



Locating Sexual Dissidence and Body Politics in Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

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Abstract— Mahesh Dattani, a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning dramatist and a prominent voice among modern Indian dramatists, has been utilising his theatrical talent as a weapon to inflict fatal blows on the traditional conservative notions of Indian culture. In his plays he endeavours to dissect the prejudices and hypocrisies of so called 'civilized society' towards the weak and vulnerable. This paper will attempt to study how the characters with sexual deviation in Mahesh Dattani's acclaimed play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* negotiate with several social and cultural imperatives. Dejected by his boyfriend Sharad, Kamlesh is unable to cope with the circumstance, so he invited his gay friends to his apartment to get rid of his struggles against the mental anxiety and trauma of being gay. Attempts will be made to explore the private conversation between the characters as a symbolic reflection of the deep-rooted body politics and how far Surveillance and stringent homophobic gaze, implemented through numerous restricting mechanisms, endanger the existence of people who do not fit into the normative system.

Keywords— sexual dissidence, homophobia, body politics, surveillance, closet

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the body plays a crucial role in the discourses involving gender and sexuality by locating the body as a space where social and cultural symbols are ingrained. Nadia Brown and Sarah Grehson in their article *Body Politics* consider body as an active site of contestation and interrogation. They note

Bodies are sites in which social constructions are mapped on to human beings. Subjecting the body to a systematic regime such as government regulation- is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially and politically accepted manners. (Brown and Gershon1)

According to them body, in a systematic way, is placed within a hierarchical dichotomy for instance male/female, able-bodied/ disabled, heterosexual/homosexual and this binary politics gives birth to the notion of 'privileged' and marginal body. Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* asserts "the body' appears as a passive medium on which the cultural meanings are inscribed or as an instrument through which an appropriative or interpretive

will determine a cultural meaning for itself" (12). But, before we begin, we have to question what is Body? The term "body" has a biological definition that refers to the physical substance that makes up a living organism, while social theorists define it as a "social construct" with political implications. Famous Australian thinker and theorist Bryan Turner in his book *The Body* has made an appeal that body should be given central position in sociological interpretations as body is the space where every social and political events are problematized in the body and get manifested through it. The social theorists interpret body as open surface waiting for the imprintation of culture in it. The statement is somehow an agreement of John Locke's conception of Tabula Rasa, that mind of an inborn is a blank sheet of paper. In relation to gender renowned feminist Simone de Beauvoir's observation that "one is not born women but becomes ones" is an explicit reference to gender as an acquired entity. Thus, gendered body indicates a body that behave in compliance with the gender norm. since birth body has been treated with specific designs and mechanisms and through repetitive practices of a certain behavior make

the body a slave of habit and put it into a cultural regime. Thus, body politics emerges when an individual feels a mismatch between his sex and gender roles. Roberta Sassatelli defines body politics

Body Politics refers to both the processes through which societies regulate human bodies or use (part of) it to regulate themselves, and to the struggles over the degree of individual or social control of the body, its parts and processes. In other terms it covers two sides of the power body relations: the powers to control bodies on the one side and resistance and protest against such powers on the other side. (348)

Works of Michael Foucault provide the necessary impetus for the theoretical development of the discussion on body. he argues that through surveillance and exertion of power body has been historically disciplined. In his widely read book *Discipline and Punish* he has developed the notion of “docile body”. Butler opines that ‘body is not a “being” but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality’ (199;177).” In the 3rd chapter named *Subversive Bodily Act*, quoting the proverbial line of Simone De Beauvoir’s “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” she argues “this phrase is odd, even non-sensical, for how one can become a woman if one wasn’t all along?... Beauvoir, of course, meant merely to suggest that the category of woman is a variable cultural accomplishment, a set of meanings that are taken on or taken up within the cultural field, and that one is not born with a gender- gender is always acquired. (151). Therefore, placing the body in a cultural matrix result in constructing and shaping the body in a normative way.

