



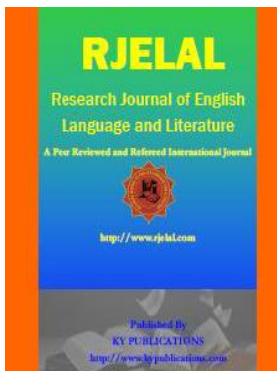
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## OF DECEIT, LIES AND SUCH IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI*

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### ABSTRACT

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* broke new ground in Indian theatre for its honest portrayal of issues that affect the gay community in urban India. This paper explores Dattani's representation of the gay community with a particular focus on two parallel themes that inform the play – the critique of heterosexuality, and the need to remain true to one's sexual orientation, whatever the odds. The small group of homosexuals gathered inside Kamlesh's flat often mock the heterosexual world even as some of the characters desperately want to belong to it. However, Dattani makes it clear that though the advantages of being heterosexual are tempting, the gay community must resist being co-opted into heterosexuality at the cost of being dishonest to itself. His characters grapple with their sexual identity and the precarious position it puts them in, in a homophobic society that can't see beyond their sexual orientation. The 'villain' of the piece, Ed, who rejected Kamlesh because he lacked the courage to accept his sexual identity, and now plans to marry Kamlesh's sister, appears more pathetic rather than villainous because he wants to belong to the heterosexual world and be a 'real' man even if it involves deceiving himself far more than the woman he plans to marry. The witty banter that characterises the dialogues in the play in no way mitigates the serious message it attempts to convey; if anything, in enabling viewers to laugh *with* the characters instead of *at* them, the play humanises them, and hopefully, makes us see them as 'real' men and women, just like us.

**Key Words:** homosexual, heterosexual, deceit, sexuality

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"It is not simply the first play in Indian theatre to openly handle 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" (Dattani 45). With these words, John McRae (Special Professor at the Department of English Studies at the University of Nottingham and Director at the Abelians Theatre, Bari, Italy) applauds Dattani for his open and sensitive portrayal of gay love in *On a Muggy Night*

*in Mumbai*. Produced and directed by Lillette Dubey, and first performed at the Tata Theatre in Mumbai on 23 November 1998, this is a play in which not one, but a whole group of homosexual individuals take centre-stage, and wax eloquent on what it means to be homosexual in contemporary, metropolitan, Indian society. In so doing, the play subverts the homophobic, reductive, worldview that looks at homosexuals through a single lens – that of their sexual preference alone, And in showing how denying one's natural sexual orientation and/or

deceiving others about it has disconcerting consequences for both, the deceiver and the deceived, the play hopefully makes us realize, just as the characters on stage do, that honesty, not deception, is the only way out.

In the opening scene, the clear suggestion of a just- concluded sexual liaison between Kamlesh and the security guard of the building, introduces homosexuality as the theme. A fashion designer who moved to Bombay three years ago, ostensibly to make a name for himself in the world of fashion, Kamlesh is actually grieving over a failed relationship. We soon learn that it is not just Kamlesh but his entire group of friends who are homosexuals. There's Sharad, Kamlesh's former lover (who is still in love with him); Ranjit, who lives in the UK with his English lover and works with HIV counselors; Bunny, a well-known television actor who stars in a family-oriented soap opera; and Deepali who lives with her lesbian lover Tina. This network of close friends make up Kamlesh's support system together with his sister Kiran, whom he has rescued from an abusive marriage; unfortunately, they cannot prevent Kamlesh from living the lonely life of a recluse after his breakup and depression, and barricading himself inside his flat. The air conditioner in the apartment provides relief from the 'heat' of the intolerant, insensitive world that lies outside. When Ranjit suggests that they leave the door open just a crack, the metaphorical significance of his words is hard to miss: "Don't want all this lovely cool air contaminated by all the muck outside" (Dattani 66).

The play sets up a contrast between the heterosexual and homosexual world, and Kamlesh's 'chic' flat functions as the node of the latter. Dattani makes use of his usual multi-level stage to create distinct spaces for various purposes. In this case, the stage is divided into into three areas: one represents Kamlesh's flat; the second area comprising three levels denotes a space where characters can express their inner thoughts; and the third zone comprises Kamlesh's bedroom. These spaces are, however, subordinate to another, more significant, implied spatial division: that between the world inside the flat, and the one outside it. Though the events unfold inside Kamlesh's flat, the repeated references

to the wedding going on downstairs ensure that the audience never forgets the presence of the outside, predominantly heterosexual world, not the least because it impinges so strongly on the consciousness of the characters inside the flat. The door allows characters to enter into this little, private world to both seek and provide the love and understanding they need to face what lies outside its confines.. The windows allow those inside to look out at the city from within this sanctum in which Kamlesh has created "a world where he can belong" (Dattani 51). And because the main characters look at and comment on the outside world from within this comfort zone, the audience too finds itself looking outside from within; the stage becoming a window of its own, allowing us to peek into the homosexual world that Dattani privileges in this play.

