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## QUEERING THE QUEER THROUGH SOCIAL STIGMATISATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI AND VIJAY TENDULKAR

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### ABSTRACT

The word Queer means something or someone who is aberrant, altered, which doesn't pertain to standing medians or beliefs of the society etc. This paper deals with the Queer Sexualities which are considered to be deviating from existing norms or constraints of sexuality as set by the society. These norms as laid down by the heteronormative society further makes these queer sexualities more and more stranger. They are stigmatised in the society by diverse means and this stigmatisation further leads to their ostracisation in the society. This paper deals with the in depth study of these approaches as used by homophobes against the homosexuals, and their impact on the psyche of Queer individuals. The hitches they have to face are copious and incessant, so is the tumult they experience both in the outside world as well as in their inside too. The study is done with special reference to Vijay Tendulkar's play *A Friend's Story* and Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* both of which are emblematic of the Queer issues. Both these playwrights have towered high in the present scenario of Indian English Drama with their unconventional themes and the sympathetic handling of the issues of Queer sexualities. The main issue discussed in this paper is regarding the en-gendering of the queer sexualities in the homophobic society and the role of society in subjugation of these sexualities.

**Key Words:** Queer Theory, homophobic, dilemma, ostracisation, camouflage, hypocrisy.

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### INTRODUCTION

The word 'Queer' is meant to denote the whole range of sexualities other than heterosexual i.e Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual etc. The phrase "Queer theory" was coined by Teresa de Lauretis to describe a school of thought that studies sexual distinctiveness, human sexuality, and gender.

During the 1980s, the term 'queer' was reclaimed by a new generation of political activists involved in Queer nation and

protest groups such as Act Up and Outrage, though some lesbian and gay cultural activists and critics who adopted the term in the 1950s and 1960s continue to use it to describe their particular sense of marginality to both mainstream and minority cultures. In the 1990s, 'Queer Theory' designated a radical rethinking of the relationship between subjectivity,

sexuality and representation. (qtd. in Selden 252)

The queer theorists look for various illustrations regarding the biased treatment faced by some individuals on the basis of gender or we can say their sexual preferences, in texts, history, and society. They often reject binary oppositions such as heterosexual/homosexual, because giving privilege to one against the other results in negation of the other. There is use of the terms lesbian and gay to designate distinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publications and discourse. In the process of penetrating, surpassing and problematising heterosexuality, homosexuality and female homosexuality are also incorporated into this single category of queer. They argue that "sex between the two individuals is something other than heterosexual as the gender of one's choice is no longer the defining factor". Thus, the term queer which was at first used to define the male homosexuality now has become an umbrella term for all sexualities and sexual practices that are considered or asserted to be oppositional to the so called normative sexuality.

Queer Identities have always been viewed with an eye of huge contempt and have often been stigmatised in the society. This social ostracisation leads to make queerness a social taboo about which nothing is to be said or even listened to. In this present scenario Mahesh Dattani has used his theatrical techniques to break the silence regarding the queer identities. He has dealt with this issue with a deep human insight as well as with true humanistic sympathy. Regarding this, John McRae in his introduction to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, writes:

. . . the themes of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deserve to touch the whole of society and to be touched by it. 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 it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates. (McRae 45)

The play is set in a flat where there is a gathering of some friends which are later on discovered to be queers is going on but the presence of outer world can be observed from time to time in the course of action. A wedding is going on in the same building. There is a lot of noise, music and wedding songs etc. which indicates the intrusion of the outer world into the personal lives of the characters. Highlighting the presence of society, Jaspal Singh in his article "Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*: An Articulation of Gay Identity Crisis" remarks:

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. (1)

The outside heat is stressed upon at many places in the play which indicates the actual hostility which these queer people face in this homophobic society. The air conditioner in Kamlesh's flat and the relief it provides to them is symbolic of the comfort these people feel without the fake identities which they carry in order to survive in the hostile society carrying hostility and contempt towards them. The hypocrisy of queer subjects is not just their tactic to gain acceptance in the society but also is symbolic of the oppression of the society.

Dattani 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 crisis of the gays who occupy no honourable space in social order. (Singh 1)

The same oppression at the level of the society can be easily observed in *A Friend's Story* which represents the violence whether it be physical, mental or emotional, against the individuals who are labeled as misfits and considered to be unworthy of belonging to it. Mitra, who is not ashamed of her sexuality tries to build

relationship of love and friendship in this harsh homophobic society but is left all alone as no one could understand the traumatic condition she was present in. The male characters very efficiently bring out the true face of the homophobic society which is afraid of queers strong and independent personality. There is a deep seated contradiction which persists in the homophobic society and leads to the stigmatisation of these queer individuals.