II. HOMOSEXUALITY IN INDIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

With more than 1.3 billion inhabitants, India serves as a microcosm of the world, housing individuals from all castes, religions, and cultural backgrounds. In spite of such diversity, persons of varied sexual orientation have been persistently denied existence in mainstream discourses over the previous few centuries. However, a brief examination of Indian mythology, religious writings, and history will convince us of the inclusiveness of ancient Indian culture toward all genders. While describing this trend, Ruth Vanita calls the 19th century ‘a crucial period of transitions’ when colonial precolonial homophobia gradually got imprinted as a “dominant voice in colonial and post-colonial mainstream discourse.” She also made note of the homophobic effects of the puritanical Victorian mindset that was imposed on Indian culture. to illustrate. The sculptures at the Khajuraho

temple, for instance, clearly depict homosexual and lesbian interactions. An ancient Indian text on sexuality called the *Kamasutra* views mutual attraction between men as a "third nature" or "Tritiya prakriti". Thus, it would be a blunder to dismiss the presence of sexual dissidence regarding it as sexual perversion.

III. ANALYSIS

To bring changes within society drama is perhaps the best medium due to its ability to influence a large number of people within a short span of time. Mahesh Dattani has drawn overwhelming attention for the portrayal of ‘fringe issues’ on the stage to dissect various layers of sexual-subjection. Complementing his endeavor to choose his subject matter from wide ranging socio-political issues M.K Naik write In a way, Dattani's theatre complements Karnard's in that Dattani is obsessed with contemporary social and political realities in India, in contrast to Karnard's preference for mythology and history. His subjects include the influence of the Indian joint family on a person, the predicament of women in Indian culture, and homosexuality—a contentious issue (for an Indian). Dattani is the first notable Indian dramatist of English who has addressed this issue.

He has written a number of plays with a queer element, but *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, which made its debut at the Tata Theatre in Mumbai on November 23, 1998, is one such play that focuses solely on the day-to-day realities of queer lives in India. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, a play of three acts, Dattani endeavours to project the life of homosexuals in a dominant heterosexist nation and how they struggle for a stable-identity and their longing for a space under which they can grow by their own wish. The play documents Dattani's forceful artistic responses to the repressive laws, doctrines, and ideologies at the social, political, and judicial levels. His creative talent, combined with his practical knowledge, allows him to create characters who accurately reflect their "abject" living conditions The play, set in the city of Bombay, revolves around the life of a group of homosexuals. The play begins with Kamlesh’s attempts to break the relationship with Prakash because their relation will not be accepted by the society. To cope up with the mainstream culture Prakash prefers to lead a ‘normal’ life with a woman, Kiran (the only heterosexual character in the play). Ranjit considers India as a country unsympathetically prejudiced towards the queer people and thus, he prefers to live in abroad. The play is a perfect dramatization of the internal conflict of queer people and how they put a mask on their identity in order to behave in socially accepted manner. He has written a number of plays with a queer element but *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, which made its

debut at the Tata Theatre in Mumbai on November 23, 1998, is one such play that focuses exclusively on the day-to-day realities of queer lives in India. The play documents Dattani's forceful artistic responses to the repressive laws, doctrines, and ideologies at the social, political, and judicial levels. His creative talent, combined with his practical knowledge, allows him to create characters who accurately reflect their "abject" living conditions. Foucault mentioned in *History of Sexuality* that by the 18th century sexuality turned in to a 'police matter' which encourage the "necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses" (25).

The settings of the play is designed in a way that it conveys a lot about the play. In this play we get six gay characters representing several facets of their marginal existence through their actions and conflicts. The whole action of the play takes place in a claustrophobic environment of a small flat, 'too perfect to be real. yet it speaks a lot of its occupants, Kamlesh and hiss attempt at creating a world where he can belong" the settings of the play aptly establishes the mood of the play and is emblematic of the inner turmoil and tensions of the characters. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri in *Mahesh Dattani An Introduction* observes how

"the spaces within 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 the 'other' spaces occupied by the characters in the play perpetually reminding them of their isolation" (43).

Outside of their flat, a marriage ceremony is going on which create a sharp contrast to the theme of play at the same time it points out how hegemonic heterosexuality always interfere and exerts power on the life queer people. Dattani has brilliantly represented the flat as a signifier of the 'closet' of the homosexuals from where they hardly dare to come out due to their internalized homophobia, self-hatred for being gay. By providing them a private space of their Dattani seeks to explore inner psychological tensions, anxieties, aspirations and to locate their own perception about their own identity and orientations. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* explicates the association between discipline, power and punishment by analyzing the 18th century tradition of public display of punishment and execution. He argues the development of discipline, a set of rules and regulatory measures through the movement of the bodies could be controlled in an efficient way. He uses the concept of Jeremy Bentham, a utilitarian theorist who developed "panopticon", a technical method to keep an eye the criminals of the prison by constructing a watch-tower at the center of the prison from where proper vigilance can be

maintained. When one under constant fear of being looked at one becomes docile.

