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Representation of queer and the aesthetics of language in Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

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Abstract

The emergence of queer voices during the 1990s in India, brought a radical shift in the mainstream ideas of gender studies and its dynamics. Homosexuality re-emerged as a form of gender expression and sexual orientation and the "Queering" process took up pace in Indian Literature. The paper explores Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* as a prime text which introduced the concept of homosexuality in Indian literature and to the Indian audience. The play dramatised a claustrophobic and recessive life of a gay man, who is finding it hard to align himself with the societal notion of masculinity. The paper argues that Dattani's representation is only a minor part of gay people's lives and does not touch other phases of queer lives. The play has been praised for depicting gay characters in a theatre with cosmopolitan space. I will argue that the play focuses more on the colonial notions of homo-sexuality and postcolonial queer theories are completely out of its purview. I will discuss my arguments with the help of queer literary theories. The play is aesthetic in language but portrays a diminished view of queer lives.

Keywords: Queer, gender, masculinity, postcolonial

Introduction

The decade of the 1990s saw the emergence of Asian homosexuals. Homosexuality was closely associated with AIDS, a disease which was emerging rapidly in the Western countries. In India, homosexuality was considered a taboo, something which one cannot talk about and hardly has any representation in the Indian society. The colonial government criminalised homosexuality by introducing section 377 which says:

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine"^[1].

It clearly undermines the representation of sexuality by terming it as unnatural.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (in some mentioned as 'Bombay'), was first staged in 1998 in Mumbai, a cosmopolitan space. The play is first in India which openly addresses the issue of homosexuality and the lives of queer people in India. The audience reaction to a play which addresses a theme which was never talked about and was under-represented, was scrupulous and poignant. Homosexuality was always considered to be an issue and problem which has long been considered as a western idea and concept. In India, though homosexuality existed since ancient India and references can be found in many religious texts, it has been completely ignored and kept out of purview since colonial rule. Madhavi Menon in her book *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India* (2018), observes "In the West, these (queer) multiple desires are greeted as new-fangled ideas, and in India now they are increasingly treated as foreign conspiracies." (Menon, 10). The fact India had never treated homosexuality and queer desires as something outside the purview of mainstream life was restricted before the colonial government rule, a phase when queer relations were in bloom.

John McRae warns his readers not to judge characters' lives and identity:

"For the fault is not just the characters'- it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity." (3)

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Dattani's play is a breakthrough in Indian literature, and brought new queer ideas into the emerging twenty first century.

Space

John McRae in the 'A note on the play', argues that there are two spaces in the play, one a physical space, "an interior with different spaces- Kamlesh's flat, mainly the living room and the bedroom- there is also the mental space", both representing the two perspectives of homosexuality. The bedroom represents the sexual space, a space of intimacy, while the mental space represents the claustrophobia of living a life as a gay person. Kamlesh-Guard relationship is a monetary, unnatural relation where money is exchanged with sexual love. But repeatedly we as readers are told that Kamlesh is in love with Prakash, his former boyfriend. Dattani's portrayal of gay love is unconventional because no two people are in love with each other and relationships are more as relations of convenience, not of organic love.

The cosmopolitan Mumbai space is juxtaposed with Kamlesh's profession as a famous fashion designer and the elite friends he is surrounded with. Bunny is a famous television actor; Ranjit is settled abroad; Deepali we are told is doing well in her career; all the friends add up to the cosmopolitan space. But the notion of cosmopolitan spaces in context to urban elite homosexuals is a hegemonic idea. In India, homosexuality is often seen as a space of urban rich people who have the 'freedom' and 'money' to explore their sexuality, while rural India is more traditional and deep seated with the roots ^[1]. The LGBT community has many significant presences in rural India but due to social limitations are unable to come out into the public. Dattani's play does not show us the rural Indian space where homosexuality had break into the mainstream Indian culture. The play audience can only see the urban rich queer space where not much repressed desires is present. All the characters in the play know each other about their sexual orientation. The sexuality is not hidden in Dattani's urban portrayal but the same is a subaltern in 1990s rural India.

Also the play never allows its characters to have access to the outside of Kamlesh's house. Kamlesh himself is never shown us in the outside space, except for a brief flashback of his first encounter with Ed. While a 'Barat' (wedding procession) is going out in Kamlesh's locality, an outside space, Kamlesh is excluded from this unified social celebration and is "depressed" in his house, waiting for his friends to come and "help him". The closed space for Kamlesh represents his minority status who is unable to be equal with the society.

