

## ASSESSING ALTERNATE SEXUALITIES: An analysis of Mahesh Dattani's Play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*



### English Literature

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### ABSTRACT

*Mahesh Dattani, India's leading English playwright has been forthright in dealing with taboo issues such as child sexual abuse, gender discrimination, incest and alternate sexuality, especially in the urban upper classes of India.*

*The present paper attempts to analyse his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* which deals with the taboo issue of homosexuality. It is a play about the fears and insecurity faced by six homosexuals in Mumbai; they are unable to adjust to the outside world. Moreover their own world is ripped apart by jealousy, separation, feelings of loneliness, and the imposed need to always hide their homosexual leanings. Troubled and unable to face the pressure, Dattani shows a world replete with a desire to be part of the mainstream; however, society is still not ready to accept alternate sexual preferences, pushing them into a world of loneliness and solitude.*

Mahesh Dattani is one of India's leading dramatists, who has chosen to write in the English language. Carrying forward the tradition of Nissim Ezekiel, Asif Currimbhoy and Girish Karnad, Dattani has taken English drama to a level that it had never attained earlier. The first English dramatist to be conferred the Sahitya Akademi award, Dattani has not only brought English drama in India into the mainstream, but in fact due to the push received by the English theatre, even the regional drama of the country has been enriched. Dattani has been bold enough to touch upon taboo subjects, which no dramatist, regional or otherwise, had dared to do so. Child sexual abuse, gender discrimination, communal tensions, incest, and most shockingly, even alternate sexual preferences are themes in Dattani's plays. The themes and subject matters of Dattani's plays are taken from the everyday lives of modern urban Indian masses. He does not resort to any sensationalism, but then he is very critical of urban upper class Indians who try to push such sensitive and taboo issues under the carpet and deny their very existence.

The present play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with the trials and tribulations of a group of homosexuals who have gathered in a flat in the posh Marine Drive area of Mumbai. The very fact that Dattani presented them as well-educated, urbanized, well-exposed to the modern world, English speaking, at good positions in the Corporate sector, and yet having alternate sexual preferences shocked the audiences and the readers alike. But Dattani was relentless in his portrayal of six men who are homosexuals as members of the urban, upper class India, and, though they have acknowledged each other's homosexuality, are still terribly scared of being 'found out'. Closeted together in a flat on a sultry evening in Mumbai, these men and one lady friend who is a lesbian – Deepali, shun the outside world and find comfort within their own company. In this play the question of homosexuality and its avid rejection by the social construct is of particular interest. "In spite of the fact that in India homosexuality is slowly gaining acceptance, gay relationships are still stigmatized as unconventional and unnatural and therefore often hidden under a shroud of privacy" (Prasad 40-41).

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) discusses unabashedly the routine of well-to-do homosexuals in Mumbai. Interestingly enough, Dattani probes deep into the psyche of these men and portrays their changing mutual relationships, their self-delusions and their consequent self-discoveries (Myles 114).

Kamlesh, Sharad, Bunny, Ranjit, Prakash/Ed and Deepali are clear about their different sexual preferences; but they make every possible effort to 'hide' this fact from everyone. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, though Dattani has chosen an unconventional subject-matter and theme, yet the backdrop of the

play is decidedly conventional. To discuss the issue of homosexuality, Dattani uses the family setting.

Despite its offbeat subject – gay love – the play manages to convincingly show its moorings in family relationships within its chosen milieu. It is a celebration of gay life, but it also deals with the middle class virtues of family values and friendship among its themes (Chaudhuri 42).

Dattani never allows, doesn't want to actually, let his characters live in a Utopian world of comfort and warmth. Right from the first Act, it becomes clear that these men and women share a disturbed and difficult relationship; with the outside world, and with each other too. The boundaries of the social construct do not permit them to have alternate sexual preferences; and the outside world is so hostile that they dare not step into it. Perhaps this was a deliberate ploy by the dramatist to keep the 'taboo sword' hanging on all his characters most of the time.

As the play opens we find that Kamlesh is trying to get over his relationship with Prakash; for which he had moved from Bangalore to Mumbai in the first place.

