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## A Critical Analysis of Alternative Sexual Behavior in Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

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**Abstract:** Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who is not afraid to take up the controversial and is ready to handle what is considered bold and blazing. He is bold enough to mirror the issue of alternate sexuality, homosexuality to be precise, and present it through his play "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" in a very powerful manner. The play effectively deals with the life of homosexuals and gays. In the play, Sharad and Deepali, though comfortable with each other, have different ways of being gay. Sharad has his own confusion and dilemmas, as he has a keen desire to turn into a heterosexual and lead a normal life. Much emphasis is given to the character of Kamlesh and Prakash aka Ed and his romance with Kamlesh's sister, Kiran. Earlier Kamlesh and Prakash were true lovers. But, Prakash changes into Ed, wearing the attire of a handsome gay, starts loving Kiran who is sister of Kamlesh. Thus, Dattani takes up the growing tendency of homosexuality in cities like Bombay and its non-acceptance by the society. He tries to go deep into the mind of these characters while depicting and simultaneously scrutinizing their mutual relationships and their revelations as also their self-discoveries.

**Keywords:** Controversial, Blazing, Alternative, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Dilemmas, Heterosexual, Gay, Acceptance, Scrutinizing, Self-discoveries.

Before we go to trace such issues in the Dattani's play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, we think it's worthwhile to understand the concept of sexuality in all its contours. It is also a requirement of the research endeavour to study why men and women have tendencies, what may be figuratively termed as alternative sexuality. Homosexuality as opposed to heterosexuality, has co-existed as a component of human sexual behaviours since the dawn of civilization. However,



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it is also true that in terms of civilized society, heterosexuality has been accepted as a natural medium for the continuation of the human race while homosexuality has been termed as aberrant deviant behaviour. As such it has always been a hush-hush affair, sort of taboo which is never openly practised or even discussed. The issue has been, traditionally speaking, pushed under the carpet and its nature or the forces leading to this behaviour have not been open to scrutiny until recent years when psychologists started delving deep into the unfathomable recesses of the human psyche. Similarly, this deviant behaviour came out of the dark closets of theologians and preachers because of the endeavours of the sociologists who tried to understand the impact and implications of such modes of sexual behaviour on the social constructs.

In recent years, however, attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted slightly. Due to liberal media, such issues have been open for discussion on a more frequent basis. Moreover, several organizations, Law commission of India and the Planning Commission of India, have either implicitly or expressly come out in support of homosexuality in India. They have made an outcry for sympathy, tolerance and social equality for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. Dattani is the first and foremost playwright to bring such issues on the stage for public discussion.

The umbrella of human sexuality includes numerous components, including gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation and patterns of sexual arousal and functioning. Gender identity refers to persons' sense of being, male or female. For the vast majority of people gender identity is consistent with their biological sex. But in certain cases there is cross-gender identification, in which individuals are pre-occupied with the desire to live as the other sex. Sexual orientation refers to a person's tendency or preference for engaging in sexual acts with male or female partners. Homosexual behaviour involves sexual intimacies with members of the same sex. Homosexual behaviour, by females, is often called lesbianism. Heterosexual behaviour involves sexual activity with members of the other sex. Bisexual behaviour involves sexual activity with members of both the sexes. Furthermore, some people engage in sexual activity with only one partner, others have several partners. It would be pertinent to quote Michal T.



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Nietzel, etal on the concept of human sexuality.

“Gender identity sex roles, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour are all independent aspects of human sexuality. One aspect of a person’s sexuality needs not and often does not determine other aspects of sexuality. Thus, it is common to find that females who have in accordance with the male gender role, may have a secure female gender identity, that a man whose sexual orientation is homosexual (or “gay”) has a strong male gender identity, and that a heterosexual male may prefer cooking or football. In short, human sexuality is very complex.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, the question arises- What is normal sexual behaviour? Most people have strong opinions on this issue, but it turns out that these opinions vary widely. Some people define normal sexual behaviour as acts that guarantee the reproduction of the species, while others define it in terms of “moral or religious codes that prevail in their culture”<sup>2</sup>. Another approach is to “equate sexual normality with that which is most common. If a lot of people engage in a certain pattern of sexual behaviour, it is regarded as normal.”<sup>3</sup> It is once again pertinent to quote Michal T. Nietzel to find the roots of homosexuality, or alternative sexual behaviour in mental disorders: “Thirty-five years ago, the answer would have undoubtedly been “yes” because until 1973, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder. In that year the American Psychiatric Association officially declared that homosexuality is not a mental disorder.”<sup>4</sup>

Socially aberrant behaviour, alternative sexual behaviour like homosexuality, is one of the major thematic concerns of the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, through which Mahesh Dattani tries to critically analyse such behaviour patterns, their causes and consequences on the family and the society. To deal with human relations minutely has been Dattani’s major concern. He seems to make an appeal for the acceptance of these shifting social and moral values in contemporary Indian society. What John McRae says, in the note on the play, will help the argument:

