385).

Envisaging a world, free from any oppressive idea of normalcy that divides humanity into normative and non-normative sexualities and again, masculine and feminine genders based on the matrix of heterosexism and sexism respectively Nivedita Menon raises her voice of protest against present system of gender and sexuality:

[O]nce we give up on the idea that only heterosexuality is normal and that all human bodies are clearly either male or female, more and more kinds of bodies and desires will come into view. Perhaps also, one body may, in one lifetime, move through many identities and desires. The use of 'queer' then, is a deliberate political move, which underscores the fluidity (potential and actual) of sexual identity and sexual desire. The term suggests that all kinds of sexual desire and identifications are possible, and all these have socio-cultural and historical co-ordinates. (Menon 98).

Mahesh Dattani in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* makes a socio-psychological study of his queer gay and lesbian characters from the perspectives of heterosexism along with a single non-queer straight female character Kiran who becomes the victim of sexism. The play is set in a flat inhabited by some friends Prakash, Kamlesh, Sharad, Bunny, Dipali and others who later appear as queer identities. In same building, a marriage ceremony is going on. The flat crowded with attending people in wedding, symbolic of hetero-normative world divides the flat of these queer identities standing for homo-non-normative world. The play presents a contrast between onstage discussions of these homosexuals and offstage noise and music of hetero-normative people attending the wedding party. The sound and music of wedding indicates the intrusion of the outer world into the personal lives of the characters. The poor

description of the flat assembled by these queers is also identical with their personal plights and anguishes, as observed by A.K. Chaudhuri: "The spaces within the home are 'muggy' too hot to be comfortable, the air-conditioning breaking down, even as the interior spaces of the psyche have to be confronted. Meanwhile the exteriors keep exerting pressure, intruding into the 'other' spaces occupied by the characters in the play perpetually reminding them of their isolation." (Chaudhuri 43) The initial description of the flat gathered by queer gays which stands for the opposite to non-queer people in another flat of same building shows how queers are invisible and unidentified as social beings co-existing with non-queers in the same society. Drawing this initial description of this division of two flats in same building representing two worlds of queers and non-queers, Dattani intends to present the thematic design of the play. Jaspal Singh rightly says, "Dattani, within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identity crisis of the gays who occupy no honourable space in social order." (Singh 1)

The play is a fine commentary over the problems and issues of gay characters. Prakash and Kamlesh fell in love to each other but their relationship couldn't last long on the face of societal hetero-normative pressure, and they were forced to get separated. The pang of separation was so high that Kamlesh sought relationship with Sharad in order to forget Prakash but he could not obliterate his past memories with Prakash and as a result of this he could not make a new relationship possible with Sharad. Kamlesh came in great shock and surprise when he learnt that Prakash had changed his name from Prakash to Ed and wished to marry his divorcee sister Kiran. Finding himself at the critical juncture, Kamlesh invited all his homosexual friends in order to find a solution for his problem. It is from the discussion of these gay people in the meeting that takes place in Kamlesh's flat that Dattani helps us probe into the mental conflicts of these queer people.

Prakash and Kamlesh were very happy couple together but their relationship suffered on the face of societal pressure. An unreal and strange thought suddenly crept into the mind of Prakash or Ed that he was wrong in keeping up a homosexual relationship. He blamed himself a sinner according to religious values. As Kamlesh says, "he (Prakash) goes to church every week now. They put him on to a psychiatrist. He believes his love for me was the work of the devil. Now the devil has left him." (Dattani 85) Being ignorant of reality that homosexuality is rooted to biological and psychological factors, Prakash wrongly alleged the devil to be responsible for his perversion of being a homosexual. However, Kamlesh is different in nature and temperament from Prakash. Unlike Prakash, Kamlesh does not feel ashamed of being a homosexual and is very honest about his relationship. His involvement with Prakash was so high that he could never forget him. He could not adjust with Sharad and felt guilty of his present relationship to which he was never honest. He had sought only escape from the pangs of his past relationship in coming in touch with Sharad. As Kamlesh himself confesses, "I did a cruel thing... Sharad. I hope you will find it in you to forgive me... I did a cruel thing by loving Sharad to forget Prakash. I have not succeeded. And I have hurt someone as wonderful as Sharad. I made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that I was trying to get over." (Dattani 68)