Kamlesh: I came here to get over a relationship. A relationship... I suppose it was. In Bangalore. We have been through the pain of separation... As gay men and women we have all been through that. . . I did a cruel thing by loving Sharad to forget Prakash. I have not succeeded and I have hurt someone as wonderful as Sharad. I made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that I was trying to get over. (68)

What Kamlesh is trying to say openly is that though he is a gay, he too is after all a human being who gets hurt by separations as much as perhaps the 'normal' men do. The rigmorale of break-ups, formation of relationships, re-uniting, jealousy at the partner's mingling with the others – all of these happen with gay men as much as with the 'straight' men. By making Kamlesh the mouthpiece to give voice to the inner mind of a gay, Dattani is knocking loudly at the doors of the urban Indian society to wake up to the woes and pain of the homosexuals. John McRae has rightly pointed out:

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* 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 easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates. (Multani 60)

Among themselves, the characters enjoy comfort, camaraderie, jokes and a zest for life. But any interaction with an 'outsider',

a person who is not of their 'kind', sends them into a close huddle, and their warmth vanishes. Their discomfort can be seen through their conversation patterns, their behaviour, and pretensions of being overjoyed at meeting the 'outsider'. Dattani constantly reminds his audience of their fears and apprehensions. One of the intentions while writing this play was perhaps to make the homosexual characters of the play confront the social construct, and slowly, though painfully, come to terms with the fact that they will now have to live with their so-called 'differentness'.

**John McRae in his commentary on this play in Dattani's Collected Plays, writes:**

... as the characters' masks fall, their emotions unravel, and their lives disintegrate. 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. (45).

The homosexuals gathered in Kamlesh's flat represent the varied faces of the homosexual community. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri analyses:

Sharad, the flamboyant gay cares a fig about how the world views him; Bunny, his anti-thesis, the clandestine homosexual who plays a happily married father on a television sitcom as well as in real life; and Deepali, the sensible lesbian, whose portrayal subtly implies that it is the woman who is sensible, even in gay culture (49-50).

It is an assumption taken for granted in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, that homosexuals as characters do exist in the society, and in fact have existed in the Indian milieu since centuries. Their appearance is not sudden, as some kind of a deviant genetic syndrome that has resulted because of immorality running rampant or because Indians are now aping the west! Dattani provides ample evidence of this fact, by engaging his characters in realistic conversations in day-to-day language, without resorting to any kind of codified language or symbolic system. However, as soon as they begin to interact with the 'outside' world, or with 'outsiders', the so-called 'straight' guys, their comfort vanishes. Their body language, their monosyllables and interaction all point to their being conscious of being 'different'.

Kamlesh, for instance, is literally shrieking for help; his actions and dialogues clearly suggest the same. He confesses that he is still in love with Prakash, a man who has apparently moved on, gone 'straight'. Kamlesh is neither able to take in the separation nor is he able to digest the fact that Prakash left him because he was 'ashamed' of being a gay. Bunny, the TV actor thinks that homosexuality may be a reality, but not something to be proud of, or to be boastful about. He hides behind a veil of heterosexuality and pretends to have the best of both the worlds.

Bunny: Camouflage! Even animals do it. Blend with the surroundings. They can't find you. You politically correct gays deny yourself the basic animal instinct of camouflage. (70)

**Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri points out:**

This being, the typical Indian manner of constructing an acceptable identity as a cover for the true self. The other way to 'be yourself' would quite simply be to run away, or as Sharad would put it, turn into a 'coconut' like Ranjit, who boasts of having a steady relationship with a man abroad where his sexual identity ceases to be a problem; but other problems of racial identity – "you are brown on the outside and white on the inside" (71) – manifest themselves (93).

Prakash and Kamlesh are ridden with a feeling of shame and guilt at being gays, because that identity stops them from being

'accepted' members of society. The hypocrisy of the Indian society that McRae pointed out earlier, comes to the forefront when a gay is almost 'forgiven' if he marries, has a family and is able to hide the reality. Dattani portrays the psyche of such married gays through the speech of Bunny:

Bunny: I know. 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 here in this room. And you all hate me for being such a hypocrite ... I am a gay man. Everyone believes me to be the model middle class man. I was chosen for the part in the serial because I fit into common perceptions of what a family man ought to look like. (102-103)

Throughout the play, all the characters are shown to be reeling under the pressure of the acceptance vs. non-acceptance syndrome for being homosexuals. They fear that if the neighbours discover their true 'identity' they will be thrown out. Each character thus, tries to escape into his/her own cocoon, and, at the slightest sign of danger, they run for cover.