*A Friend's Story* opens with the discovering of the Mitra's photograph by Bapu with which he is astonished as well as repulsed at the same time. This was the beginning of the friendship of Mitra with Bapu and in this relationship Mitra invests whole of her trust but she never finds whole acceptance on the part of Bapu, who comes to symbolise the homophobic society which can at some point try to pretend to understand the situation of queers but in reality never relates with them. This becomes very clear with the confusion and reluctance Bapu faces when Mitra confesses to him about her sexuality. He says:

. . . What she had disclosed about herself left me dazed. Do such women exist? Are they born like that or do they get conditioned as they grow to be what they are? Is it an ailment or a human trait of a particular kind? What would happen to Mitra? It was bizzare, repulsive and . . . abhorrent. (434)

Thus, we can clearly see how the homophobic society as represented by Bapu, is reluctant towards the queer subjects and is not ready to accept them as their actual selves and further stigmatising their subjectivities. There are a lot of misconceptions which exist in the society regarding the queer individuals. They are not considered to be normal and are often regarded as something evil. *A Friend's Story* deals with a queer person who happens to be a female. The way society looks upon her is represented through the medium of Bapu. Mitra is regarded as "frigid" (434), "eunuch" (435), "not normal" (455) and "lesbian bitch" (456). This is how the society stigmatise the queer individuals by calling them names without any true acknowledgement of their true state. A negative image is cropped up and the image is further

demonised and it assaults both mentally and emotionally, further reducing their status of being an evil for society. The dialogue between Bapu and Pande sums up this in a very effective manner while they are talking about Mitra.

BAPU. I mean a girl who is altogether . . . she doesn't get turned on by men.

PANDEY. Call them frigid.

BAPU. What? PANDEY.F-R-I-G-I-D. The touch of a man leaves them ice cold.

BAPU. I mean, things must be difficult for them, I mean life . . .

PANDE. It must be very difficult for a man caught up with such a dame. Poor bastard, he can neither chew nor swallow . . .

PANDE. You have seen them clapping and dancing haven't you? Eunuchs . . . they're like that. (434-435)

The true face of homophobic society is unveiled here, as instead of trying to understand the actual position and problems of queers, they are considered to be an evil. "Even those parents who are willing to be considered as modern will not let their children branded as homosexuals, as it will bring stigma on the entire family" (Patel 125). Stereotypes are created and their identities are belittled and this adds to further alienation of queer identities.

The identities of queer individuals are created in binary opposition of the heterosexuals. The stereotypical images are the result of the stifling, dominating discourses operating in the society. In homophobic society, a male is defined by certain behavioral patterns like being aggressive, strong etc. which are associated with being manly. Foucault also has analysed the stereotypical image of homosexual as:

In the nineteenth century texts there is a stereotypical portrait of the homosexual or invert, not only his mannerisms, his bearing, the ways he get dolled up, his coquetry, but also his facial expressions, his anatomy, the feminine morphology of his whole body are regularly included in this disparaging description". (18)

Camouflaging identity thus becomes very important for the queers in order to maintain the reputation and to save themselves from being thrown out of the society to a distant corner of alienation as Sawant remarks, "Every second person may be a homosexual but fear of ostracism restrains him from exposing himself" (38). This anxiety of queers being situated in the margins is brought out by Deepali when she says, "It's not the shame, is it? With us? . . . It's fear . . . Of the corners" (14). The norms of society make it very difficult for the queers to accept their real identities openly and they have to cover themselves in the veil of secrecy which leads to hypocrisy at large on the behalf of queers. But this hypocrisy is not just limited to the queers as the society and its norms are responsible for it. This repression on the part of society has been pointed out in the introduction to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* where Jon McRae writes:

. . . 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. (McRae 46)

Thus the queers tend to hide their sexuality in order to survive in this hostile world. Even if they make an effort to explain themselves to the society, they are shunned off often. Mitra brings this out when she says:

. . . I will have to tell my people sometime. The question is, even if I were to tell them, will they understand? They may not even know that such condition exists. Even if they know it, they may find it easier to feign ignorance." (433)

The only people with whom queers can associate are other queers who can understand their plight as they are themselves the victims of hostility meted out by the society. They are alienated from the society as it is not just possible to live alone on love; every individual also yearns for social acceptance and company. So, even being aware of unhappiness they experience, they still have to follow the constricting social rules and decorum. The nature and the remedy offered by the homophobic society is clearly indicated when Kiran says, "Kamlesh, take

my advice. Don't let people know about you. You will spend your whole life defending yourself. If I had a choice, I would stay invisible too" (91). Bringing out this situation alive Bunny says:

