

Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*: An Articulation of Gay Identity Crisis

Jaspal Singh

Mahesh Dattani, the Sahitya Academy Award winner playwright gives the homosexuals of India a voice to articulate, probably for the very first time in the Indian theatre in his plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. He spotlights the crisis that gays face as they are torn between their true self and what the traditional Indian society thinks and expects of the gays. Their hidden fears and feelings are carefully portrayed in these plays. Dattani, within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identity crisisⁱ of the gays who occupy no honourable space in social order. This issue is invisible in the societyⁱⁱ about which none publically talks or writes. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a play that depicts the social space of violence and humiliation faced by them. First performed at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai on 23rd Nov., 1998 and then adapted to a film *Mango Soufflé*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is probably the best and the most complex play that discusses the socio-psychological identity crisis of the gays who are torn between the social taboos and their personal desires, their conscience and social consciousness. It dramatizes the conflicts, anguish, dilemmas, insecurities, fears and frustration of the gays in the society. John Mc. Rae writes in a note on the play:

“It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and 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 society creates.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Dattani has made use of multi-level stage to represent the different spaces of household representing the mental spaces of the characters and the different realities they live in. The dark expensive area represents the mental anguish and dilemma of the characters while the open space represents the action in the context of external thoughts. All the action takes place in Kamlesh's flat that is divided into three spaces - the living room, the bed room and the non realistic expensive state. The flat is situated at the Marine Drive which gives the idea of the luxurious life of Mumbai. There is a contrast between the glorious view of the 'Queen's Necklace' and the isolated flat of Kamlesh which shows the contrast between the public and private life of the gays. The second is the bedroom of Kamlesh which is hidden behind the wall which gives it an image of mystery and privacy. The third area is the space where the characters immediately suspend into the “*shoonya*” and their innermost thoughts and feelings come out.

Dattani cleverly juxtaposes two contrasting scenarios where there is the gathering of gays in a flat on one hand, where all the action takes place and of a wedding going on offstage and sounds of celebration are quite loud and clear. The wedding is the sanctification and endorsement of a heterosexual relationship and “the whole world acknowledges two people who enter a union pact, so they have to stick by that.”(Collected Plays p.72.) The society approves of a heterosexual relationship but the homosexual relations are looked down upon by the majority. The gays present in the party feel the pressure of the social customs and traditions. They try to gain space and come to terms with their own identity in contrast to the social norms. Kirin, the heroine of the play says, “I really wish they would allow gay people to marry.” And she gets a reply from Ranjit who says, “They do. Only not to the same sex.” (CP p.98.)

We see a host of gays at the party in the flat and they represent varied faces of the homosexual community. They all are complex characters who cannot be understood by their

outward gender preferences only. They have their own fears and fantasies, cares and concerns, conscience and consciousness, emotions and passions as part of their personality traits like anybody else. They have different expressions regarding their identity. They have gathered together at the invitation of Kamlesh who is a 'recluse' in the heart of Bombay and is unable to forget his lover Ed/Parkash. Kamlesh is not a closet homosexual who wants to hide his true self. He himself says, "How long shall we continue to hide? We can't hide forever!" (CP p.91) But his gay partner Ed has betrayed him and he feels down and out because of that. He even tries to take the help of a psychiatrist out of the 'Yellow Pages' who pretends to understand his case and tells him about the 'aversion therapy' to help him fight the depression but "He said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change the society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself." (CP p. 69.) But he was all the more obsessed with the memory of Ed which keeps 'cropping up' in his mind 'like herpes'. He ended up "picking up strangers-bringing them over-hoping to connect" (CP p.70.) and was "screwing anything that has a bulge in the pants." (CP p.63.) He even indulged in sexual relations with the guard and the secretary of the society. It is the failure on the part of Kamlesh to 'reorient' but success or at least a pretention of success on the part of Ed when he pretends to be 'straight' because the church and the psychiatrist have helped him believe that his love for Kamlesh was "the work of the devil. Now the devil has left him."(CP p.85.) It is not the individuals alone who disapprove homosexuality but the high institutions of society like church who do not approve and sanctify such relations because relations between same sex, since they cannot be procreative are seen as unnatural and carnal.

Ed has left him because he wants to hide his gay identity and therefore he intends to marry Kiran who is Kamlesh's sister. He wants to remain in touch with Kamlesh through Kiran so that nobody suspects his identity. He says, "Nobody would know. Nobody would care...I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me."(CP p.105.) He sees no future in open gay relationship. He does not want himself to be branded publically as a gay. He defends himself of his intentions of pretending 'straight' in the arguments in the party when he says,

"Look around you. Look outside...There are real men and women out there. You have to see them to know what I mean. But you don't want to. You don't want to look at the world outside this- this den of yours. All of you want to live in your own little bubble."(CP p. 99.)