“It is not simply the first play in the Indian theatre to handle openly, gay themes of love, partnership, trust, 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 the society creates.”<sup>5</sup>

Mahesh Dattani’s *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is the first play which deals with the



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subject of homosexuality. An effort has been made by the playwright to find out the pathetic plight of homosexuals who do not find respectable space in society. Sharad and Deepali, though comfortable with each other, have different ways of being gay. Sharad had his own confusion and dilemmas, as he has a keen desire to turn into a heterosexual and lead a normal life:

“We-all, 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 adore me simply because I am hetero- I beg your pardon- a real man.”<sup>6</sup>

The characters of Kamlesh and Prakash aka Ed are given due emphasis. Ed marries Kiran, who is sister of Kamlesh, because he wants to remain close to Kamlesh so that he can fulfill his homosexual desires with him thereby challenging the institution of marriage for vulgar desires. Kamlesh, playing the role of a humble lover, resigns himself to the changed situation without complaining. Given this, his sexual needs are fulfilled by Sharad, his friend. We can very well know the plight of Sharad when he reveals to Kamlesh: “I wanted a year of my life being a housewife for you and all I get is a kick in the ass! You beast!” (P.56). Kamlesh also feels broken when he feels ignored by Sharad and Parkash. What he says to Ranjit will help us to look into his tragic dilemmas:

“Please! I am afraid! I need your help! I need you all. I am frightened. After Sharad went away- I decided that I didn’t really need anyone to live with. I had my work. That should have been enough. It wasn’t, I felt this void, the same feeling when three years ago, Parkash left me. I would have understood it if he had left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship.” (P.68)

Interestingly enough, Parkash/Ed feels ashamed of being homosexual and tries to leave the place along with Kiran at the earliest. He has a keen desire to live with the outside world which is reflected in the following words spoken by him to Ranjit:

“Look around you. Look outside. Look outside (goes to the window and flings it open). Look at the wedding crowd! There are real men and women out there! You have to see them to know what I mean!” (P.99)

The play gets the contours of a tragi-comedy when Bunny feels uncertain, unsure of this



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acceptance by the society. See what revealing facts are brought home to us about the plight even of a gay who feels himself best adjusted. The following dialogue projects the guilty, remorseful and agonized self of Bunny:

“The people who knew me are the people who hate me. That is not such a nice feeling. Try to survive in both the worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either. I am sorry, Kiran, I lied to you as I have lied to the rest of the world. I said to you that I am a liberal-minded person. I am not them I accept them. Actually it is they who are liberal-minded. They have accepted me in spite of my letting them down so badly.” (P. 102-103)

Mahesh Dattani in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with the plight of the gay community and their existential dilemmas. It can be taken as a charter of demands for people with the alternative sexual behaviour whose activities are taboo in society. With an excellent portrayal of the characters like Ed, Bunny, Sharad and Kamlesh, in a very lively and truthful manner, Dattani brings to the forefront the menace, real or imaginary, gays have to live with. Their sexual intimacies are still strongly forbidden by social rituals and are considered immoral and unsocial. When Kiran, in the play, wishes that gay people be allowed to marry, Dattani here pleads for the acceptance and social approval to homosexuals.

The foregoing discussion points to the fact that in spite of the psychologists passing judgement that homosexuality is not an abnormal behaviour or a mental disorder, the Indian psyche, in general, does not accept it as something normal. As a consequence, Dattani's characters, in spite of their indulgence in homosexuality, do not feel comfortable with their own inner selves. It is also, perhaps, because of the fact that people, at large, do not accept it as normal sexual behaviour. This results in their turning into split personalities which, in turn, affects their behaviour at the individual, societal and familial level. They are confused and perplexed psychologically and spiritually, trying to balance their own individual sexual preferences with the accepted and acceptable norms of behaviour in a society which treats and terms it as immoral and deviant behaviour.

Thus, a sort of existential crisis traumatizes them and forces them to stand in isolation in a world which is nothing but hostile. Nevertheless, it may be pointed out that Dattani, as a



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creative artist, does not seem to pass a moral judgement on the issue of homosexuality. Through his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, he provides an open forum to the reader to weigh and decide for himself the acceptability/non-acceptability of this behaviour. On the whole it may be said that by taking up the issue of alternative sexuality, the playwright has very artistically endeavoured to bring out a taboo which has been hidden under the mask of social distaste as well as hypocrisy.

## References:

- <sup>1</sup> Michael T. Nietzel, etal, *Abnormal Psychology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), P.489.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid; 489
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid; 489
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid; 494
- <sup>5</sup> John McRae, “A note on the play”, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* in Mahesh Dattani’s *Collected plays*, P.45.
- <sup>6</sup> Mahesh Dattani, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* in *Collected Plays* (New Delhi, Penguin, 2000), P.101. All subsequent references to the text of the play are from the same edition with the relevant page numbers given within parentheses immediately after the quotation.