

# Alternate Sexuality as a theme in Mahesh Dattani's Play 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai'

Shanice Anne Thomas, S. Sushma Raj, Ganeswara Rao

**Abstract:** In today's context discussions on alternate sexuality find utmost significance considering the fact that people all around the world are becoming aware and open to the idea of it. This paper will explore this area looking at it from the Indian background by examining how society views homosexuality and how people belonging to this milieu become victims to societal expectations and norms through Mahesh Dattani's play *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai* (2013). The play however, being written before the amendment of Section 377, throws light on the plight of the homosexual community that was subject to dehumanization and criminalization by the society as well as the law.

**Keywords:** Alternate sexuality, homosexuality, India, section 377, dehumanization, criminalization, society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is indeed a matter of concern, when in a multicultural country such as India; traces of marginalization are still blatantly visible. Marginalization and discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, community and gender are age old hurdles which continue to pose a threat to our society. With numerous Indian writers touching upon the various issues of discrimination, we see writers like Mahesh Dattani boldly setting the stage to discuss issues related to gender discrimination and alternate sexuality.

Mahesh Dattani, the coveted Indian-English playwright and Sahitya Akademy Award holder, has gained critical acclaim for his plays on themes of varied social issues. The avant garde play, '*A Muggy Night in Mumbai*', first performed at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, 1998 has for its theme, the identity crises of the homosexual community who are torn between the set standards of the society and the struggle to be true to themselves. Dattani gives them a voice to communicate their dilemmas, insecurities and frustrations.

## II. DISCUSSION & RESULT ANALYSIS:

The entire play takes place at Kamalesh's flat at Marine drive, a posh locality in Mumbai where his friends, other homosexuals have arrived for a gathering. On the other hand the intrusion of the heterosexual world is seen as we are made aware of a wedding procession that is taking place offstage. This serves as a juxtaposition of the socially accepted

institution of marriage between heterosexuals as sanctified as opposed to a homosexual relationship which is frowned upon by the society.

Though there exist scores of discourses on the various theories of sexuality by writers such as Michele Foucault, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, all of whom attempt to normalize homosexuality being as natural as heterosexuality, we still stand witness to the subalternization of this section of society. This, Dattani strives to bring to focus through his plays. Chaudhuri comments on this saying:

*"Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make to his audience. But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatizes and peoples the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with, facing genuine, real life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India's 'queer culture'."* (51)

The play looks at the politics of sexuality, while exploring homosexuality in all of its colours. The play takes shape through the characters of Kamalesh, Prakash a.k.a Ed, Sharad, Deepali and Bunny. Through the course of the play we are made aware of Kamalesh and Prakash's relationship which ends on account of Prakash breaking under societal pressure. To mask his homosexuality, he decides to marry Kiran, Kamalesh's sister. Here we see an example of what Eve Sedgwick calls the '*homosexual panic*' where the straight culture responds in a paranoid manner to the fluid nature of sexual identities, on account of which the homosexuals feeling threatened, are forced to reorient themselves as in Prakash(Ed)'s case. His agenda in marrying Kiran is to be closer to Kamalesh but since he fears being discovered, he resorts to the institution of a heterosexual marriage:

*"once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any... suspicion"* (CP 104).

We see that Bunny, in a similar manner expresses his sexual preference in a clandestine manner, camouflaging his homosexuality by portraying the ideal heterosexual family man on screen as well as off.

This aspect of gender being 'fluid' was touched upon by Judith Butler who advocated that the concept of gender was more of a 'becoming' rather than a state of 'being'. When we look at Ed's shift from homosexuality to heterosexuality we see this happen. This also takes place in the case of Bunny who maintains a dual identity of a heterosexual in public and a homosexual in private. Another instance would be the case of Ranjit who is referred to using the metaphor of a 'coconut', the brown outer shell representing his Indian nationality, and where white representing the western white identity of being gay. We also notice how the idea of being gay is assumed as not being Indian but western.

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**Shanice Anne Thomas** Dept. of English, GITAM School of Gandhian Studies, GITAM University, Visakhapatnam-45. Email: [shanice.ranade21@gmail.com](mailto:shanice.ranade21@gmail.com)

**Dr. S.Sushma Raj**, Dept. of English, GITAM School of Gandhian Studies, GITAM University.

Email: [s.sushmaraj@gmail.com](mailto:s.sushmaraj@gmail.com)

**Ch. Ganeswara Rao**, Dept. of English, GITAM School of Gandhian Studies, GITAM University. Email: [ch.ganeswararao77@gmail.com](mailto:ch.ganeswararao77@gmail.com)



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Sharad and Deepali are the only two persons in the group who are not ashamed of their sexuality. Deepali says:

*"it's not shame, is it? With us...its fear...of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be"* (CP 89).