Deepali is a 'sensible' lesbian among the group. She feels sympathetic and concerned of Kamlesh and has an affinity towards him which is reflected in her conversation with Kamlesh, "If you were a woman, we would be in love...If you were heterosexual, we would be married."(CP p.65.) She is vocal of her sexual inclinations in her arguments at the party and says, "It's not shame, is it? With us?... Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be" (CP p. 89.) and of the gay cause, "I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men!"(CP p.60.)

The guard who does odd jobs for the people at the party is also a homosexual who is seen putting up his clothes in front of Kamlesh just at the beginning of the play. Ranjit who wants to hide his gay identity in India has his gay partner in England.

The whole play revolves around the identity crisis in Edwin Prakash Matthew alias Ed but it is just not Ed who is facing this crisis. All the gays in the play are facing this crisis. We have another example of the like of Ed as Bunny Singh who admits that what he is doing, he is just trying to "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." (CP

p.70.) He is a *Sardar* who has cut his hair to hide his outer religious identity and has married to hide his inner gay identity. But he is a success in the TV program ‘*Yeh Hai Hamara Parivaar*’. The title of the program and its success suggests that India has a traditional society and social setup. He is a wonderful ideal middle class Indian towards whom everyone looks up to: the ‘ideal husband and father’.

Ed is also trying to ‘camouflage’ in the same manner as Bunny Singh is doing. He is under immense psychological pressure and is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. On one hand he is in conflict with Kamlesh whom he leaves because he was ashamed of his relationship with him and he did not want to be branded as a gay in the society and on the other hand he is in conflict with Kiran from whom he hides his true identity but tries to use her to remain in touch with Kamlesh. Sharad is the antithesis of Ed who is vocal of his gay identity. “Let the world know that you exist. Honey if you flaunt it, you’ve got it.”(CP p.70.) He himself admits that “I am not bisexual. I am gay as a goose.”(CP p.100.) and teases Ed with his speech on ‘Macho Man Syndrome’ that Ed tries to feign:

“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. Look at all the kings around you, look at all the male power they enjoy, thrusting themselves on to the world, all that penis power! Power with sex, power with muscle, power with size. Firing rockets, exploding nuclear bombs, if you can do it five times I can do it six times and all that stuff. (Thrusting his pelvis in an obscene macho fashion.) Power, man! Power!” (CP Vol. I p. 101.)

Ed tries to be the ‘king’ in the society by pretending being ‘straight’ but cannot hide his true self as he has a past and that past haunts him.

Sharad pinpoints the crisis in Ed’s mind through the gay anthem that he sings in the beginning and the end of the play which is the English version of Charles Aznavour’s ‘*Comme ils disent*’ ‘What Makes a Man a Man’:

So many times we have to pay
For having fun and being gay....(CP pp. 55-56.)

I ask myself what I have got
And what I am and what I’m not...(CP p.111.)

‘To be or not to be’ identified as a gay ‘is the question’ that Ed and other gays in the play face. Overwhelmed by the circumstances and social pressures, Ed twice tries to commit suicide in the play. His attempt to suicide shows that he is the weakest of all the homosexuals in the play because he is suffering the most from this identity crisis. The other characters in the play have this crisis also but they have some faith and belief in their identity also and they are articulate about it at least in their ‘bubble’. But Ed doesn’t want his true identity to be revealed even to his close friends and to his girlfriend also. He breaks in the end when his gay identity is revealed to the society and to his fiancé through his photograph with Kamlesh where both are hugging each other naked. He is in a dilemma as to what to do: “Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?”(CP p.111.)

Kiran is the only heterosexual in the play. She is an attractive and beautiful girl in her thirties with 'exquisite bone structure' and having right colour and fabric. The 'scars' of the troubled marriage have not left her. She divorced her husband because she wanted "To escape from those fights at night...The humiliation of expressing to friends and neighbours...that the black eye was from banging my head against the door. Or the broken rib was from the fall...It was the cigarette burns on my arms I couldn't explain."(CP p.77.) She feels the humiliation of being branded a 'divorcee' as she says: "Being divorced doesn't help. Everyone seems to know all the details. Or think they do. At that party, I felt their stares, as if they were saying 'That's Kiran. The one whose husband dumped her.' Kamlesh, take my advice. Don't let people know about you. You will spend your whole life defending yourself. If I had the choice, I would stay invisible." (CP p. 91) Kamlesh had introduced her to Ed whom she now loves dearly but assumes that he is not a gay. She is planning to shift to Mumbai after marriage with Ed. She comes to know about Ed's identity at the party. She says, "If there are 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?" (CP p.107.)