**John McRae offers an analysis of the characters:**

Of the characters, Sharad and Deepali are comfortable with their sexuality, and have different ways of being gay. Sharad is camp, flaunting; Deepali more restrained, perhaps more stable. Kamlesh is anguished, and Ed the most obvious victim of his own insecurities. Bunny, the TV actor, is a rather more traditional Indian gay man – married (he would say happily) while publicly denying his own nature, and Ranjit has taken an easy way out by moving to Europe where he can "be himself" more openly. (Murtani 60)

Moreover, being homosexuals they are forever exposed to dangers of being beaten up, or handled violently. The bitterness resulting due to the internal struggle of having to identify oneself as a homosexual and becoming a societal outcast because of it, cannot be suppressed by any character. Dattani has not suggested a homosexual relationship among the characters gathered in Kamlesh's flat, except of course the one between Kamlesh and Prakash/Ed and between Kamlesh and Sharad. Rest of the characters do admit that they are gays, but do not display any sexual involvement with each other. Kamlesh's flat almost comes to represent a refuge for these gays, a place where they may not be gathering for physical gratification, but where at least there is no fear of accepting that they have alternate sexual preferences. Kamlesh's flat is the psychologist's couch where each character takes turns to reveal the pathetic angst of being a gay in a hostile world. The presence of a lesbian, Deepali, is a subtle dramatic ploy by Dattani to suggest that even the male/female differences are forgotten as these characters bunch up to represent people having different sexual preferences. However, the characters have gathered at Kamlesh's flat to collectively voice their fear and ostracization as gays and lesbians, not as males and females. Dr. Chittaranjan Mishra says:

Bunny Singh for instance, does not want to be denied acceptance of the society by flaunting his gay identity in public while his friend Ranjit wants to go to Europe and live with his English gay partner freely (Prasad 54).

He is a Sardar, a TV star, who comes across as an escapist, who by his own admittance, is 'bold' enough to cut his hair, but who is ashamed of his being a gay. Deepali asks him some pertinent questions:

Deepali: Can you love your wife? (84)

Bunny's reply clearly brings out his escapist attitude.

Bunny: You know I would be lying if I said I could. But I give

her so much more. More than any heterosexual man. I do look after her well. She is content. (84)

For Bunny, homosexuality is a nature-driven tendency; but to have a wife and children is a societal need, and a front that covers up his being a 'gay'. He believes that that is the best way in which he can 'balance' his life.

The entry of Kiran – Kamlesh's sister - puts a veil on direct conversation. She knows all the 'details' and the 'truth' of her brother being a gay, she is privy to the fact that the friends gathered in his flat have similar sexual preferences, yet her references to homosexuality are oblique and indirect. She tells Bunny, the TV actor, who is actually a gay, but has not openly declared his homosexuality:

Kiran: I just wouldn't have guessed...That you are...well, like my brother.

(Act I, pg. 76)

Homosexuality exists, but remains an unsaid reality, to be understood by the audience. Again Kiran tells Bunny:

Kiran: This is very noble of you...to be their friend. (Act I, pg. 76)

Conversation in the house suddenly ceases and then becomes dull and uninteresting at Kiran's entry because precisely at that moment Kamlesh was in the act of throwing away his first lover Prakash's photograph from the balcony. It is ironical and deeply unsettling to know that Kiran is about to get married to her brother's former lover – Prakash. Neither Kamlesh nor any of the other friends gathered therein have been able to tell Kiran that her future husband is her brother's former lover.

Heaven knows what fate awaits the brother-sister duo as both love the same man. The already complex situation becomes even more confusing, as the characters are pitted against exceedingly problematic issues. The play's ending hinges on a chance happening: the sexually unambiguous photo of Ed is discovered. (Chaudhuri 42).

Ed's attempt at committing suicide takes the play to its pinnacle, and the masks that each character is wearing are pulled apart and the real faces are revealed. When Kiran announces her marriage with Ed to the gathering of Kamlesh's friends, the heat of the muggy night rises, and the truth of the past relationship of Kamlesh and Prakash, rushes in like a tornado into the flat. The purpose for which the friends had gathered was to help Kamlesh overcome his relationship with Prakash; however, with Kiran's announcement, the wounds open afresh. "The play builds up tension, till the final discovery of Ed and Prakash as one person. The same person who is gay has to pretend to be straight for social acceptability" (Prasad 55). Santosh Chakrabarti aptly comments:

Two contrastive scenarios are conceived to offset each other. In one, Ed, the gay man breaks down after assaulting his male partner Kamlesh following the disclosure of their relation from a just recovered tell-tale clandestine photograph, and in the other, the air of celebration prevails – sound of bursting firecrackers and lusty yells is heard from the wedding below. . . Ed's lament to Kiran in the revelation scene is most telling: "I didn't mean to harm you. I only wanted to live". (Prasad 45)

The oppressive social structure has pressurized Prakash to such an extent, that he is willing to deny himself his natural inclination to love a man. Prakash's guilt signifies two parallels: conditioning as regards the place given to homosexuals, and his fear of abject rejection by society at large. This aspect is focused

upon through the episode of the psychiatrist.

