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Investigating Mahesh Dattani's 'On a Muggy Night in Mumbai', through the Lens of R. Raj Rao: A Queer Study

Suchitra Harnahalli

suchitrapoems@gmail.com

Shripad Samant

shripad.samant@mithibai.ac.in

SVKM's Mithibai College (Autonomous), Mumbai, Maharashtra SVKM's Mithibai College (Autonomous), Mumbai, Maharashtra

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interaction of Mahesh Dattani's, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai with R. Raj Rao's Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India under Queer Theory. Queer Theory studies homosexuality, incorporation of gender and sexuality in texts, along with the history of queer writing. Mahesh Dattani's play is the first play in Indian Theatre to have openly gay themes on stage. Since much of queer writing comes from the West, in order to facilitate a holistic understanding of the play in the context of the Indian subcontinent, this study is done from the lens of R. Raj Rao, who is himself a queer theorist from India. This paper focuses on the impact of homosociality, heteronormativity and homophobia in the play and on the lives of gay people at large.

Keywords: Homosexual, Gay, Heteronormative, Homosociality, Homophobia.

1. INTRODUCTION

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, is a play in three acts by Mahesh Dattani, first performed at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai in 1998. Dattani's play is cited to be the pioneer of delving in openly gay themes in Indian Theatre. At the time the play was performed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was not decriminalized. This section of the IPC criminalized all forms of sexual activity which were not heterosexual or procreative. His play depicts the consequences of homophobia on the lives of homosexuals who have been living in the narrative framework of a heteronormative society. Dattani's play invites conversations on the accounts of queer lives who have been ignored for long like Sharad in the play, until Kamlesh reconciles with him.

The play holds at its heart the quintessential tenets of Queer Theory. However, much of Queer Theory comes from the West, from writers like Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick and Jonathan Dollimore. Their observations and criticisms stem largely from the literary discourses and socio-political culture of their immediate society. That is not to say that it takes away their credibility or relevance, but in order to study *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, a play based in India it is fundamental to incorporate a queer theorist who has understood these texts and interpreted them in the Indian context. R. Raj Rao is one such novelist, poet, playwright, and openly gay theorist who assimilates not only sexuality but also gender, class and caste in his writing. His book *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India*, is a union of understanding queer writings in India, investigating the theorists from the West, their relevance in Indian vocabulary and the politics of being queer in the Indian sub-continent. This paper aims to undertake a study of Mahesh Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, through the vehicle of Queer Theory as seen in R. Raj Rao's book. In order to facilitate an extensive study, this paper has been divided into two major sections of dealing with homosexuality in Indian Theatre and the consequences of homophobia on Indian gay lives as seen in the play.

2. DEALING WITH HOMOSEXUALITY IN INDIAN THEATRE

Mahesh Dattani through his craft has always been outspoken about what he calls the 'invisible issues' of Indian Society (Mee 320). *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, is a testament to his deft handling of taboo discourses in India through the medium of theatre. One of its kind, the play does not shy away from depicting gay lives in India. While the tale maybe a product of Dattani's compelling imagination, he has illustrated their story in a heteronormative world with characters who are essentially anti-heterosexual. This section is divided into two sub-sections, pioneering of homosexuality in Indian theatre and the effects of homosociality as a barrier in representing gay lives, to investigate the play's effects on stage.

2.1. Pioneering Depiction of Homosexuality

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, is not only the first play to dive into openly gay themes, but also a play which shows the lives of homosexual and gay people in all their truth. Dattani deliberately assimilates these characters in a world where heterosexuality assumes hegemony, thus already setting a conflict in his play.

The play illustrates the lives of seven homosexuals and one heterosexual person who is their ally. All of these characters have their own struggles and personality traits which are distinctly different from other characters in the play. For instance, Sharad in the play as discussed by R. Raj Rao is an “anti-essentialist” (11), gay. Much like Oscar Wilde who found ways to be creative with his sexuality, identifies as gay, thus liberating himself from the morality laid down on him by a heteronormative society. Sharad in the play is unabashedly gay, which is evident through the unashamed authority which he possesses over himself, refraining from abiding by the false morals imposed by the society. This hallmark of queer theory is identified in *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India*, wherein R. Raj Rao accounts, “In other words, the homosexual had to be proud of the fact that he was a pervert” (Rao 39), which aligns with Sharad announcing, “Hum log sab bahut besharam hain” (Dattani 60), to the guard, meaning they are all unashamed.