Dattani has beautifully used the symbol of a photograph to highlight the identity crisis in the play. It is a photograph where Kamlesh and Ed are hugging each other 'cheek to cheek, pelvis to pelvis, Naked.' It is the only photograph left with Kamlesh as he has returned all the other similar photographs to Ed along with the negatives. He was hiding this one in particular in the bathroom, behind the mirror which Sharad discovers and takes out to show it to other friends. Kamlesh finds it beautiful but Ed calls it ugly and a piece of filth. Ed's calling it ugly shows that he was not ready to leave any proof of his gay identity with Kamlesh. He also tries to commit suicide when he comes to know that Kiran and other people at the party and the wedding have seen the picture and his gay identity that he wanted to hide was revealed to the people. Kiran who is 'frozen' to see the picture at first but then replaces the picture of her and Ed in the frame with that picture symbolizing that she considers an open gay relationship as a better choice than a hidden one. So the picture is the most powerful and vital symbol depicting the identity crisis used by Dattani in the play.

The entire experience of crisis, predicament and dilemma that the homosexuals in the play regarding their identity can be summed up in the speech of Bunny Singh in the third Act when he makes his confession in front of his gay friends and especially to Kiran when he says:

"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. 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 but I accept them. Actually, it is they who are liberal-minded. They have accepted me in spite of my letting them down so badly. I deny them in public, but I want their love in private. I have never told anyone in so many words what I am telling you now- I am a gay man. 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."(CP pp. 102-103.)

It is just not the denial of the true identity by Bunny Singh but the speech encompasses the entire gay community that is under tremendous pressure as how to hide their true identity and be a hypocrite so that the people of the 'acceptable world' should not hate them. All of them try

to 'survive in both the worlds'. But they end up with a sense of belongingness to none. John McRae puts it as:

"...the fault is just not 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."^{iv}

This experience of contradiction between the self and the society leads to the identity crisis which has been beautifully dramatized in this play. The play is a vindication of rights of the gays who need at least some social space to overcome their identity crisis. The play ends with '*Fade out last on the picture of Ed and Kamlesh, Kiran and Kamlesh holding each other*' implying the acceptance of gay identity by at least one heterosexual and revelation to the rest of the society and the picture depicts that the reality will always exist howsoever or whosoever tries to deny it.

Dattani makes use of very bold words in the dialogues of this play; words that a conservative Indian society does not relish publically. One doesn't have to look for gay connotations between the lines. Words like: bulge in the pants, coconut friend, buggery, dickhead, love bites, pelvis to pelvis, nerds, fucking hot, faggot, pansy, gandu etc. have been used without any restriction. These words have been taken from the gay vocabulary and used here to make the dialogues crisp and functional. Dattani makes the characters speak loud and long of their sexual desires and experiences in the play. There are quick exchanges between the characters and sometimes long monologues are used wherever and whenever necessary. Dattani realizes the needs of the theatre and he fulfills those needs in his own bold style. It is attributed:

"Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person, rather than a writer, is evident in the way he is able to structure the stage mechanism effectively and how at times allows the text to speak for themselves and to look at their own workings and methodology. He employs a language that is often pungent, clear and sharp, pushing the spoken word to its limits and interfering them with pregnant silence and that only someone with an intimate inwardness with theatre can."^v

To conclude, we can say that Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, is a play that raises eyebrows but also raises many questions regarding gay identity and acceptability that middle class society would prefer to sweep under the carpet and maintain silence on the topic. He delves deep into the minds of the individuals and unveils the layers of complexities in human relationships and their social positioning thereby deconstructing the taboo subject of homosexuality in such a way that the invisible clutches of the society on the psyche of an individual are revealed. Mahesh Dattani never tries to sound didactic but the audience is made to think whether society should expect gays to change what they can't? They just expect society to accept and respect them for who they are and will always be.

Notes and References:

ⁱ Identity crisis is the distress and disorientation resulting from conflicting pressures and uncertainty about one's self and one's role in society. An identity crisis is a time in the life of an individual when he seriously begins the quest for answers about the nature of his being and the search for an identity. 20th century psychologist Erik Erikson gave the concept of identity crisis in his book '*Identity: Youth and Crisis*' in 1968. Erikson realized that the problem of identity appears, though usually on a smaller scale, in all lives. Identity crisis may occur at any time of life, in any individual when he tries to locate himself with respect to his surroundings-social, legal, cultural and political but finds himself at a receiving end with no voice. Some identity crisis are created by difference, exclusion and particular violence. It is the struggle of the powerless against the powerful and privileged with those historically denied which has created identities and the demand for rights.

ⁱⁱ "If we look at the statistics of a gay population in any given society, even if you look at it as a conservative five percent (people put it at ten, but even if you take five per cent), with a population of 850 million we're talking about almost 50 million people, and I think it's a real invisible issue. Almost all gay people are married in the conventional sense, so I think there are invisible issues which need to be brought out and addressed." Invisible Issues: An Interview With Mahesh Dattani by Erin B. Mee (Multani, Angelie. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays Critical Perspective*. , New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. p. 157. Print.)

ⁱⁱⁱ John McRae. "A Note on the Play", *Collected Plays: Mahesh Dattani*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000. p. 45. Print.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 46. Print.

^v Choudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani*. New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2005. p. 105. Print.

All text references from: Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays I*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. Print.