Dattani brings out the angst of Kamlesh when he is 'advised' by the psychiatrist to break free from the homosexual ways and become straight. In a dialogue laden with sarcasm, Kamlesh says:

I knew I needed medication. I chose the psychiatrist out of the Yellow Pages. He pretended to understand. Until he began to tell me about aversion therapy. For a while I believed him. Because the medication helped me cope with my depression better. Until he said I would never be happy as a gay man. It is impossible to change society, he said, but it may be possible for you to reorient yourself. (69)

Of all the people, Dattani chooses a psychiatrist to echo the societal disapproval for homosexuality. It is a fact generally taken for granted by the urban classes that psychologists and psychiatrists are better equipped and more suited to understand the 'deviant behaviours' and tangential diversions of men and women as regards sexual preferences; but here we find a psychiatrist who is trying to preach societal codification and norms to Kamlesh. He goes a step ahead and 'asks' Kamlesh to 'change' his sexual preferences.

What Dattani doesn't say categorically is the fact that as a member of a stereotypical society, even the psychiatrist views homosexuality as a fractured conception of failing to come to terms with the natural process of sexuality. It is viewed as something like depression; eventually with time and help, it can be 'set right'. So a person with a different sexual preference, if counseled correctly and appropriately, can be turned into a 'normal' person. The psychiatrist thus tries to tell Kamlesh that his loneliness is the result of his being gay; once he 'cures' himself of that, the loneliness, the boycott by cultured society, the feeling of being constantly persecuted – everything will cease. Santosh Chakrabarti describes this tendency of the homosexuals in the play:

The main focus of the play thus is on the question of a gay man's conversion to the 'straight' state, so that he can belong to the world where weddings take place in order to accentuate socially accepted stereotypical roles. The success of Ed's romance with Kiran hinges upon this formula of conversion and acceptance in view of his past relationship with Kamlesh, her brother. . . Societal acceptance is the ultimate end for all – whether gay or convert/straight. (Prasad 46)

All the three Acts are enacted in Kamlesh's flat, which incidentally is located in the posh Marine Drive area of Mumbai. Why does Kamlesh choose to throw a party in his flat? Mumbai is a metro full of pubs, clubs, discs, restaurants and all-night joints. Then why invite the homosexual friends to one's home? It is a sultry, humid evening, so having beer and snacks on the beach would have been an ideal way of relieving oneself of the heat. But Kamlesh keeps his flat as the meeting point because all of them know they will be shunned in pubs or clubs or discotheques. They might even be dealt with violently. The fresh sea air is not for them; perhaps mingling and interacting with the outside world is so replete with the pressure of being different that it had better be put to a stop. Intentionally therefore, Dattani places the action of the play in Kamlesh's flat, marking it as a safe haven for people 'like' himself. Chitranjan Mishra points out:

Unacceptable to the ideas of homogeneous cultural identity, the gays inhabit a world of their own, subject to exclusion and isolation. Dattani tracks a group of characters to bring out their conflicts and repressions against the backdrop of a society that denies them their freedom. The stage is divided into three acting areas. One is a small flat of Kamlesh with windows overlooking the Mumbai skyline. The second one is a non-realistic set where

the characters confront their inner thoughts. The last one is Kamlesh's bedroom. (Prasad 53-54)

The evening when Kamesh's 'special friends' are going to meet, as a contrast, there is not only the Mumbai skyline visible from the balcony of the flat, but one can constantly sense the presence of the wedding crowd, singing and dancing at the ground level. This indicates the 'real' world to be encountered by the homosexuals, as against the closeted, suffocating flat peopled by men and women with different sexual preferences. Sharad comes first, humming a song:

So many times we have to pay  
For having fun and being gay . . .

Kamlesh's case is peculiar: not only is he a 'gay', but to make matters worse, he invites the ire of his friends by indulging in sexual encounters with the guard and the secretary of the building. Kamlesh's gay friends and partners find his indulgence in such sexual encounters disgusting and 'abnormal'. Deepali makes it very clear:

You men! All you do is screw around like bunnies!