Although Kamlesh and his friends share an easy camaraderie, the product of long years of friendship, we sense an underlying tension amongst the members of the group, arising from their varying attitudes towards their sexuality. Each character is seen grappling with the same dilemma – whether to accept or deny one's sexual orientation; whether to conceal or reveal it, and how. Sharad, for one, is very comfortable with his sexuality, in contrast to others who prefer to hide it under the veneer of heterosexuality. Bunny, well-known television actor, and a household name, advises Kamlesh: "Find yourself a nice woman. You can always have sex on the side", a statement that reflects his own use of 'camouflage', a strategy to deceive the world about his true sexual orientation (Dattani 70). He knows all too well that the same fans who adore him today will shun him tomorrow if they discover that he is gay. And while his friends have no desire to take recourse to 'camouflage' to hide their sexual orientation, Bunny's strategy has worked quite well for him, so well in fact, that he is lauded as the ideal husband and father thanks to his role in the family-oriented television serial he acts in, ironically titled 'Yeh Hai Hamara Parivaar'! As for Deepali, she takes pride in being a lesbian, considering it a better option to being in an oppressive relationship with a man. But even she is forced to admit that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is not easy in India: "It's not

shame, is it? With us?...It's fear...Of the corners we will be pushed into where we don't want to be.. (Pause) I too was once afraid of being a woman" (Dattani 89). Clearly, heterosexuality and patriarchy constitute a double whammy that is well nigh impossible to withstand. But for all that, Dattani's characters resist being co-opted into the heterosexual mainstream, and the primacy of the heterosexual world is subverted through the clear disdain that some of his characters express towards it even as they try to hide behind it to escape ridicule.

In the opening scene, when the security guard inadvertently admits that his sexual trysts are driven by pleasure rather than the need to make some extra bucks, it illustrates how homosexuality is far more pervasive than we would otherwise believe. And when Kamlesh hints that the Secretary too has been a sexual partner, the point that same-sex desire goes beyond class and monetary considerations is driven home. More importantly, when Kamlesh reassures the guard that they will continue to pretend that he does it for the money instead of for sexual gratification, it sets the tone for the parallel theme of deception. The wife of the fat, bald, diamond merchant who overcomes her revulsion, and lets her husband have her way with her at night only to have sex with the milkman once her husband is away at work, is a case in point. In fact, every character is caught in a web of deceit, sometimes of his/her own making, and sometimes not. The only one stubbornly determined to strip the mask of pretence is Sharad, often subverting any attempt at pretentiousness with his over-the-top performances, as when he imitates a drunken Meena Kumari smashing her bangles on the wall when Kamlesh sternly warns him not to mention his ex-lover. It is this very sense of 'play' that redeems Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* from dissolving into a kind of pedantic, heavy-handed discourse about the repression of gays in the country. Sharad's banter about equating himself with a bitch despite not having 'six tits', or Deepali's retort "I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men!" are just two instances that exemplify this sense of play (Dattani 60). Sexual innuendos, jokes about being straight and gay, and

the sexually explicit language that is sometimes serious, sometimes flippant, often funny and witty with liberal use of slang and Hinglish, disconcerting though they may be to conservative and/or homophobic members of Indian society, add entertainment value to the play but far more importantly, they enable the viewer to laugh *with* the characters on stage, and thereby identify with them to a greater or lesser extent. The openness with which characters address issues related to their sexuality and their relationships makes us see them as human beings, as 'real' people, as brothers, friends and lovers, instead of as homosexual 'subjects' obsessed with clandestinely, furtively seeking partners to satisfy their sexual desires with.