Sharad after being dumped by Kamalesh, is heartbroken and therefore his friends suggest that he turn straight and escape to the world that is more acceptable, but Sharad rejects the idea of being bisexual and claims that he is *"as gay as a goose"*.

Kiran is the only heterosexual character in the play. Dattani uses her comment:

*"I really wish they would allow gay people to marry"* (58)

in an attempt to assuage the uncomfortableness the society feel towards this community. Having escaped an abusive marriage, she is distraught on discovering that Ed is indeed gay. The playwright leaves us with food for thought to consider if heterosexual marriage is normalizing torture and divorce, then is the world of homosexuals really that worse off?

Dattani uses the photograph of Kamalesh and Ed embracing as a symbol to further highlight the identity crises. Kamalesh looks at the photograph as being beautiful, whereas Ed is repulsed by it as he is not ready to openly accept his sexuality. This 'homophobia' as Eve Sedgwick has termed it pushes Ed to the extent of attempting suicide on discovering that the photograph has been viewed by the people at the wedding procession downstairs.

Bunny's confession towards the end of the play echoes the plight of the gay community:

*"I have denied a lot of things...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 the worlds, and it seems I do not exist in either"* (102).

They are unable to design their own lives on account of the constant societal pressure breathing up their neck.

As Beena Agarwal aptly puts it: *"Dattani in 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai' investigates how the human aspirations are significant in contrast of social faiths. History is witness to the fact that the invisible clutches of social forces can never permit an individual to carve his own designs beyond the patterns and accepted by society."* (46).

Therefore, we can place Mahesh Dattani as one among the contemporary social realists, who in his dedication towards exposing the evils in the society, through theatre has played a crucial role in emancipating the rights of the marginalized. Bijay Kumar Das in relation to this play comments:

*"in this play, Dattani examines the psychology of persons who are by nature 'gay' or 'bisexuals' and the desire on the part of the some of them to turn heterosexuals. This may seem to be an unusual theme in Indian context. But in the real life such characters do exist. Hence Dattani has recreated the characters in their own situations. To see this play on the stage is to feel the characters turn their inside out. Dattani hinted at the need for same-sex marriage in the Indian context"*. (23).

### III. CONCLUSION

After years of fighting for their rights, the LGBT community has finally received a positive verdict with the amendment of section 377 in 2018, which legalizes same-sex relationships in India. This is indeed a revolutionary step in a country which has suppressed and criminalized the LGBT community on account of being a sexual minority. The play having been produced before the amendment serves to decenter the concept of gender. Therefore, serving a social tool to overcome bias, it is

instrumental in encouraging people to change their outlook by empathizing with the oppressed minorities and challenging the heterosexual norms of society.

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### AUTHORS PROFILE



**Shanice Anne Thomas** is currently pursuing her PhD in English at School of Gandhian Studies, GITAM University. She has done her Masters in English Literature and graduated in English, Journalism and Psychology. An avid reader, she also has a flair for writing poetry, articles and short stories. She previously worked as Lecturer, teaching students of M.A English programme at St. Joseph's College for Women, Visakhapatnam. She is specialised in 'Revisiting of Fairy tales' and presented a good number of papers in both national and international conferences. She has also contributed to various college magazines and interned at a local magazine, 'Yo! Vizag' and evening newspaper, 'Bay News'. In her leisure, she brings out beautiful art paintings which is a dept at.



**Dr. S.Sushma Raj**, Associate Professor in English, GITAM Institute of Science, GITAM (Deemed to be University) has about 16 years of teaching experience. Besides an M.A, M.Phil, and PhD in English, she holds a degree in M.B.A (HRM) as well. She published about 25 articles in national and international journals and also the co-author of a book. She has expertise in teaching Communicative English, Business English, Phonetics and Soft skills. Besides teaching, she has also served as Assistant Director, Student Affairs in the University. She is passionate about reading a great deal of books. In her leisure, she writes poetry and creative pieces. She has been a guest speaker to various academic institutions and motivational speaker to various NGOs to address the disadvantaged sections of the society. She believes that there is nothing impossible for them that believe!!



**Dr. Ch. Ganeswara Rao**, Assistant Professor in English, GITAM University has been teaching Soft Skills, Personality Development, English Communication Skills and basic grammar to undergraduate students. He has about 10 years of teaching experience and published a good number of papers in both national and international journals. He also attended reputed seminars and conferences and presented about 10 papers. He has done his Ph.D from Andhra University and his research was done on Afro-american literature. His research interests are Indian Literature, Afro-American literature and Canadian Literature.