. . . Just as the man whom my wife loves does not exist. I have denied a lot of things. The only people who know me-the real me-are present in this room...I have tried to survive. In both worlds. And it seems I do not exist in either . . . I deny them in public but love them in private. (102-103)

*A Friend's Story* deals with the friendship of Mitra, Bapu and Mitra's affair with another girl Nama. Although Bapu from the very beginning of the play helps Mitra but he never approves of or her love for Nama. He doesn't consider her to be normal and her love to be natural. He wants to be friends with Mitra but at the same time he is also rebuffed by her sexuality. At many times he asks himself whether he was doing it right by helping Mitra or was something wrong with it. Bapu expresses his dilemma as, "But I had the niggling feeling that I was doing something wrong... I never stopped questioning myself. Is it right or wrong?" (444)

So, this is the predicament which queers face as their love is not given any sanction in the society and they have to maintain their relationship in secrecy and away from the eyes of the society. The social forces with their demeaning effect often produces guilt, alienation, aggression, remorse among the queers, as they are not able to adjust themselves in the set rules of the society which are guided by homophobia and results in the destruction of individuality of a queer. Thus the queer community suffers under the pressure where their identity is lost and there arises a state of crisis for them. Kamlesh puts it in his words as, "They can't see us at all, although we can see them. They must be blind" (81). The true plight of queers is revealed here as this homophobic society is truly blind towards the concerns and the conditions of these queers and forces them to hide their real identities in order to be a part of the society.

In *A Friend's Story* NamaDeshmukh in order to hide her love affair with Mitra also maintains her relationship with her boyfriend Dalvi. In public places or in front of him she refuses to accept her

love for Mitra. Even when Dalvi abuses Mitra as, "You bloody lesbian bitch, you I'll kill you! Aren't you ashamed? . . . I'll crush you, you devil, I tell you, I'll tear you to pieces on the streets, I'll strip you on the road" (456). The hostility of society thus becomes very evident from the way Dalvi abuses Mitra and also the helplessness of queers to discard their own identity is brought out by the playwright. Also as the action commences Nama further refuses her relationship by saying that she and Mitra are just friends. Although the inclination of Nama is towards Mitra but she constantly refuses as she is very well aware of the very fact that their relationship would be in no way be accepted by the society, which judges everything on the norms of being straight and everything else is judged on this basis. Also if the relationship comes out into open then it would bring out a huge amount of shame and denouncement on the social front. In order to avoid this segregation from the society, Nama leaves off to Calcutta in order to get married when her love affair with Mitra is made public. Also she just washes off her hands clean she says that she was tricked in and blackmailed by Mitra and it was a forced upon relationship not of her own consent. "On hearing the death of Mitra, there is a sense of relief" (Janardhanreddy et al. 182). It becomes clear from the reactions of Dalvi who represents the heteronormative society and says, "Everything ends with Death. She is no more" (494).

Similar is the case in the love affair of Kamlesh and Ed. Kamlesh was not ashamed of his queerness just like Mitra but his partner is not happy with being a queer just like NamaDeshmukh. Both Mitra and Kamlesh yearn for the company of their loved ones who in turn are not sincere in the love affair. On one side there is Nama who alleges that the relationship was not on her consent but was forced upon her and marries, on the other side there is Ed who says that he has become heterosexual and is involved with Kamlesh's sister Kiran who is unaware of his true identity and is going to marry him. So, this needs to be understood that the feelings which queers have are similar to that of the heterosexuals but the difference lies in the choice of partners which should be the individualistic decision made by people instead of

being forced upon by the society. Under this restriction imposed upon the queer individuals, they are denied the basic right of being loved. It becomes very important to provide equal space to queers in the society and should be allowed to make a choice of being what they want to be.

Thus the social stigma on queerness prevents it from being an acceptable state and the queers have to feign their true identities in order to gain power and dignity in the society which decides everything on the sexuality. Where heterosexuals are given all the power and queers are segregated from the main stream. This is evident from the ironic statement of Sharad where he says:

. . . 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 a hetero . . . a real man . . . If I can be a real man, I can be king. (101)

This social stigma is further elevated when the queers have to maintain their relationship in secrecy or they are at the risk of being out casted from the society. This is brought out through the medium of guard when he brings back the photograph of Ed and Kamlesh, after it falls from the window in the compound where the marriage is going on. The guard says:

Aap log apnakam sari duniyakobatanachahtehai . . . Aapkawoh photo! Baraat wale ke compound me gira! . . . Sab bachedekhrahe the! Sab hansrahe the . . . Aurphirbadonnebhidekhliya. Sab ne dekhliya! . . . Abhiaap logon kakyahoga? Aap ye sab khullamkhullakartehain? (105)

