

## **Deviated Urban Society in Mahesh Dattanis' select plays**

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### **Abstract**

Society, especially in India has certain norms and conditions which govern them. Those who deviate from these norms like culture, religion, moral and discipline are considered uncultured. Mahesh Dattani views these uncultured sections of society in the Urban context and gives the audience a glimpse into their inner life, their problems and turmoil. This is paper shall highlight how Dattani lights up the agonies of the deviated society. Finally, this paper concludes with the present status of such society.

**Keywords:** Urban, Uncultured, Turmoil, Society, marginalised, Homo-sexual, Taboo

### **Introduction**

Dattani expresses his concern for taboo relationship discrimination of the values based on gender, prejudices, uncertain liaisons and the disgust for sexual colonialism” (Agarwal 194). The difference in the attitudes of the rural and urban societies in dealing with these oppressed groups is also well delineated by Mahesh

Dattani. His plays such as *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Seven steps Around the Fire* all deal with these silenced subalterns.

Dattani explores the idea of liberal-mindedness and exposes the hypocritical attitude of the urban society in dealing with the marginalised sections. Mithran Devanesan inquires, “Are we the liberal-minded person we would like to believe that we are or do we blindly know to unwritten laws of family conduct that is the easier path to take?” (87).

All human beings are generally divided based on race, religion and nationality. Apart from these general categories, they are further categorized based on their sexuality and sexual orientation - such as heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender. Homosexual is a general term and is further divided into gay and lesbian. In its inclusive meaning, it usually refers to the homosexuals as a whole- both gay and lesbians. Anthony Giddens feels, “The term ‘gay’ also brought with it an increasingly widespread reference to sexuality as a quality or property of the self: A person ‘has’ sexuality, gay or otherwise, which can be reflexibly grasped, interrogated and developed”(11) The term ‘gay’ usually means happy or cheerful, but has also come to signify homosexuals. The word ‘gay’ may have started to acquire associations of immorality as early as the fourteenth century, and had certainly acquired its current meaning by the seventeenth century. By the late seventeenth century it had acquired the specific meaning of addicted to pleasures and dissipations, an extension of its primary meaning of carefree implying uninhibited by moral constraints. It was apparently not until the twentieth century that the word began to be used to mean specifically homosexual, although it had earlier acquired sexual connotations. People firmly believe that heterosexuality is the only normal and acceptable mode of sexual and social relations. Hence, society looks at homosexuality as an unnatural and

abnormal relation. It is also otherwise called a deviant relationship because it is a deviation from the so-called normal relationship.

In Indian writing, to some extent, this kind of writing comes in the realm of taboo. Mahesh Dattani brings to light certain taboo subjects that are usually brushed under the carpet in Indian society. In fact, homosexuality is and was part of Indian culture. Dattani brings to light Indian homosexuality.

*Bravely fought the queen* deals with the secret life of Nitin, a closeted homosexual who in spite of his urban upbringing hides the fact that he is gay. He has a secret affair with his childhood friend Praful. Who is also a closeted gay person. In order to maintain his relationship unhindered, Praful gets his sister Alka married to Nitin. Alka is the Victim of her husband's homosexuality. Alka's brother Praful is Nitin's secret gay partner. "old Baa's second daughter in law Alka has to suffer the reluctance of her husband who is a big failure in his business, just because he is in the trap of this dangerous sexual disease" (Jha 36).

Alka's brother Praful tricks both Alka and Nitin. When Nitin stayed in Praful's house in their younger years, after everyone slept, Nitin went around the house to make sure that everybody was in deep sleep and he returned to Praful's room. Nitin describes how he would go back to Praful's room and kneel down. At times he would wake up immediately, at other times he would lean forward to look at him "close enough for my breath to fall gently on his face. And he would open his eyes... I loved him too. He is... was attractive. And he responded [...] that was a game he played. And I – I was caught in it" (BFQ 314). When Praful insist on Nitin's marriage, Nitin refuses thinking that he should not marry. He feels that no woman would want to marry a gay man. But Praful assures him that his sister Alka knows everything about

the two of them and their secret relationship and that she has agreed to the match as all she wants is the security of a marriage. But the truth is that Alka does not know anything about her brother's affair with Nitin; She does not even realise that Nitin is gay. Now Nitin is having an affair with an auto driver and he wants Alka to go to sleep. He does not want her to wake up to the harsh realities of their condition. Nitin talks to a sleeping Alka, "Don't wake up. Stay drunk. You mustn't watch... those powerful arms" (BFQ 315). Alka has a fruitless marriage since Nitin is gay and has no interest in her. But she does not realize the real reason behind their estrangement and thinks that her mother-in-law old Baa is preventing their relationship and love.

