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DEFYING THE QUEER SELF: A QUEER READING OF MAHESH DATTANI'S
ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI

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Abstract

Homosexuals are always treated as 'abnormal' in the sense that they lack something. Thus, they are minorities and are marginalized as the 'Other'. According to Foucault, classification of particular people as sick, criminal or insane enabled the discourse to construct 'the Other' as the deviant opposite of the norm. Homosexuality treated as deviant was, therefore, treated as a counter to the standard or norm. It was caught up in a relationship of power were a heterosexual society labeled and then punished deviance.

The 'Other' and the 'self' are not two separate entities. Butler is of the opinion that the 'self' and the 'Other' are always implicated in each other. It is entangled with, and is involved in each other. Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* is a play dealing with homosexuality, in which a character undergoes a clash with his identity. The conjecture here is that it arouses when the person who is a homosexual denies his own identity by treating his very self as the 'Other'. "As basic psychology shows, what is identified as the external 'Other' is usually part of the self which is rejected and hence projected outwards" (Barry 145). The paper entitled 'Defying the Queer Self: a Queer Reading of Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*' attempts to trace out the same.

Keywords: Queer self, *the Other*, coming out, rejection, homosexuality

"Queer can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonance and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically". (*Tendencies* 8)

-Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is an Indian playwright whose perspicacious approach to the psyche of these marginalized sections (LGBTQ) has won

accolades in the world of literature. In his play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani tries to give voice to these 'seemingly' voiceless sections of the society. This paper is an enquiry into the deep recesses of the inner psyche of the homosexuals. Many people who are confused of their sexual identity may take time to come out from their closets. But some of them are afraid to do so even though they realize their gender identity. Such people reject their own self and pretend that they are heterosexual. They continue their lives by wearing this mask. The paper focuses on one such

character in the above mentioned play (*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*), named Ed.

Discussion

Ed/ Edwin/ Prakash is a homosexual who pretends to be straight (heterosexual) and thus, wants to appear 'normal'/ 'real man'. For that reason he pretends to be in love with; and decides to marry his ex-lover's (Kamlesh's) sister, Kiran. This pretention deteriorates his self and he tries to commit suicide. He is not even true to his own self. That is the reason why he doesn't come out in the open. According to Butler, gender identity is built on a prohibition against homosexuality. Pramod Nayar in his book, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* explains Butler's statement: "It is the loss of the same-sex object of desire that creates a melancholic heterosexual identity" (*Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* 190).

I would like to prove my point with the help of certain textual clues. Firstly, Ed is portrayed as a person who cheats on his love and also, as a person having selfish intensions. Ed wants Kamlesh to destroy the photograph of them in a compromising position, thus, wiping away all the traces of his homosexuality. Kamlesh, jilted in love, now turn towards Sharad, another homosexual character. Sharad's love is a great comfort for Kamlesh and he rejects further sexual advances of Ed. Ed, who is really a homosexual, doesn't want to lose Kamlesh. When Kamlesh comes to know that Kiran is getting married to Ed, he thinks that Ed has now become a heterosexual.

Kamlesh: He goes to church every week now. They put him onto a psychiatrist. He believes his love for me was the work of the devil. Now, the devil has left him (*Collected Plays Volume II* 85).

Ed hesitates to come out even to his friends. He suppresses his sexuality and this causes incorrigible damage to his self. He defies his own queer self when he explains his concept of a 'real man' (a man who asserts his penis power). It is evident when he tells Deepali that he doesn't know

anyone who pretends to be heterosexual. Here, he suppresses and defies his own self by hiding the fact that he is a homosexual. At first, he says that it is possible for one to be a heterosexual and a homosexual at the same time.

Kiran : But is it possible? How will he go around doing it?

Ed : Of course it's possible.

Deepali: Really? Do you know of anyone who has done that?

Ed : I mean- No! I don't know of anyone. It's common knowledge. (217).

As said earlier, the 'self' and 'the Other' are entangled with each other. It is very much part of the self. Rejecting something as 'the Other' here, means rejecting the self. In the case of Ed, he defies his own very self as 'the Other'. This constant clash is going on in his mind as he tries in vain to come to terms with it. Unknowingly, he is making himself believe that there is nothing wrong with pretending to be heterosexual. Ed is not true to his own self. That is the reason why he is afraid to come out in the open. There is a deliberate rejection of homosexuality that constitutes his self identity. This defying of his queer self together with his false identity as that of a heterosexual deteriorates his character. Instead of coming out, unknowingly, he openly challenges his own very self.

Secondly, on another instance, Ed goes to the window and flings it open. He wants others to look outside. He says: "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" (216). Ed is addressing his own queer self when he says these words. He is a victim of the society that believes that to be normal means to be heterosexual. There is a constant clash between his wanting to be a heterosexual or a 'real man' as he puts it and that of his inner self which is homosexual.