You people want to tell your deeds to the whole world . . . That photo of yours! Fell in the marriage ceremony compound! . . . All children were looking at it! Everybody was laughing . . . And then the elders also saw it. Everybody has seen! . . . What would happen to you people now? Why do you do all this openly? (translation mine)

Another character Kiran seems to be the real sympathiser of these queer individuals and advocates that they should be allowed to marry the partner of their own choice or else they would never be happy. She unaware of the deception of Ed on being queer utters the ironic words, "What more do you want? You will never be happier than this. You will end up being lonelier if you tried to be anything else other than who you are" (102). At other times she acts as the mouthpiece of playwright to comment on the society and its attitude towards the queers when she comes to know about the relationship of Ed and Kamlesh. Her reactions are conventional and it further suggests the social stigma and represents not just her reactions but of the society as a whole. She becomes overwhelmed with the feeling of guilt as well as shame of being in relationship with Ed and says:

Ah, but they know you. Just think. Somewhere, sometimes you will meet someone at a party who might say- 'You look familiar' and every time you hear that, your heart will beat a little faster, your feet will grow cold. Has this person seen that picture? Does this person know who I really am? (108)

Thus the society appears again and again in the course of both the plays from time to time, sometimes the playwright makes the characters mouthpiece for the society and at other times the presence of the pressure of society becomes evident in other forms. In *A Friend's Story* Bapu appears to be a sympathiser of queer world especially when he gets tired of talking Mitra out of her queer relationship and out of desperation he addresses the audience as:

Where does this stubbornness come from? Why do some people insist on the impossible? What does one do with people who are bent on treading the path of endless pain and agony? Nothing. Wisdom lies in doing nothing. But what if one is unable to do nothing? (458)

Tendulkar, making Bapu as a sympathiser of queers, brings out his own humanistic concern towards the queer subjects and sympathises with what they have to face in this heterosexual society. Bapu on other

occasions also come to represent the deaf and dumb society which never acknowledges its queers and is adamant at making them leave their real identities and become straight as if being queer is some kind of disease which can be cured. He offers this solution to Mitra to forget Nama and become heterosexual. He puts it as:

What has happened has happened. It had to stop at some stage, and it has. Let life begin afresh now. Let's see this as a new opportunity which has come our way to change course. . . If you resolve to change, then everything can change . . . We waste our time in thoughtless actions. Thinking makes us realize our mistakes. What's the use of putting heart and soul into something which can never happen? (484)

On the other hand Dalvi becomes the representative of the society carrying hostility towards the queer individuals. When love affair of Mitra and Nama become public her name is scratched out from the register as the management is afraid that the name of the college would be defamed if it comes to light. It is made to appear that she herself had left the college. Dalvi turns hostile towards Mitra which in turn represents the hostility of society towards queer subjects, when he says:

. . . I will dispatch letters to any college where she gets admission. I have already got the letters cyclostyled. I will make everything public . . . she can't be crushed at one go. She's the sort who will wriggle on, sprouting nine lives . . . I'm not going to let that bitch go free. If need be, I will go personally to wreck her chances. Watch me. (480)

So both the writers have employed the same characters to represent the hostility as well as sympathy towards the queer world. There is also the representation of the change of consciousness of the characters which also represents the society at one stage or the other. In the introduction of *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* John McRae, bringing out the intrusion of the outside world writes:

The outside world is always pressing in - the heat, the sounds, the people pestering Bunny, the kids who find the photo. Very



few dramatists are able to give this sense of a whole society . . . it recalls Ibsen at his social best. (45)

We can easily draw parallels between both the plays *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *A Friend's Story*, as both bring out the way in which the queer identities are stigmatised and considered being unnatural and devilish at the same time. Both the playwrights have presented the sympathetic outlook on the injustice and harsh treatment they have to face. They have very efficiently brought out the hypocrisy of homophobic society which demeans the individuality of queers through the different stifling and repressing discourses.

#### Conclusion

The social stigma attached to queer people makes the survival of queers difficult in the society which is largely homophobic. The queers have to live their life under fear and by veiling up of their true sexuality or else they are ostracised from the society. In order to survive, queers have to camouflage their identity. Thus hypocrisy forms a permanent streak in the personality of queers. They are always haunted by the thought of isolation in the society in case their queerness comes out. In *A Friend's Story* Nama camouflages her queerness by giving the name of friendship to her relationship with Mitra. When their queer relationship comes into light she completely denies such relationship and the whole blame comes upon Mitra. *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* provides a vivid picture of this camouflaging through different modes like physical appearance, getting married or leave the country as queer relationships could never find acceptance in the society. So, the social stigma attached to queer sexuality not only isolates an individual from the society but also from himself.

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