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Claustrophobia in Mahesh Dattani's *Night Queen*

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Abstract:

Setting of a tiny closed room, hiding of facts and identities and helplessness of the two homosexual characters (Ash and Raghu) make *Night Queen* a play of claustrophobia, not only for the characters but also for the readers. The paper attempts to understand the causes as well as representation of such claustrophobia. It is an attempt to analyse the setting, the symbols and the language of the play in order to understand the sociological causes of homophobia even for the queer. For this, it tries to make an enquiry into heterosexual normativity, homophobia and homosexuality with reference to the play.

Keywords: Homosexuality heterosexuality claustrophobia homophobia.

Set in a closed room in Raghu's house with a window rarely open, Mahesh Dattani's *Night Queen* is a representation of claustrophobia associated with homosexuality. The entire play takes place in a "tiny room with two doors. The side door leads directly to the street. The other door leads to the rest of the house," in between the two doors leading to the street and the house respectively, there is a prolonged display of vulnerability of Ash and Raghu. Included in "Yaraana, Gay Writing from South Asia", *Night Queen* is a dramatic representation of a few hours in the lives of Raghu and Ash who are gay partners for the night. Their conversation begins with several doubts and verifications, continues with several misunderstandings and some mutual understanding and ends with a compromise. Both of them seem to be caught by the suffocation of their past, their guilt, their deceptions and their insecurities. The action in the tiny room is interrupted by the external intervention, of an auditory intermediation of an old woman's voice and a symbolic olfactory intervention of the odour of the night queen flowers. "We hear an old woman calling out, 'ay, Raghu'. The strong wind blows some flowers in the room (Dattani 60). The moral dilemma, the guilt consciousness and the forced appropriation

of their gender is quite claustrophobic not only for the characters but also for the audience and the readers.

My attempt in this paper is to understand the causes of such claustrophobia by understanding the complexities created by the norm. This would require a close analysis of homosexuality, heteronormativity and homophobia with reference to Dattani's *Night Queen*. It also tries to elaborate on the question of morality with reference to homosexuals as represented in the play.

In brief, *Night Queen* is a dialogic play with very little action. Raghu has come home with a gay partner, who he has met for the first time. Both of them are not very sure of the identity of each other. They don't even seem to be confident about the sexual orientation of the partner. Later it is revealed that Ash is Ashwini who is coming to see Gayatri, Raghu's sister for marriage the next day. The entire play is done in a hushed voice in the closed room trying to conceal a lot from other people present both in the house and on the streets. On the whole an atmosphere of claustrophobia is created and it gets more suffocating in the due course of action. Use of symbols play a significant role in creating such an atmosphere in *Night Queen*. Constraints cause suffocation and, in the play, there are constraints of both time and space. It is night time and the partners need to hurriedly unite before the dawn, before anyone gets to know, before it is late. Likewise, with reference to space, there are some recurrent symbols like the tiny room in which they meet. The setting of a tiny room with two doors reflects on the spatial limitation which probably suggests the contraction of space of acceptability of homosexuality. In other narratives and poems of the same anthology this commonality is found. The non-heterosexual people are found struggling to get space because of non-acceptability. For instance, in R. Raj Rao's poem *Underground*, it is mentioned that

"The Underground has its own shades.

In London it's the metro railroad

With poems on the walls,

And back in Bombay

It's the mafia world

Of nightly blackmailers" (Rao 103)

R. Raj Rao's poem mentions the places where gay people meet and all these places are the suffocating, stinking places and probably therefore many people do not pass by these places. Similarly, in *Night Queen* that space has been created in the unconnected part of the house meant for the paying guests. It is within that tiny space that Raghu and Ash could be true to their sexual orientation. Their truth can neither be accepted in the streets nor in the house. Even if that is a private space, the interaction is not smooth rather it is full of doubts and verification. Moreover, the privacy of the room is further disturbed by the interrogating voice of an old woman. Her voice is a reminder of the presence of an institutional social structure. That old woman is probably the institutional voice with its doubts and intervention. Moreover, her voice creates an interruption in the action of the play prolonging the whole play. Apart from that closing of door or window is also a recurring motif. Ash asks to open the door, Raghu opens the window, later he closes the door, and then closes the window. Ash wants the window to be open as he starts facing some breathing issues. The pattern shows the world of secrecy and deception and also the choking suffocation related to the same. Apart from this snake is a prominent phallic symbol used in the play. Night queens attract the snake; Ash narrates his imagination of a snake turning to a man making love to him. This could be an expression of his repressed sexual desire. A reptile as a symbol of repressed desires adds to the claustrophobia of the play.