The urban heterosexual society is comfortable with their identity and lifestyle. They feel they have nothing to be ashamed of and live their life openly. Mahesh Dattani is of the opinion that love and bonding of the same gender need not always be sexual. "There are grey areas in people's relationships with others too" (qtd.in Rao: web) Relationships nowadays, especially in urban society are not as rigidly demarcated as they used to be. Sexuality cannot be strictly categorised. The emotional bonding and appeal for the other sex vary drastically in love and sex.

*Seven steps Around the Fire* is a play about the world of eunuchs - their identity, their problems, their conflicts and their emotions in an urban setting. It compels people to look at *hijras* from a different point of view and re-evaluate their biased opinions. Uma Rao is a research scholar researching *hijras* for a case study. She is modern, urban educated woman and is hence very broad-minded in her viewpoint. She can see and judge people by their behaviour, and does not stereotype them. This is a primary reason why she is able to investigate the murder of Anarkali, a *hijra* and free Champa, the *hijra* accused of the murder, when the police could not.

Besides the main plot of a murder mystery, the play also delves into the inner world of the hijras in the process. “It beautifully deals with the pathetic plight of the *hijras*, their way of life, their ardent sense of individual identity in a callous and cruel atmosphere where a minister had the young hijra burned to death” (Prasad 203) Uma Rao is the daughter of a high-ranking government official and her husband is the superintendent of police, Suresh. It is due to these high connections that Uma gets a chance to investigate and unravel this crime within the transgender community. The transgender, known as ‘Hijras’ or ‘eunuch’ are treated like animals- sub-human creatures who cannot even be given a gender pronoun. They are usually referred to by the pronoun ‘it’ by people like the constable Munuswamy and even by an educated person like her husband Suresh. Uma goes to meet Anarkali for the first time in prison. Constable Munuswamy makes arrangements for her to meet Anarkali:

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munuswamy : (Chuckling) She! Of course, it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it does not (SSF 7)

When Uma argues with Suresh that Anarkali should not be put in a male prison where she is subjected to every form of abuse by the male prisoners, Suresh says, “They are as strong as horses... Don’t believe a word of what it says. They are all liars” (SSF 9). This is the demeaning attitude towards the eunuch held in society.

When Uma and constable Munuswamy are driving along the main road, he warns her of the hijras who will come running for alms during the traffic signals.

When Uma corrects him, he tells her that *hijras* are beggars too:

Munuswamy : Madam, be careful. The *Hijras* will come running now.

Uma : There are no *Hijras*. Children! Just children.

Munuswamy : Same thing. Beggars only, no? (SSF 18)

Dattani breaks the silence which reigned so far on the matter of non-heterosexual relationship. In a country like India, homosexuality or same-sex bonds have been treated as a deviant, perversion or even criminal. Socially they are harassed, victimized and mocked at. By portraying these marginalised groups as the main protagonists. Dattani makes one see life from their point of view and thus bring in sympathy and understanding for their condition.

Dattani boldly explores the sections of society that are marginalised by the mainstream and delves into their lives without preconceptions or judgments. Dattani boldly tackles the taboo- ridden subjects and captures the anguish and agony of the marginalized with delicate strokes. Dattani understands that for society to flourish, every section of society should flourish as well. For this to happen, it is important to break away from certain norms which ridicule and puts down those who are different in any way. It has been said that a person who has flattened up by an opponent can get up again but that a person who has been flattened by conformity remains defeated till the end. Dattani's plays remind people of this injustice and invoke a call for understanding, tolerance and empathy towards all.

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