The deep and intensive love of the homosexuals is highlighted by Dattani through the relationship of Kamlesh and Prakash. They share a deep and strong bond of relationship like that of the heterosexuals. That their relationship is not only limited to satisfying carnal pleasures becomes evident through the failure of Kamlesh-Sharad relationship. In our society, the homosexuals are not able to maintain their relationships for long in the face of societal pressure. Most of them have to pass through the pangs of separation. But their cries of affliction remain unheard by the hetero-normative public. They remain as an invisible and unidentified community in the society. As Kamlesh says, "We have all been through the pain of separation... As gay men and women, we have all been through that, I suppose ... some of us several times." (Dattani 68)

In the play Bunny Singh and Ed lead a double life. Their appearance is one thing and the reality is different. Both appearance and reality never come to be matched in their life. Both of them try to throw dust into the eyes of others by their hetero sexual appearance. Through their pretending role of heterosexuality,

they secretly wish to continue their homosexuality. In order to gain acceptance and proper identity in hetero-normative society, they are forced to hide their homo-sexual identity on the social surface. Ed plans to kill two birds with one stone. With his idea of marriage with Kamlesh's sister he will be able to continue his relationship with Kamlesh and no one will suspect him. As Ed says to Kamlesh, "Nobody would know. Nobody would care... I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me." (Dattani 105) Bunny Singh, a TV actor who has gained immense popularity by acting in a hetero-normative T.V. serial 'Yeh Hai Hamara Parivaar' is apparently a family man is the traveller of same road on which Ed intends to travel in future. Bunny Singh secretly keeps on his gay relationship under the mask of ideal husband and father but he is always haunted with the fear that if his reality is exposed, he will be turned down from professional, familial and social circles at a time. His fearful mental set up gets revelation in his speech to Sharad: "Do you think I will be accepted by the millions if I screamed from the rooftops that I am gay?" (Dattani 70) Bunny Singh and Ed are the representatives of millions of homosexual identities whose self has divided into two halves- heterosexual in the social life and homosexual in the real life and the irony is that they prove failure and imperfect in both these life due to their half existential identity. The vast gap between reality and appearance hardly seems to be filled up in the present social set up. Bunny Singh frankly admits the pang of split identity:

BUNNY: 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. ... Everyone believes me to be the model middle-class Indian man. I was chosen for the part in the serial because I fit into common perceptions of what a family man ought to look like. I believed in it myself. I lied - to myself first. And I continue to lie to millions of people every week on Thursday nights. There's no such person... (Dattani 102-103)

Besides showing queer characters forced to live false life in order to get some social identity and recognition in hetero-normative society, Dattani also presents homosexuals of different outlook. Ranjit, instead of maintaining a double standard of life, remains static in his conviction and commitment. He is a true rebel to hetero-normative society which he thinks better to leave up in order to seek an ideal place where both hetero-normative and homo-normative sexualities co-exist together with equal freedom in life. This is evident in his speech to Sharad:

RANJIT: Call me what you will. My English lover and I have been together for twelve years now. You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country!(Dattani 71)

Ranjit's words are reflections of his aversion towards the social set up of India. It is a tactic verbal rebellion against the wretched customs of the country. In India homosexuality is considered a taboo. So, gay people and the lesbians have to suppress their true selves in order to survive in the society.

Another aspect that the playwright brings to light is that our society unjustly concentrates more on the homosexuality of unmarried men and women and married men and women are often overlooked if they continue their homo-sexual relationship in the garb of matrimonial relationship. That is why the homo sexual relationships of Prakash, Ranjit and others do not get sustenance for long. But the grave fact is that married men and women also engage in homosexuality in large numbers. But most of the time it remains unnoticed. In the play Bunny Singh is such a character who is able to befool the hetero-normative people skillfully keeping them under illusion that he is heterosexual under the cover of hetero-normative system of marriage.

True to the spirit of Kamlesh and Ranjit, Sharad is antithetical to Ed and Bunny. He is vocal of his gay identity. His protest against camouflaging identity is evident in his ironic statement to Kiran:

SHARAD: We-ell let me see how I can put it. You see, being a heterosexual man- a real man, as Ed

put it- I get everything. I get to be accepted-accepted by whom? Well, that marriage lot down there for instance. I can have a wife, I can have children who will all adore me simply because I am a hetero - I beg your pardon- a real man. Now why would I want to give it all up? So what if I have to change a little? If I can be a real man, I can be king. (Dattani 101)

Like him Deepali, the only lesbian in the play is also odd enough to accept her true self. She is faithful and seems content with her lesbian relationship with Tina. When she says, "Tina and I can tell all of you to go jump!" (Dattani 71)

Marriage that validates the relationship of heterosexual male and female is beyond the concept of homosexual world. Kiran is presented as having sympathy for the gay people as her brother Kamlesh is homosexual. She is in the opinion of marriage between two homosexuals: "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry," (Dattani 98) to which Ranjit replies with full of cynicism, "Oh, they do. Only not to the same sex." (Dattani 98) The conversation between Kamlesh and Deepali also shows how homosexuals suffer from identity crisis due to non-validation of marriage in their life:

Deepali: If you were a woman, we would be in love.