Does this mean that Kamlesh is so desperate for physical gratification that by turns he indulges in sexual flings with the guard and the secretary? It appears that Dattani has deliberately included this incident in order to offset the fine balance of the rest of the play. The unsaid demand for respect and dignity by all the characters with different sexual preferences from society becomes rather marred by this 'act' of Kamlesh. Kamlesh oscillated between the socially imposed levels of 'dignity' and the force of his libido; ultimately he 'gave in' and occasionally enjoyed sexual services of the guard.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* does bring in the element of heterosexuality as well; in fact the discussion of alternate sexuality is largely conducted in the background of heterosexuality. Kiran is the only heterosexual presented in the play as a 'character', an 'outsider' who walks into the flat, interacts with all the homosexuals and the lesbian, Deepali, and even plays her part in binding the friends together. By the time the play ends, it is discovered that Kiran emerges as the strongest character.

Kiran becomes the catalyst for Kamlesh to vent out his long held secret feelings for Prakash, who is now Ed, and is about to get married to Kiran. She in fact bears the brunt of a double-edged sword – the discovery that her brother loved a guy called Prakash, and that Ed himself is Prakash, who has plotted the marriage with Kiran, so as to be able to remain near Kamlesh. Santosh Charabarti aptly comments:

Being caught in the double bind of insidious fact-suppression by own brother and deceitful dealing by her lover Ed, the innocent Kiran, the divorced heterosexual is subjected to unwarranted fraud. Though she holds her own in rejecting Ed, the final image of 'Kiran and Kamlesh holding each other against the Mumbai skyline is far from reassuring, as she has to repose her faith in a brother who is deceitful. (Prasad 47)

In the first Act, there is a visible tension between Kamlesh and Sharad. After having lived together for one full year, they have separated. The reason for this separation is unfolded slowly. Kamlesh's inability to forget his first real love – Prakash has created the rift between him and Sharad. The play comes to a point of crucial tension, a point where two characters are forced to sacrifice their relationship on the altar of social prejudice and disapproval. Prakash develops cold feet midway in the relationship with Kamlesh. He decides to retrieve his self from the claws of 'homosexuality' and become 'straight' again. Prakash does

not have it in him to be candid about his different sexual preferences, so he withdraws from the relationship. Kamlesh is deeply affected by this decision of Prakash:

Kamlesh: . . . I would have understood it if he had left me for another man, but he left me because he was ashamed of our relationship. It would have worked between us, but he was ashamed. I was very angry. I left my parents and my sister to come here, all because of him. . . (Pause). . . For the first time in my life, I wished I wasn't gay.

Kamlesh and Sharad have a strange habit of watching the couple in the flat opposite to theirs indulging in sex. One wonders what pleasure the two would be getting out of the entire exercise. Do two people, a male and a female, having a sexual encounter fascinate them? Kamlesh even keeps a pair of binoculars handy near the window of his flat to be able to observe the finer details of the encounter! It's a typical devil vs. angel situation. Kamlesh's input that the woman indulges in sex not only with her husband but also with the 'doodhwalla', is perhaps his way of pointing out that heterosexuals are no saints. The social perspective of viewing homosexuals as devils has percolated so deep down in the psyche of Kamlesh and Sharad that they become reactive to a normal sexual activity between two people and have developed a scornful attitude towards it. Homosexuals are largely viewed as people with deviant moralities; therefore, Kamlesh's reference to the wife of the Zaveri Bazaar merchant having multiple sex partners is an oblique way of telling the audience immorality exists among heterosexuals too.

To be different, and yet to be part of the society's mainstream seems to be the overriding concern of every character. This becomes clear when we find that though all characters have accepted that they are gays, yet societal disapproval makes them fidgety and uncertain. Again, each one of them share the secret of their being gay with Kiran, yet something stops them from telling the truth about Ed to her. Is this a desperate need to suppress reality? Is the unsaid code against homosexuality which makes these men cling to one another. They may have come clean on being homosexuals, but there is a limit to their openness about it. Deepali sums it up brilliantly:

Deepali: 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. (89)

Dattani's technique of talking about the gay issue by gays themselves in hushed tones or in oblique terms highlights the internalisation of the social taboo by each of them – Kamlesh, Sharad, Ranjit, Bunny, Ed, Kiran and Deepali. Everyone who has gathered in Kamlesh's flat knows the exact status of each other: it is literally a 'roomful of gays'; but it is still 'not' the 'proper thing' to talk about.