Situating Kamlesh's flat as a microcosm of the world outside his rooms can be considered as the closet, the hidden space of same-sex people. There are moments this when two space intersects with each other. When Sharad picks up the binoculars of Kamlesh and looks out at

SHARAD: oh, my Gawd! Those heterosexuals are at it again!

KAMLESH: if you can see them, they can see us. shut the window.(53)

The window is here the liminal zone where homo hetero divide is implicitly portrayed. It also embodies the fear associated with their unacknowledged identity which compel them to live in isolation to avoid clash with the dominant ideology. They are within the constant fear of homophobic gaze. Society as an institution exert power on them and restrict their intuitive behaviour. The small space of their meeting is a private place that secure them from the possible threats. The sense of stigma attached with their identity prevents them from coming out. Normative heterosexist beliefs, social values and several disciplinary institutions function as a panopticon that has sharp surveillance over the disciplined activities. At a very slight deviance body will be strategically objectified and segregated from the mainstream discourse. Frightened Kamlesh utters 'please! I am afraid! I need your help! I need you all. I am afraid. Frightened. (pause). His frustration get manifested – "I wished I wasn't gay"(69)

It begins with Kamlesh's attempt to break all emotional and physical ties with Prakash in fear of social unacceptance, shame and guilt. He confesses "I came here to get over a relation. A relationship I suppose it was. we have all been through the pain of separation. As a gay men and women we have been through that, I suppose some us several times"(68). To forget him, he tries to divert his attention towards Sharad but he fails to get rid of his agonies of separations. He even goes on taking counsel and medication from a psychiatrist who suggest him "you would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society but, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself" (69). This remark of the educated psychiatrist helps to understand the homophobic attitude of the society. R. Raj Rao, a prominent gay writer, in his novel *The Boyfriend* also points out similar attitudes through the speech of Gauri about Yudi, the Gay protagonist. She believes "all men are naturally attracted to woman. If something about their sex life had gone away, there was no reason why they couldn't be reclaimed, reformed." Thus, according to the heteronormativity, homosexuality is an aberration or a pathological condition which can be cured. For Ranjit who

lives in foreign does not undergo such marginalization. He lives peacefully with his gay partner. He criticizes the sexually biased society when he utters, “my English lover and I have been together for twelve years. And you lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country”

The play shows how even the gay characters are themselves homophobic. While growing in a traditional conservative Indian society they internalize a sense of guilt, fear and shame for their inability to equate with others. They express their desire to merge with the norms. Bunny who never comes out and works in a heteronormative serial wonder “do you think I will be accepted by millions if I screamed from the rooftops that I am a gay. camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can't find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage” (70) Sharad also believes that putting a mask over his identity and leading life like a heterosexual will provide him ample privileges of living. He says, “being a heterosexual man – a real man- as Ed put it – I get everything. I get to be accepted... I can have a wife; I can have children who will all adore me simply because I am hetero” (101).

IV. CONCLUSION

Denying such discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and challenging the heteronormative patterns of behavioral fixity Nivedita Menon in her influential book *Seeing Like a Feminists* asserts “Once we give up on the idea that heterosexuality is normal and all human bodies are either male or female, more and more bodies and desires will come in to view. Perhaps also, one body may, in one lifetime, move through many identities and desires. The use of ‘queer’, then is deliberate political move, which underscores the fluidity (potential and actual) sexual identity and sexual desire”(98). She is strongly against the notion of gendered/sexual fixity welcoming a notion of multiple possibility.

The play locates how this category of sexual dissidence suffers from acute existential crisis because of the lack of their identity which society denies them to provide. Their agonized cry for being the victims of sexual bigotry most of the times remains unheard by dominant mainstream culture of the society. And this crisis is rightly pointed out by the utterances of Bunny. He says, “I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either” (103). The play aptly dramatizes the subjection of bodies that do not conform to mainstream notion of ‘correct body’ and thus, to avoid exposure to oppression they keep themselves closeted.

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