Kamlesh's ex-lover, Ed, becomes the focal point of conflict in the play, taking the theme of deception to another level with his decision to marry his former lover's sister, who, of course, has no knowledge either about his true sexual orientation or about his relationship with her brother. And while there is no denying that Ed is a callous liar and a coward to boot, these traits cannot conceal his genuine fear of not only being *found out* to be gay but of *being* gay itself. When he tells Kamlesh that he wants to be like everybody else, he means that he wants to be heterosexual. Ed has allowed himself to be conditioned into believing that he can be gay or straight depending on what he desires to be at any given point in time! Trapped between reality and desire, between truth and illusion, between what he is and what he would like to be, Ed's situation is ultimately tragic simply because human sexuality is so fluid. Can Ed *make* himself heterosexual, or are his choices limited to either accepting or denying his sexuality? As Aviram comments, "So if one believes that gender is thoroughly constructed, this does not mean that it is also weightless, that it can be sloughed off and an alternative gender assumed" (284).

Ed's predicament is perhaps Dattani's way of sending across a message to all who believe that one's sexuality is the result of a conscious decision, merely a question of mind over matter. Ed may be the villain of the piece, and his deceitfulness and cowardice might be unforgivable, but Dattani gives us to understand that his behavior is largely the

result of social pressures exerted by a homophobic society. Kamlesh had showed him that there was something wrong with people who could not see how beautiful they were together, and this open acceptance of his love had saved Ed from committing suicide, but unlike Kamlesh who was able to resist the advice of his "straight homophobic psychiatrist" to "reorient" himself, Ed let himself believe that being gay was the work of the devil (Dattani 69). His frequent visits to the church further strengthened his conviction that he must 'become' heterosexual. Unable to resist the dual assault of religion and psychiatry, Ed's desire to marry Kiran could be a desperate need to convince himself more than anyone else that he is indeed heterosexual.

Ed inadvertently reveals his confusion about his sexual orientation when he compares Kamlesh and his friends with the people celebrating the wedding downstairs:

Look around you- Look outside. (*Goes to the window and flings it open.*) Look at that wedding crowd! 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. (Dattani 99)

In another instance, Ed endorses Sharad's decision to go 'straight' with these words: "Of course he is a man. I mean he wants to be a real man" (Dattani 99). Clearly, only heterosexuals qualify to be called 'real' men and women. Ed's defiant denial of his sexual orientation is complicated by his conviction that being 'straight' and being a man are synonymous with each other. The two constructs of manhood – the biological vs the social directly conflict with each other to raise questions about what makes a man a 'real' man. This is an issue Dattani tackles head-on in *Dance Like a Man* where his protagonist's passion for Indian classical dance disqualifies him from being considered a 'real man'. As members of a victimized group, Kamlesh and his friends understand only too well the power a heterosexual world wields to control those with 'deviant' sexual orientations. Heterosexuality is not just the prescribed norm, but a desirable, far more preferable option to homosexuality because it offers

advantages such as being allowed to marry, bear children, raise a family, and thus gain social acceptance. As Sharad points out:

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 things 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. (*Thrusts his pelvis in an obscene macho fashion.*) Power, man! Power! (Dattani 101)

Who can resist such power? Not Ed, who would rather cross over to the other side. However, this very combination of cowardice and deceitfulness causes Kamlesh to have an epiphany of sorts: "You are funny! Sharad, you are wonderful. I don't know why I didn't see it before. I love you" (Dattani 101). Sharad's unabashed acceptance of his sexuality, and his pertinent, witty and subversive attack on the heterosexual world that Ed so desperately wants to be a part of, finally makes Kamlesh realize that it is Sharad who deserves his love. In a kind of chain reaction, Kamlesh's open declaration of love for Sharad encourages Bunny to 'come out' and end the pretence of being heterosexual. As for Ed, he too was given an opportunity to be honest about and be faithful to his sexual orientation, but, unlike Bunny who can be candid about his own hypocritical attitude towards his sexuality, Ed appears incapable of being honest, as this confession to Kamlesh clearly shows:

"Ed. You fool. Can't you see? My marriage with Kiran is a start. Kamlesh. What do you mean? Ed. "Once we are married, I could see you more often without causing any...suspicion" (Dattani 104)

The question that arises is this - If Ed believed himself to be heterosexual, why would he be planning to continue a same-sex relationship with his ex-lover? Who is he really deceiving? Ed's character has a mirror-image in the character of Praful in Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*: Praful

gets his sister married to his homosexual partner, so that with a single stroke of diabolical genius, he can fulfill his duty as brother and simultaneously continue his affair with his lover-turned-brother-in-law. Luckily for Kiran, Kamlesh loves her too much to let his ex-lover deceive her so callously. And unfortunately for Ed, all his efforts at deception and subterfuge come to naught when the incriminating photograph showing Kamlesh and him naked is discovered by the residents of the building. The proof of the pudding, in this case, is in the 'seeing', and the photograph drives home the truth like nothing else could. Unable to bear the humiliation of being exposed in this manner, Ed makes yet another unsuccessful attempt at suicide. But there is little sympathy for Ed and his cowardly suicide attempt. In a rather didactic vein, the play propounds that difficult though it may be, it is nevertheless necessary to be honest about one's sexual orientation. Deception harms the homosexual as much as those that love him/her, and is certainly not the way to go.