The urban space is also different for everyone as can be seen in the play. Bunny find it easier to disguise himself as a "man" in order to live rationally and pursue a successful careers:

"Mard ke puttar bano! Be brave! Be like your father! (26)

"Find yourself a nice woman. You can always have sex on the side." (30)

"I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either." (68)

For Deepali, her companionship with Tina is more positive and organic when compared to Kamlesh-Prakash, Kamlesh-Sharad and Kiran-Ed relationship. We are shown the loving relation of Deepali-Tina, the only lesbian couple in the play.

Further, another character Ranjit is almost an outsider in the 'Indian' space, for he had settled abroad, living a more secure life, with freedom. He is a migrant from India who is unable to assimilate his identity in India. Dattani's idea of space is thus narrowed down to urban elite space, excluding rural India.

Postcolonial Literary Interpretation

'Queering' is the process of turning on its head the assumption of heterosexuality-as-norm ^[3]. Postcolonial theories attempt to bring the queer studies as a new field of academic studies and simultaneously unified it to mainstream ideas. Pramod K. Nayar observes in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*:

"Gays and lesbians share a common rejection by heterosexist society. Further, notions of family that circumscribe gay life in Asian nations are similar to those in European countries not very long ago. The literature of homosexuality in postcolonial South Asia does, however, show how expectations of 'family life' bind gay and lesbian identities." (159)

Further, Psychoanalyst and author Sudhir Kakar observes ^[4]. "Sexuality is a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies, arising from various sources, seeking satisfaction in diverse ways, and involving a range of excitations and activities that aims to achieve pleasure that goes beyond the satisfaction of any basic somatic need"

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai does not represent postcolonial interpretation of queerness. Rather the focus of the play is more minor in exploring sexualities. In Act I, the opening scene depicts the dark side of a gay person, who deliberately chooses a convenient way of having paid sex in order to gratify his sexual desires:

"The bedroom is realistic, but hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy." (1)

You used him (Guard) as a sex object." (22)

Postcolonial literary criticism focuses more on the subject of homosexuality and identity than reducing it to the object of desire and passion. Dattani objectification of same sex desire is more inclined towards the erotic feelings which was the primary reason for which the British government criminalised homosexuality. Pramod K. Nayar expand this very argument:

"Reading gay-lesbian writing in the postcolonial context is based on the assumption that sexuality is important to a text and its critical exegesis. Such an exegesis is necessarily political, dealing with social identities of authors, texts, and sexual preferences. Since gay-lesbian writing is integral to gay activism and both are located in cultural discourses of the nation, a text's stance and ideology feeds into and off the larger context. That is, gay-lesbian writing is perhaps more firmly rooted in the cultural scene of a nation or race than perhaps any other genre." (Nayar, 160)

Further the reference to Ed and Kamlesh visiting psychiatrist shows that they are suffering from mental issues and need constant social support. But their encounter with a "straight homophobic psychiatrist" (29) reduces them to escape the route to problem solving. Postcolonial queer studies attempts to neutralise these very hegemonic stereotypes assigned to the LGBT community. The Queer studies look forward to making a safe space for queer people

which advocate empowerment. Dattani's play is more towards showing a space of repressed identities. No gay character in the play is happy. There is a clear binary between the personal self and the social gathering at Kamlesh's house. Further in Act III, Ed attempts to commit suicide in order to escape the taboo of being a "gay" and simultaneously all other characters start leaving Kamlesh's house, breaking away from the social homosexual unity.

Judith Butler observes that sexuality is invariably thought of in terms of marriage, and marriage as the key to legitimacy. Various sexual practices and relationships not only enforce the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate queer lives, but also produce distinctions among forms of illegitimacy. Marriage becomes the sanctioned relationship even for gay and lesbian people: "the proposition that marriage should become the only way to sanction or legitimate sexuality is unacceptably conservative" (21). In Dattani's play, the parallel portrayal of a wedding procession 'Barat' with the main action of the play brings binaries of two different worlds. The homosexual world, depicted by Kamlesh and his friends, is in sharp contrast to the heterosexual 'barat'. Marriage is a social construct and has been closely associated with a union between man and a woman. The portrayal of Kamlesh is as if he is trapped inside his house, outside from societal gaze, while the heterosexual 'barat' has agency to celebrate their sexuality. Further, Bunny's marriage is a way to assimilate with the society by getting rid of his identity. To him, marriage is escape:

"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." (31)

The second instance of marriage is of Kiran and Ed, another marriage of convenience. Ed, like Bunny, in order to be more "straight" and "man", aligns himself with the social structure of marriage. Dattani clearly portrays marriage as a way to establish an identity. But here the traditional Indian notion on marriage too confronts in the decision making of Ed and Bunny. In India, marriage is also equated with personal growth and a social status. Bunny's career and Ed's future are dependent on the marriage. Pramod K Nayar observes:

"In India, the patrilineal family unit and a wider kinship grouping is deemed ideal in Hindu families. Patrilineal joint families include men related through the male line, along with their wives and children. In effect, all kinship, family relationships, and households are defined and seen only as heterosexual and revolving around the male line. Any other form of the family is unacceptable." (170)

Thus the concept of a normal family and normal marriage is restricted to heterosexual people only. Even in recent years in India, the same-sex marriage is much into debate but still a perfect solution and legal rights are not provided and the wait goes on.