In order to understand the claustrophobia because of non- acceptance one needs to understand non-acceptance first. For this it is important to discuss the concept of heteronormativity, homophobia and the issues of morality related to homosexuality.

To begin with the concept of heteronormativity, it "assumes every person to be 'heterosexual', and that sex, gender and the body are in line with one another. It stigmatises and marks out any sign of deviation from the alignment as a sin or pathological abnormality, thereby generating a deep - seated phobia for those who challenge this hypothesis". (Bakshi, Dasgupta 181). In other words, assumption of heterosexuality as a norm is heteronormativity. According to this belief, only those who are heterosexuals can be classified as normal and any other orientation or sexual preference is considered to be a deviation or a disease. This concept leads to homophobia which means fear for homosexuality that usually translates to a disgust or non-acceptance of the homosexuals. It is a common trait that can be reflected in a variety of behaviour pattern ranging from jokes to revulsion, from course correction to even killing. Homophobia does not only affect the heterosexuals but also the homosexual people that may lead to self- doubt, self- denial, self- pity and non-acceptance of the self. Both these kinds of

homophobia can be noticed in the *Night Queen*. As confessed by Ash, he was sexually interested in his own brother who couldn't accept this kind of a desire and therefore he found it correct to beat him up for this 'abnormal' behaviour. This left a permanent imprint on the mind of Ash to such an extent that he wanted to change himself and hence he chose to change his identity when he met Raghu. He also wanted a public image of a heterosexual for a social sanction and hence he had convinced himself to marry a woman. Marriage could be used as a convenient tool for a social acceptance without much overt problems. Any kind of normativity is based on its repeatability through imitation. Marriage is one such trait essential to heteronormativity and hence if one is included in this system, it resolves a lot of social issues. Discussing Butler, Pramod K Nayar writes, "Gender itself is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. Here *imitation creates the effect of the original*. What it imitates is the phantasy ideal of heterosexual identity. Heterosexuality is always the process of imitating its own idealisation, and *failing* in its imitation." (Nayar 255). In order to be accepted by people, Ash finds it convenient to be ready for a heterosexual marriage. This brings the argument in the domain of moral issues attached with the same. It is apparently immoral to speak lies, to deceive identity and to cheat partners. Both Ash and Raghu seems to be doing all these. Ash fakes identity, tells a lie about his sexual orientation and also agrees to marry a woman despite having sexual desires for men. Not only this, both the partners Ash and Raghu do not have a love relationship. Their partnership is based on their bodily needs only. The question is does it qualify to be immoral to those who have not been included in the society, who face rejection and humiliation because of their sexual orientation? Since, the society has rejected and dejected them and they are always afraid to be caught, like Ash Confessed, "I didn't want to be so ugly. Walking alone at night in a park eyeing strange man. Waiting at corners for someone to stop and stare. Following a man into the bushes. Unloading my burden as quickly as possible. Pulling up my pants and walking away before I could feel the shame" (Dattani 73). It is evident that the burden of shame and guilt and the fear of being caught and of being miserable is overwhelming. Since the society will not accept the truth, the only way out is to tell a lie. Since, they won't be accepted in any institutional structure, the only way they find is to create a space of meeting. Since, the society will make them guilt ridden they are left with very few options and it becomes easy to pretend. As R. Raj Rao writes, "homosexuality is frowned upon only if a person chooses to come out of the closet and lead a gay lifestyle, which implies, among other things, that he does not marry a woman. However, if he performs his 'duty' by getting married and starting a family, Hindu society seemingly has no qualms about his being a closeted homosexual." (Rao 75)

Moreover, the play brings out another issue along with the issue of homosexuality. For instance, it talks about strength and economic stability. 'Homosexual' cannot be understood as one essential category. It has its own variations and hierarchies. As pointed out by Ash, Raghu is probably superior. "Who are you to feel superior? You think you have it easy? Just because you have this - (gesturing to the room and bed) this arrangement, this set- up. Just because you are smart enough and strong enough to defend yourself, you have a sister who understands you, you have a secure job and all that, it doesn't make you an ...(stopping) Yes. It does make you superior somehow. You can tell the world to fuck off." (Dattani 72). Thus, this discourse of homosexuality does not come without other socio-economic categories. By bringing in this issue of class, the play successfully argues in defence of individuality of the people within this category. The danger of stereotyping is absence of individuality but this class difference makes Raghu different from Ash. What is still disturbing is the non-acceptance of both by the world outside of the closed room. Even if one is accepted in his house or settled in a job, he cannot have an uncomplicated relationship. His social and economic position may give him a morally superior position in front of his weak partner but still he too is equally vulnerable.