When Ed says that his friends want to live in the "little den" (216) of theirs, what we could see is a troubled mind that is trying its best to convince the

self of the stand that it had taken (of his pretension as a homosexual). While all the other characters speak openly of their sexual preference, Ed is afraid/hesitates to come out even to his friends. It is he who wishes to live in this 'den' or 'bubble' (closet) created by his self to mask his true identity. By flinging open the window of his homosexuality, Ed looks outside and speaks about the world outside while he is still 'safely' inside the four walls of his original self. The 'den' here, is Ed's queer self which is a safe place for him. His false identity as that of a heterosexual, forces him to defy his queer self. When his friends question his identity; this safe 'bubble' breaks.

Thirdly, Ed sees a reflection of himself in Sharad when Deepali says that Sharad broke up with Kamlesh because he wants to be a heterosexual. Actually, Sharad and Kamlesh are very much in love with each other. Sharad is possessive of Kamlesh and he can't tolerate any thoughts of Ed entering Kamlesh's mind. He tries his best to make him forget the bitter experiences that Kamlesh had when he was in love with Ed. They (Deepali, Sharad, Bunny, Ranjit and Kamlesh) play a trick on Ed to make Kiran (Kamlesh's sister) aware of the fact that it is Ed who had cheated Kamlesh and that Ed is a homosexual. When Kiran says that Sharad can't be a heterosexual, Ed reacts by saying "of course he can. If he wants to, then he can do anything" (216). He believes the words of Deepali and thinks that Sharad really wants to be a heterosexual. Thus he sees a reflection of himself in Sharad and this is exactly the reason why Ed defends Sharad by saying that he can be both.

Sharad understands Ed well and goes on to explain the latter's concept of a 'real man': "You see, being a heterosexual man- a real man as Ed put it- I get everything.... I can have a wife; I can have children who will 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..." (217).

When Ed defies his queer self, he ceases to exist. Sharad says about it while consoling Kamlesh: "As far as we are concerned, Prakash doesn't even exist" (190). Kamlesh acknowledges it later by saying that he now knows that he has been chasing an illusion.

Kamlesh: Perhaps the man I loved does not exist. (To Sharad) But you do. And I love you. (218).

Thus, Ed becomes a mere 'illusion' for his ex-lover. This happens out of his rejecting and challenging his queer self and also of his doing on of a false heterosexual identity. He becomes 'nobody' when he defies his queer self.

Finally, Ed comes to the realization that he can no longer go on defying his queer self by wearing the mask of heterosexuality. When he realizes that others including Kiran have come to know about his homosexuality, he tries to commit suicide by creating an accident. He fails to realize that what he had rejected is very much a part of him. What we can see in him is the homophobia of the society. He says to Kamlesh that he is sorry for all the harm he did. He says: "Do you remember, Kamlesh, the night we met? If I hadn't met you... If I hadn't met you..." Ed goes to the door and in a flash he is gone. He jumps on to his motorbike, kick starts it and races down towards the gate at breakneck speed. He gets into a loud skid and topples over (224).

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to mention a Greek myth of the origin of human beings. In Plato's Symposium, Aristophanes speaks about it. Veronique Mottier mentions of the myth in his *Sexuality: A Very Short Introduction*:

According to this myth, humans descend from creatures who had spherical bodies, genitals on the outside, four hands and feet, two faces each, and were divided into three genders: one group had two male genitals; the second group had two female genitals; and the third group, hermaphrodites had one of each. Over time, the creatures become arrogant and uppity. To punish them, Zeus split them in two. In that state, they clung to

their other halves, dying from hunger and self neglect because they 'did not like to do anything apart'. Zeus took pity on them, and invented a new plan, moving their genitals so that they could have sexual relationships with each other. Each of us is a half of a human being, and each seeks his or her other half. Men who are split from the hermaphrodites desire women; women who descend from a female creature 'do not care for men, but have female attachments'; and men who are split from a male body prefer to pursue male, and in their boyhood 'enjoy lying with and embracing men... because they have the most manly nature, and ...rejoice in what is like themselves. (3)

Ed secretly cherishes his homosexual relationship with Kamlesh but, at the same time, wants to be a heterosexual in front of the society. It could not be possible because as mentioned above, the other half of Ed is probably a male. Thus, when he defies his own queer self which is a part of him, he goes against his nature.

The defying of the queer self in oneself is disastrous. Ed simultaneously loves and hates his sexuality. The words that Ed use to speak against homosexuality itself shows that what he rejected or defied as 'the Other' is very much a part of him and that the self and 'the Other' are intertwined. His problem was that he considered both as different entities.

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