Ranjit in the play portrays the queer diaspora, another emerging community outside India. In order to find a personal self, Ranjit like many other contemporary gay people, migrates to a more queer friendly country like the USA, UK, Europe and Australia. To Ranjit, India is a degenerating state for gay people;

"You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country." (31)

"I am sometimes regretful of being an Indian, because I can't seem to be both Indian and gay." (52)

But Ranjit is not completely safe from society's taboo for his Indian "race" is an issue in the country of white people. Ranjit accepted a Utopian world in the western countries but encountered something different. Nayar observes:

"Gays of colour face oppression from whites. Diasporic queers face multiple oppressions by virtue of their displacement, Western education, race, and sexual orientation. Their identity, as Martin Manalansan IV argues (1993) is about being gay, being diasporic, being Westernized and being of another race -that is, they are 'subject to' both local and global/transnational identities." (174)

Dattani here aligns himself with the postcolonial interpretation in Queer reception. Ranjit becomes a double marginalised figure, one as a homosexual person another as a brown Indian in England. The way the West interprets homosexuality is very different from India, or Asia. Queer theory seeks to build *global queer communities*, where people of diverse ethnic, regional, linguistic origins and affiliations come together. Chela Sandoval proposes that global queer communities and their networks constitute a "dissident globalization".

Language

The language of the play is clearly an intermixing of Hindi (written in form of English) and English, both a cosmopolitan and native way of communication. In Act I, Kamlesh talks in Hindi, native language with the Guard. Thus the class disparity is clearly shown even though both share the same space, Kamlesh's bedroom. The moment Kamlesh encounters his friends, he communicates in English, the language of the elite, a notion prevalent in India. Dattani does not ignore the class distinction in the play. Like Kamlesh, Sharad too uses the same language with the Guard. Further, Kamlesh conversation with the Guard shows the latter as a sex worker, again degenerating his identity:

"Tum, kya...yeh sab...paise ke liye karte ho?" (8)

Regarding his language, Dattani comments:

"Like many urban people in India, you're in this situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. English is more comfortable to express." (Mee, 2002) [3].

Further, Jaspal Singh observes

"Dattani takes up urban themes as English is the preferred language in urban India. His theatrical context constitutes urban middle class individuals that are in conflict with the self and the society. That is why characters do not look or sound unreal when they speak English on stage." (31)

In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani use of language is clearly for the elite audience and readers to which the play and the drama is accessible. Further many critics have argued that the queer gathering at Kamlesh's house is an elite space where the English language is accessible more easily. The audience too had been elite and majorly English speaking. Dattani resembles the urban elite homosexual community and probably the play is written for them. The

Guard in the play represents the lower social class. But there is no attempt to either show the rural community in assimilation or unification with the urban spaces especially in context to the queer voices.

Conclusion

The ending of the play is much distorted without a clear resolution. It leaves Ed, Kamlesh and Kiran alone in a struggling place. Probably this is Dattani's attempt to show the unresolved lives of the three characters, like the play's ending. In one sense, one can observe that the last two lines of Kamlesh is a clear assertion of identity crises:

“I ask myself what I have got
And what I am and what I'm not...” (78)

Homosexuality in India is in continuous threat from society which assumes heterosexuality as the dominant form of expression. The play clearly brings this argument into its main plot. Dattani's attempts to bring a topic which is unrecognised from the society is remarkable in Indian literature. But this portrayal lacks an integrated idea of queer community. The LGBT community deals with a wider spectrum of sexualities. It is not only restricted to gay and lesbian identities. Dattani has restricted to the gay people only and thus does not show a much wider community, which results in the play not making it large into the queer fiction even after being acknowledged widely.

Postcolonial writers have attempted to show the LGBT community in a much positive and empowering way, a community which is resilient. The emerging queer studies expanded this study and introduced wider interpretations of queer representations in literature, media and films. Further, Dattani's play usage of English language problematize the marginalisation and exclusion of rural India queer community, which is considered to be a subaltern and silent group. The play is a partial representation of queer lives in the late twentieth century.

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