On the other hand, Bunny in the play is a character who is strikingly in contrast to Sharad’s personality, albeit both of them are homosexual. In his book Rao reports, “Andre Gide and Oscar Wilde, become focal points in any discussion on de-stereotyping the body and desire. Both were homosexual, but their approach toward homosexuality was poles apart” (9). He explains that Gide believed in accepting his sexuality, yet adhering to the morality of his contemporary society as he believed that his homosexuality was only his sexual identity. Much like Bunny in the play, who is married and has received wide fame for his profession as an actor. However, Bunny’s marriage is only a deception for the society, to masquerade his homosexuality as a heterosexual one which will gain him the license of normativity and along with it all of the privileges of a heterosexual man in a patriarchal set up. This becomes evident when he remarks, “Do you think I will be accepted by millions if I screamed from the rooftops that I am gay” (Dattani 70).

It is crucial to acknowledge that in the late 1990s when this play was first performed, such portrayals of gay lives was considered scandalous. Dattani’s success lies in bringing out the ‘othering’ which Indian gays go through on a daily basis. Such an ‘othering’ is also seen in the way closeted homosexuals speak with hints of homophobia, for instance in the play Bunny exclaims, “Oh no! I am not! I am not...like them” (Dattani 76), in his attempts to deceive others. As he knows that identifying as his true self would “ghettoize” (Rao 116), him as an actor. A term used by R. Raj Rao in his book when elaborating on Mahesh Dattani’s plays. He explains that Dattani’s plays with openly gay themes could reach the mainstream because Dattani himself never came out as gay as once a playwright comes out as a homosexual in public, their writing is inferior to others owing to the fact that their craft is assumed to be more a result of their political agenda than their talent (Rao 116). Homosexual narratives often are uncounted from the mainstage. Critics often comment on the boldness for the portrayal a love which is different from the normal, not realizing that the motive behind depicting homosexual narratives is bringing these very normal stories into the mainstream because they are not any different from the way heterosexual people love one another.

2.2 Homosociality as a Barrier in representing Gay Lives

Homosociality refers to two people from the same sex who are socially involved with each other with no sexual or romantic interests. R. Raj Rao reports in his book that this is rather normal in India than it is in the West. In the Indian subcontinent, it is not outlandish to hold hands of someone from the same gender on the streets because the society assumes people from the same sex to be involved in a platonic equation, nothing more than that (Rao 67). This potentially allows for homosexuals to freely express their love in public spaces, albeit leading in a complete dismissal of their narrative.

This function can be seen taking shape in the play when Kiran assumes Ed to be a heterosexual man although her homosexual brother introduced Ed to her. It is not homophobia, which will be explored later in this paper, but homosociality that has conditioned her, making her miss this detail of her brother’s life. Before Kamlesh could tell her about Ed and him, Kiran talks to him. Soon Ed argues with Kamlesh about their equation and dismisses their relationship, asking him not to jeopardize his equation with Kiran. Homosociality caved its way to convince Kiran otherwise about Ed’s sexuality and gave Ed his segue to walk ahead on his path of asserting heterosexuality.

Homosociality bounded by the hegemony which heterosexuals assume in the society, also gave rise to Ed visiting a psychiatrist who believed in conversion therapy, this fueled his hope to someday lead a life as a ‘normal’ man. In his book R. Raj Rao argues that since medicine as a field of scientific study laid down complete faith in biology and biological reproduction, it pathologized gay lives, citing them as disorders or illnesses for the longest (15). Thus, giving rise to such unacceptable practices which exist even today. Such blunders in the field of medicine, have always adversely affected the lives of gay people as seen through Ed’s struggles. Instead of healing his suicidal tendencies, the psychiatrist thinks it rather essential to first cure his sexuality, denoting it to be the root of his problems. This augments his inherited homophobia causing him more distress than before, leading to a series of mishaps in the play.

3. HOMOPHOBIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN THE PLAY

R. Raj Rao reports, “Homophobia may loosely be defined as a prejudicial fear and hatred of homosexuality, homosexual people, and homosexual acts. This is not necessarily directed at others, but could also be directed at oneself” (76). However, he later argues in the book that homophobia does not exist in India, in that this term is used more in a colloquial sense due to the lack of a better terminology. Explaining that activities deemed to be homophobic in India arise out of the need to be moral, out of corruption and psychological persecution than they do out of pure homophobia in its cosmetic sense. Homophobia hence allows for heteronormativity to exist while simultaneously discounting narratives of homosexuals, discrediting them, deeming them as inferior and abandoning those who come out as homosexuals. Homophobia in the play is twofold, in that there is an account of the, shame culture and heterosexism.

3.1 Shame Culture as seen in, *On a Muggy in Mumbai*

R. Raj Rao recalls theorist Ruth Vanita in the chapter based on homophobia in his book. Although she did not invent the term, 'shame culture' he reports that her account of its utility, is valid. Homosexuals in India are shamed for coming out as their true selves, in that along with them it is their entire ecosystem which is deprived of respect in the society. Their families, friends and even acquaintances are shamed, making it distressful and virtually impossible for homosexuals to come out as in Foucault's sense "gay" (41). Such a shame culture, leaves two options for gay lives, either coming out and bearing the consequences or staying closeted and leading a dual life in secrecy, like the Guard and Bunny in the play.

Aforementioned discussion on Sharad's announcement as all of them being unshamed in 2.1, thus becomes of crucial importance here. That moment in the play, is not just Sharad accepting that he is unshamed but also subverting the shame put on him by the society, acknowledging its consequences and still coming out. Thus, coming out as a process in the LGBTQ community comes along with its own set of consequences, one of them being the 'shame culture'. A representation of those who are closeted because of the same is employed through Bunny's character who would rather not come out and stay closeted to avoid this. However, Dattani has also discussed through the character of Ranjit, those who want to come out as gay and not bear such consequences for being their true selves. In Ranjit, the audience sees that at the behest of saving himself from such a shame culture and also lead a peaceful life, he has left the country to stay with his partner. Ranjit substantiates his choice by accounting, "Call me what you will. My English lover and I have been together for twelve years now. You lot will never be able to find a lover in this wretched country!" (Dattani 71).

As discussed in R. Raj Rao's *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India*, the 'shame culture' then prohibits one from taking control of their narrative and if they want to, they cannot in their own country. Apart from that, he also discusses how, it only arises when an individual comes out as gay. Until then, the consequences do not even exist. Identifying this, the characters in the play attempt to fit into these boxes made for them on the grounds of morality. For instance, the guard in the play who would rather be seen as someone who is indulging in homosexual intercourse with Kamlesh, for money than actually admitting his truth is a product of the 'shame culture'. He realizes that accepting he does not do it for money would be equal to accepting homosexuality, which will marginalize him and ultimately shame him and his ecosystem.

3.2 Heterosexism stifling the Voices of Gay Lives

The belief that attraction between people is gender specific, is known as heterosexism. Indicating that a man can only be attracted to a woman and vice versa. Heterosexism allows for homosociality to exist, which as discussed earlier might partly benefit the same sex couple in public space, but will eventually lead to homophobia. Heterosexism in Rao's words "straightjackets" (67) people. The consequences of letting heterosexism further permeate would be society viewing all kinds of touch as sexual, which happens in the West. Heterosexism also gives rise to conflicts in the play, as it secures hegemony for heterosexuals.

As seen in the play, Ed insists that Kiran should call him Ed and not Prakash, almost diminishing that identity as if it never existed, as this part of him is associated with Kamlesh. Ed is aware that for him to attain the privileges of a heterosexual man in a patriarchal society, he has to refrain from embracing his homosexuality and pretend to be heterosexual. His selfish motives, jeopardize Kiran's emotions, while he promises Kamlesh a future towards the end, knowing that once he attains the privileges of a heterosexual man through his marriage, he can simply lead a dual life discreetly.

4. CONCLUSION

By studying *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, in the light of R. Raj Rao's *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India*, it can be established that the play upholds some of the most essential tenets of Queer Theory in the Indian Subcontinent. Applying R. Raj Rao's lens, abetted in investigating the lives of the characters in the play while discussing their societal relevance. As a gay writer himself, R. Raj Rao's queer theory added in understanding of not only heteronormativity in the play, but also some of the most complex thoughts and decisions of the characters in the play. Examining every aspect distinctively, provided the liberty to study the characters and their sexuality as representative of the contemporary society while aligning them together in queer theory.

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