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A Singular Group for Women and Gay on the basis of a Shared Oppression in Mahesh Dattani's plays

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's plays are always concerned with the burning issues of alternate sexuality and women oppression in contemporary India. The paper focuses on the matter of cornered group of women and gays at the same platform in his serious plays. To raise a voice against gender discrimination somewhere, it seems, women and gays are becoming distanced from their separate identities. The identities get shared in *On a Muggy Night in Bombay*, *Dance Like a Man*. And Shared oppression is what channelized through the voice of protest. The plays which are mentioned in this paper portray the picture of that singular group. Looking through this lens it produces that freedom for category is more prioritised than emancipation for each in the plays mentioned.

Key Words- *Sexuality, Emancipation, Homosexuals, Microcosm.*

...I am not even sure about the politics of gender since at times I don't even think about the gender of my characters. It's only when other characters in the play react to their own gender, or the gender of those around, that the issue comes alive. (*Lakshmi Subramanyam: A Dialogue with Mahesh Dattani*).

Such is the expression of one of the most successful and significant contemporary playwrights Mahesh Dattani who addresses many unacknowledged issues such as gender discrimination in authoritarian society, identity crisis, the hollowness of middle-class lives as reflected within the microcosm of the family -all prevalent in the contemporary Indian

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society. Among these gender issue is the one emphasized more often in his plays. One of the most prominent features that differentiate Dattani from other contemporary playwrights is his concern for not only the oppression of women but for alternate sexuality, homosexuals and the like. He appears to be bold enough artistically by bringing forth their characters and in exposing the issues which are considered taboo in conventional society, inspite of stiff opposition from the marginalized sections of society. This article is directed towards unveiling a homogeneous group in which all women and gays are homogenised on the basis of shared oppression in society and thus has been treated as found in his popular plays such as *Do the Needful*, *Dance Like a Man*, and *On a Muggy Night in Bombay*.

The society set as backdrop in Dattani's plays is full of hypocrites who construct the sexuality and sexual relationship as taboo, whether homosexual or heterosexual. And the women who are considered as sexual object or as child-bearer according to social conventions are so victimized in this society. The female characters such as Lata, Alka, Dolly, Ratna, and Tara in his plays are not only 'other' of the third world but are also categorised in a group in terms of the "sameness" of their oppression, to follow C.T Mohanty. Alka and Dolly of *Bravely Fought the Queen*, thus, can be called "sisters in struggle" as they are caught in the trap of male chauvinism. Dolly's husband Jiten, the sadist who, like Jimmy of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, inflicts pain on his wife due to his unfulfilled libido, and pushes Alka out of the house while finding her as an obstacle on his lecherous activities and Praful, brother of Alka and Dolly, who deliberately pushes Alka's face upon a lighting stove, represent the darkest faces of male patriarchy. Equally, Lata and Ratna who are being questioned by male patriarchy for their career as dancer in *Dance Like a Manas* dance which is held not so ethical also becomes a taboo and Lata by sacrificing her love for Salim, the "terrorist" in *Do The Needful* belong to that group struggling for emancipation. In his later plays women's struggle is more radical just like bold rhythm of dance, capable enough to beat gender stereotypical roles as Ratna remains a professional dancer and made her daughter also a dancer though Jairaj had to abandon this career later. But this primary overcoming is

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not enough to feed the intellectual mind of his admirers. Dattani has entered into the core of the problems of individuals to bring a fresh identity beyond all prejudices, thus enabling himself to be a voice for the marginalised. He explores other gender issues and begins to deal with them to exhibit that there are homosexuals who in their effort for surviving like heterosexuals are thrown at the edge and falls prey to the gender stereotypes in society. The characters representing these individuals and being subjected to dominant ideology or taboo have shared a common space with women on the basis of their oppression and therefore structuring a singular group for all the sufferers in some of his plays.

In *Do the Needful*, the radio play, Dattani has skilfully directed the characters of Lata and Alpesh who belong to the singular group of common oppression though they are having different sexualities, one notorious & another gay. Lata, an educated daughter of Gowdas family becomes intimate with Salim who is recognised as Kashmiri terrorist. That Salim's status of possessing four wives does not abstain her strong desire for love as her notoriety reflects "– what's the point in thinking of all that now? I will have to be content keeping you as a lover". On the other hand Alpesh once divorced is fully obsessed in a homosexual relationship with Trilok, the one to massage Alpesh's body. Both of them are living on their different mental spaces but are equally oppressed as they can neither reveal their preferences to the society nor can they enjoy it freely. Finally though the two families target to make them "straight" they agree in their "doing the needful" campaign but with the secret deal of not being intimate to each other or not becoming "straight", not even harming each other's mental space. Especially when Lata discovers Alpesh with Mali she realizes his alternate sexuality. Keeping their mutual understanding he overwhelms uttering "teribhichup, meribhichup". Apparently they are subjected to dominant social ideology. But Dattani has been successful to surpass the social prejudicial boundary as he retains their freedom of space though silently. Synonymously female sexuality and homosexuality in male are stereotyped and those are held in contempt in *Dance Like a Man*. In *On a Muggy Night in Bombay* homosexuality is practiced very slyly as those are strongly prohibited and considered to be

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shameful act. Women and gays are having a same group of suffering here also. Their sexualities are not treated equally with the existing gender relationship. Dattani's realization of this marginalisation is well expressed in his words: "I have found out that sexuality can't strait jacketed or compartmentalised. They are varying degrees of love and bonding one feels for another person irrespective of gender." (Krishna Rao, "Mahesh Dattani", the Gentleman, 2003). Kamlesh, Deepali, Sharad, Bunny, Ranjit, Kiran and Ed (Prakash) – all of them have their own spaces but share same platform in terms of their suffering. They intend to live independently without confining them to age-old social ideology to impart a new identity to their unacknowledged status. So they heartily abhor being heterosexual following the social custom as it is evident from the conversation held between Deepali and Kamlesh:

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!'.....

Prakash though pretends to be straight could not remain so at the end. He has to burst out his suppressed sexuality in front of his fellow being.

Further in *Dance Like a Man* the matter of being 'homo' is considered as very repulsive and abnormal. Even if one wears sort of attire for dance performance such as male dancer's long hair and flexible body gestures, their different way of talking all these seem to the society very ridiculous as men according to the social norm are not supposed to possess these things. They are not considered as men but half men. It is fully expressed in Amritlal Parekh's words:

Amritlal : No! It's not enough that I have to deal with a bunch of half- clad, long-haired men in my house all day and pay for the honour, now you want to go prancing on a stage with them in foreign lands!

On the other hand female dancer Ratna is strictly forbidden by his father-in-law not to dance with Chenni Amma, the devdasi who is often held in contempt and called as fallen woman.

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Both the gender identities are restricted to some extent. Thus they are automatically thrown and flown towards the same group in terms of their identity crisis.

Thus, through the reading of these stage characters he reads the society and its problem in giving due space to every individuals, their freedom of living different lifestyle and ways, not to be interrupted by norms and codes. And in doing so he has been able to unveil the mystery of the far existing oppression and its root cause. This like a malady has devoured the individual identity and synthesizes all the marginalised in a single group which reduces the possibility to bloom from their restricted periphery. Dattani is the mastermind enough to explore this so-called common space. In dealing with different gender issues, thus, he has been radical theatrical voice who has given “sixty million English-speaking Indians an identity” (Alyque Padamsee in *Collected Plays*). Like Ibsen and Beckett he has been successful to identify the suffering of the marginal section of the society.

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