Ash: Help me, Raghu.

Raghu: Help me, Ashwin.

(They begin to kiss.) (Dattani 75)

In queer theory, sexualities are conceptualized in terms of fluidity, contradiction, and indeterminacy; desire is bodily and embodied, but it is also linguistic and discursive; and sex is delinked from gender such as sexuality is no longer understood within the framework of the heterosexual matrix." (Waugh 444). In Indian context, sex and sexuality are the taboo words and as far as homosexuality is concerned, it becomes even more difficult for people to accept this relation. Thus, the arguments of fluidity or bodily desires with reference to gay identities have still not occupied much space in the literary as well as non-literary spaces. The stigma attached with the "queer" or the 'same sex love' is still more powerful than the theoretical defence of the queer.

Thus, continuous rejection from society in casual as well as criminal ways, it is not wrong to say that the gay people too become a part of the same heterosexual normativity and develop a hatred for the self. They too tend to be homophobic and hence adopt the tools of secrecy and deception in order to hide their reality. Probably, homophobia in men is an outcome

of hegemonic masculinity. It is difficult for men to believe that they are not masculine enough to engage with women or to reproduce. Ash's brother suffers from the same problem. He has developed severe homophobia which is reflected in his stories of cover up. He is uncertain, doesn't want to reveal his true identity, does not want to share his fantasies and even when he does share his fantasy of snake turning in to sexy men in his dreams, he denies that and calls it a lie. Because of his homophobia, Ash is seen to be uncertain, afraid, creating unnecessary confusion such as, "I lied about making it up! I don't fantasize. I don't fantasize!" (Dattani 65). Out of such insecurity and deception, because of the fear of his real identity, Ash threatens Raghu saying he deserved to be tortured. Raghu gets to know Ash's real identity and blackmails him that he would reveal that Ash is Ashwin Kothari who will come to see Gayatri for marriage. He wants to marry because as he confessed, "I don't want to be ugly anymore" (Dattani 73). Such homophobia was instilled into him by his brother who showed him gay people waiting for strange partners in the park. He says, "He showed me those guys, looking around, waiting for a sexual partner. A stranger. He told me how unhappy and miserable they were." (Dattani 73). These men were ugly because they were looking for a sex partner as they were aware of their desires. These men were ugly because they looked unhappy and miserable because of the social burden of heterosexual normativity.

It is evident that all these feelings make the tiny room a space of discomfort. This discomfort involves a continuous struggle to accept oneself and to challenge the norms. The play has only one main action or rather an ambition of love making between same sex partners. The entire story has been woven around this central action; there are rising actions of lies and betrayals, deceptions and negotiations. All the doubts and verifications form the complexity of the plot and the more the situation becomes clumsy and complicated the more the central act becomes bigger. Thus, it is the complication that makes the goal of same sex love an unachievable mission and the constant negotiation of characters make it more desirable for the readers as well as the characters. Their failure makes it claustrophobic which does not ease out with their concluding love making scene as the readers are aware that this does not resolve the issue rather complicates it further. Their love making is an act of compromise and helplessness. Thus, it can be said that though the play ends with accomplishment of the desired goal, it does not free the play of its burdens and limitedness. The last dialogue is by Raghu, "We should give each other the chance to bloom-at least at night." (Dattani 76). The mention of 'at least' exposes both the vulnerability and compromise by the characters. It is these frontiers that keep the play tied up, messy and complicated. Since the goal of love making is not an unachievable

goal, it leaves behind many unanswered questions for the normative world as to why do such norms exist? Who does it benefit? Are the norms inclusive? Thematically speaking, unlike the typical great tragedies, the play does not end with the death of any hero because apparently there isn't one (even to die). Both the characters are very unheroic who cannot fight bravely, who are scared liars. Not only this, unlike the typical comedies, the play does not resolve the issue with meeting of the lovers rather it complicates it further.

Night Queen is a story of one night in the lives of two men who want to make love. The four walls of the setting enclose a lot more than just making love. It has guilt, shame, rejection, self-pity, a desire to be accepted, a will to be a part of heteronormativity. Moreover, there are various doubts directed towards the self and the partner. All of these create an atmosphere of claustrophobia. There are interrupting voices, a hetero-normal world outside the room and amid all these a desire to be loved.

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