Kamlesh: If you were a man, we would be in love.

Deepali: If you were heterosexual we would be married. (Dattani 65)

Another crucial observation in the play is the victimization of the women by the power of sexism, a term applied for gender discrimination. As per sexism, masculine gender enjoys superiority over feminine gender and in most cases the later becomes the victim of exploitation, subjugation and even negation of identity in public sphere. The oppression received by Bunny and Ed at the hands of the society is translated into victimization of their wives by them. They don't pay a heed to the emotional harm they are involved to as regards women. Ed fixes his mind to marry Kiran, Kamlesh's sister but when Ed's real identity comes to light, he rather takes the discovery normally in the garb of sexism showing no sympathy over Kiran's present state of mind on which Kiran's reply gives rise to question over the validity of sexism on the societal surface:

ED: Sweetheart, that is such a Pardon me, but you are behaving like a typical woman again.

KIRAN: Isn't that what you want?

ED: No! Now let's get out of here!

KIRAN: That's why you want to marry me. And that's what I tried to be all the time. Look what it gave me. . . . Do you know? When my husband beat me up, I truly believed and felt that he loved me. I felt he loved me enough to want to hurt me. Kamlesh helped me get out of that. But I continued being the same. . . woman. I wanted to feel loved by a man. In whichever way he wanted to love me. And I met you. And you did show love. And you continue being the same Man Typical, you said. You are right. If there any stereotypes around here, they are you and me. Because we don't know any better, do we? We just don't know what else to be!" (Dattani 107)

Dipali, the only lesbian in the play also challenges sexism. Dipali's conversation with Ranjit brings into light that she is in against of sexism.

DEEPALI: You are a real dickhead.

RANJIT: Are you jealous?

DEEPALI: Why should I be jealous of you?

RANJIT: Because I have a dick. Would you want one? Of course you would.

DEEPALI (*with great dignity*): I thank God. Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman. (Dattani 66)

Sharad-Dipali conversation presents another scene of Dipali's protest against sexism:

SHARAD: If I had a lover, would I be such a bitch?

DIPALI: Don't- don't use that word. (Clenches her fist at him.) You can call yourself a dog, call yourself a pig, but never insult a female. (Dattani 59)

Dattani in the play very subtly brings into focus that the gender war not only exists among hetero-normative sexualities but it is also intact among homo-non-normative sexualities. Through the words of Kiran and Dipali, Dattani wages war against sexism that unjustly creates a line of separation between male and female giving the former more privilege than the other on the basis of gender discrimination. Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* makes a psycho-critical study over diversified images of homosexuals. In the words of John Mac Rae in the introduction to the play:

Of the characters, Sharad and Deepali are comfortable with their sexuality, and have different ways of being gay. Sharad is camp, flaunting; Deepali more restrained, perhaps more stable. Kamlesh is anguished, and Ed the most obvious victim of his own insecurities. Bunny, the T.V. actor, is a rather more traditional Indian gay man - married (he would say happily) while publicly denying his own nature, and Ranjit has taken an easy way out by moving to Europe where he can 'be himself' more openly. (McRae 46)

Drawing nearly all types of diversified images of homosexual identities, Dattani perhaps has tried to hold all queer identities in order to discuss the pain and suffering of homosexuals on a vast scale. Nearly all characters in the play are victims of heterosexism and sexism in some or other form. Homosexual male characters are victim of heterosexism, whereas lesbian female character Dipali and only heterosexual character Kiran are the victims of both heterosexism and sexism. On a certain occasion in the play Bunny remarks on the categorization of gender and sex and his remark truly serves the purpose of the play as well as the playwright:

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! (Dattani 88)

Criticizing over present social set up where queer identities along with females are subject to fragmentation of identity due to hegemony of heterosexism and sexism, John McRae's opinion truly stands on the ground of reality that present society, "not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity." (McRae 46)

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