The privileging of the homosexual world in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* contains an implicit critique of heterosexuality; of a society that forces Dattani's characters to choose between homosexuality and heterosexuality; of a society that foregrounds and reduces a homosexual's identity to his/sexual identity, effectively erasing every other aspect of his personality. When Ed's suicide attempt is foiled, he confesses: "I only wanted to live.", and then asks: "Where do I begin? How do I begin to live?" (Dattani 110). Sexual choices thus become interconnected with existential choices for homosexuals, but the playwright offers no consolation. Instead, he sends out a clarion call for battling it out instead of trying to hide one's sexual orientation.

At one point in the play, Kamlesh and Deepali joke about marriage:

DEEPALI. If you were a woman, we would be in love.

KAMLESH. If you were a man, we would be in love.

DEEPALI. If we were heterosexual, we would be married.

*Both of them do a mock 'Aaaagh!'.  
(Dattani 65)*

As this exchange shows, Dattani's critique of a heterosexual world that marginalizes those with alternative sexual orientations, is extended to the institution of marriage. Heterosexual marriages come in for bitter criticism through the plight of Kamlesh's sister Kiran and the wife of the diamond merchant, whom Sharad observes from Kamlesh's apartment. But while Kiran was fortunate to have a supportive brother who saved her from the domestic violence she was subjected to, the diamond merchant's wife is not as fortunate. Her attempt at achieving sexual gratification with the milkman instead of her insensitive husband whose sexual needs she must satisfy however distasteful the experience, speaks volumes about the condition of many women in this country, in which a woman's pleasure or lack of it is of no consequence. Trapped in what appears to be an obviously unhappy marriage, she, nevertheless, subverts her powerless position by seeking pleasure outside marriage, and that too, with the doodhwala! Her experience coupled with Kiran's experience in her first marriage exposes the institution of marriage as an exploitative trap, particularly for women.

"Much of the oppositional energy in contemporary theatre, in any case, is not directed against the colonial experience but against the oppressive structures of nation, patriarchy, caste, class, and tradition", says Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in her study of post-independence theatre in India (12). Dattani's plays consistently take on some of these structures, and "Dattani's characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the oppressive weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire" (Mee 4). For one thing, he counters the stereotypical perception that homosexual relationships are all about casual sex and lust rather than love and companionship. He shows how trust and honesty in relationships are just as important for homosexuals as heterosexuals. We see how Sharad is hurt by Kamlesh's lack of honesty, for pretending that they were never lovers, and for having sex with the security guard for mere sexual gratification. Sharad's playful antics and light-

hearted banter cannot mask the very serious principles he lives by - that whatever be one's sexual orientation, one must have the courage to remain true to it; and that sex is meaningful only when it involves two people in love: casual sex has no place in his value system. That Kamlesh is eventually compelled to acknowledge Sharad as his true love is a vindication of this value system.

"And why do we even need gay theatre, gay venues, gay plays in the twenty-first century? Aren't we part of the mainstream?" Theatre director ,Thomas Hescott, asks this question in an online article that takes stock of gay theatre in the West. "Obviously not", or "Not yet" might be the answers expected in response to this rhetorical question, whether in the West, or in India where gay rights still have a long way to go. Pramod Nayar, for one, finds the 'invisibility' of the Indian queer especially odd considering how Hindu mythology has always recognized the existence of same-sex desire, if the instance of Lord Shiva's popular representation as 'ardhanareshwar' is anything to go by (123).

Theatre has long been acknowledged as a powerful medium of change, and Dattani admitted as much in an interview: "I do believe that the purpose of theatre is to bring to the forefront issues that society would rather keep in the background." (Subramanian Kanta ) In an interview with three student reporters of *The Scholars' Avenue* (an independent student-run campus newspaper of IITechnology, Kharagpur), he added: "Some message might automatically come out of a theatrical performance, without anyone meaning to, but the act of deliberately trying to put out a message using theatre weakens it. I feel that one has to be very crafty to use theatre as a medium of social awareness." It seems to me, however, that Dattani has used *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* to send a clear message to both, the heterosexual and homosexual communities about the need for honesty and mutual respect, which only goes to show that, by his own logic, that he has been very crafty indeed!

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