Ed: You are Kamlesh's...special friend, aren't you?

Kiran: Err – Ed... (Act III, pg. 97)

Ed is a classic case of 'self-denial'. He seems to have convinced himself that his homosexual leanings were 'unnatural', they were a 'crime' and it was all a big mistake. He appears to be very relieved that he has come out of it and become a 'real man'. He thinks that homosexuality was just a phase that can be overcome, or can be simply forgotten like a bad dream. No wonder then that he screams at them:

Ed: Look outside. Look at that wedding crowd! They are the real men and women out there! But... 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. (99)

If Prakash is grappling with the guilt of being a gay, the case of

Bunny and Ranjit is even more pronounced - in the former's efforts to live a double life, and the latter's efforts to run away from everything. The fear of rejection and being left alone to simmer in his own lonely capsule, has made Bunny become a closeted homosexual; whereas Ranjit seems to be convinced that India is not the place for 'homosexuals' to live.

Dattani has chosen the professions of his characters too carefully. Each one of them represent professions that are modern and with a sense of the cosmopolitan culture. Kamlesh works at a reasonably good position in an advertising agency; Bunny Singh is a TV actor; Ed/Prakash is in the field of Marketing; Deepali is not a typical housewife kind material. Dattani cleverly informs us how each of the friends gathered at Kamlesh's flat are independent in terms of economic bearings. They appear to have their own incomes, and sizable ones at that, their own houses, rented or otherwise, their own vehicles and their own individual bank balances. Being well-educated and with good external exposure, these six characters stand tall on their feet; however, even money power does not seem to ensure their safety and security. Their insecurity is voiced loudly when Dattani indirectly suggests that each one of them fear that the moment their office or workplace come to know about their being 'gays' they might lose their jobs instantly. This fear perhaps keeps them away from frequenting pubs, restaurants, the beachside, discs, gymnasiums, theatres and all other public places. They fear that they might come across friends or office colleagues who would discover their real identity and then shun them, or worse, plot to throw them out from the workplace. Though well-established in their respective professions, all of them realise that they are not indispensable; especially in a country like India where population is hardly an issue, replacements can be easily found. Their turmoil thus is multiplied as none of them have the luxury cushion of ancestral wealth; their survival depends on their incomes. Bunny Singh will be deprived not only of work and subsequently income, but additionally he will become a face that is laughed at the most by the vast TV sitcoms watching public of India. A much stereotyped audience of India will not be able to view him as a romanticizing hero on the screen, or the father of a loving family, or any other 'normal' character he will play. The knowledge of his being 'gay' will leave his viewers stunned and the characters that he has portrayed so far will suddenly assume an artificial nature.

Similarly, Kamlesh will be viewed as someone unable to really understand relationships or the family dimensions while making advertisements of varied products. Clients and even his own office people might consider Kamlesh as deficient in understanding normal human emotions and interpersonal relationships because he is a gay. Hence, the job of making attractive advertisements featuring happy families or children in products like chocolates, soft drinks, cars, cosmetics or child care products may have been given to someone else and not to Kamlesh. The fear of losing economic independence maddens all the characters of the play.

Dattani uses Kamlesh's flat to suggest that it is up market and well-furnished; a clear indicator that money-wise Kamlesh and his friends can be described as well-to-do. However, they take care not to flaunt their money. Bunny Singh, the TV actor, is perhaps the richest of all of them; but he too carefully avoids mention of money matters in front of his friends. He does tell Deepali that he keeps his wife very happy, but that the happiness is largely bought through money is implied.

The end of the play has an almost O. Henry like twist: the sexually unambiguous photo of Ed and Kamlesh is discovered by the middle-aged guard of the building. Usually, any literary or artistic activity featuring on homosexuality, or even lesbianism for that matter, end on an unhappy note. Homosexuals invariably

move towards death, isolation, or a sham heterosexual marriage of the kind Ed and Kiran are heading towards. But this play ends on an upbeat note. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* lifts the veil of secrecy that shrouds the marginalized cultures, sexualities and lifestyles. Can homosexuality change to heterosexuality? Is homosexuality really 'unnatural'? Is Dattani substituting one sexual stereotype with another? What, for example, happens to bisexuals? *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* attempts to pose these questions, knowing fully well that final answers are hardly possible.

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