

## GENDER BIAS TRAXIS IN TRANSGENDER: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE

*Pushpa Das*

*Guest Teacher, Netaji Subhas Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India*

---

Received: 23 Aug 2018

Accepted: 28 Aug 2018

Published: 11 Sep 2018

---

### ABSTRACT

*Actor, director, playwright, dancer and screenplay writer Mahesh Dattani is the first English language playwright to win the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. To him, a playwright is not only a writer of a special kind of literary device but a craftsman whose design is to reform the society bringing the controversial issues before the audience. Through his play Dattani tries to hit the dogma and superstitions of Indian Society Issues like gender-discrimination, communal problems, the plight of women in the male-dominated society, corruption of power hungry people, marginality etc. found a voice in his writing.*

*The present paper collates and interprets literary perceptions of Mahesh Dattani's contribution to transgender studies. The umbrella term 'transgender' includes those people whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex i.e. transmen and trans women. They are the social group who are socially and politically outside of our structured frame of society. The Indian word for transgender is hijra which is a hindu-urdu word, derived from the semantic Arabic root 'hjr' in its sense of 'leaving one's tribe', identifying social groups who are excluded from an established social structure. Dattani highlights the generic identity crisis of the hijra community in the Indian context. The book selected for the present study is "Seven Steps around the Fire" by Dattani.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Transgender, Hijra, Forced Harmony, Micro construction, Hegemonic Power Structure, Social Discrimination, Violence*

### INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi was. He is described as 'one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English' by Alexander Viets in the International Herald Tribune, Mahesh Dattani received his early education at Baldwin's High School and then went on to join St. Joseph's College of Fine Arts and science Bangalore, Karnataka.

In 1984 Dattani founded his playgroup 'Playpen'. "Where there's a Will" was his first play. Since then India's Avante grade playwright has written many plays such as 'Tara', 'Night Queen', 'Final Solutions' and 'Dance Like A Man'. All of these plays are based on the social issues.

The plight of the transgender community in Indian society is bravely voiced in Dattani's "Seven Steps around the Fire". The play highlights not only the generic identity crisis but also the existence crisis of the hijra community in the political power dominated Indian society. They enjoyed practically no decent or noticeable public identity. They have no

acceptance in the social harmony and protection from social prejudice and abuse. "Seven Steps around the Fire" is probably the most popular play by Dattani based on the theme of transgender. Here the playwright explores their bootless attempt to include themselves in the society's 'forced harmony'. They also want to be the part of the society, the mainstream, but their desire is always crushed by the thoughtless and cruel rage of the power hungry society.

In the play *Uma Rao*, a sociology scholar, emerges as the strongest character who is the mouthpiece of the playwright. She fights to determine the identity of a eunuch.

The story is all about the marriage of a beautiful hijra, Kamla, with a son of a wealthy government minister named Suhbu. A eunuch, a beautiful one, is traditionally invited for marriage, as well as the final tragic death-all appears to be pragmatic micro constructions. The shocking revelation of the truth of Kamla's being hijra culminated in the murder of herself. Hijra are accepted in the society for gracing the ceremonies of marriage and birth but would not be allowed to portray the same. The heart rendering story of a hijra that is murdered simply because she wanted to be part of the mainstream fills us with horror and a sense of injustice. She is not an individual. She is the representative of a marginalized section of society. Through Kamala and the other transgender victims of the play, Dattani shows how a nature deprived community is thrown into the fire of marginality - into obsolescent.

Dattani's "Seven Steps around the Fire" was the first broadcast by BBC Radio4. The truth and harsh reality behind the murder of Kamla, the invisible protagonist of the play, is unveiled through *Uma Rao*, who is the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of the Chief Superintendent, Suresh Rao. She teaches Sociology in Bangalore University. The reality behind the murder of Kamala is revealed to her as well as to the audience during her working on the research paper titled 'Class and Gender -Related Violence'.

The characters of the play are introduced through the course of *Uma's* inquiry of Kamla's murder. Suresh, *Uma's* husband, introduced Munswamy, a constable, to her as her bodyguard. Anarkali, a hijra, who is framed as criminal for murdering Kamla, is introduced to her in the jail. She meets Champa, the head of the eunuch, at her home. Mr. Sharma and his son, Subbu are introduced to her in their house. Kamla's murder is revealed and the real culprits have come into the face on the day of Subbu Sharma's wedding at the house of Mr. Sharma where all the characters of the play are assembled. The play presents the plight of a eunuch in the society. They are the neglected section of the society. They are not given any respect in the society. They have no right to get love.

If they enforce themselves in the social harmony they have to suffer the same fate of Kamala and the people who try to give love to them have to suffer like Subbu in the play.

Deviating from the conventions of conventional morality Dattani, in his dramas reconstructs the spaces for marginalized groups of society as he himself admits that "Each individual wants to be part of society, of the mainstream but we must acknowledge that it is a force harmony". (Dattani: Indian Express). It is not a process of romantic exhortation only but an effort to make the society face its grotesque reality. He accepts that the function of drama is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project "grotesque image of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly but funny."

Dattani's BBC Radio play *Seven Circles around the Fire* was first staged in 1999 as *Seven Steps around the Fire* becoming the "first authentic representation of the community of Eunuchs in theatre." (Agarwal). The story revolves round

the invisible character, Kamala, who is burnt by the same fire around which she took seven steps with Subbu in hope of becoming a part of the mainstream. Our social beings believe in the blessings of transgender and fear their curses but are not ready to see them blessed with family life. Kamala was burnt because she included herself in a social practice called marriage and the spirit of a group of eunuchs was crushed by the dominance of political power because Kamala belongs to their community. Kamala was punished brutally because not only she married a man but also she wanted to become the daughter-in-law of a politically powerful and socially dominant minister.

Social discrimination, violence, sexual abuse, and physical abuse are portrayed in the play by the characters Kamala who is burnt, Anarkali who is falsely accused of murdering Kamala and the leader of the eunuch group, Champa whose voice was choked. It seems a planned attempt to crush the spirit of a particular race. The revolutionary spirit of the society is represented through the character of Uma Rao whose unconventional attitude is reluctant to unravel the hidden truth behind the murder of Kamala.

Hijras are neglected and discriminated class of our society who are deprived of fertility by nature and of marriage and family life by our society. But in both the cases that we gendered people enjoy, their blessing is considered to be a divine one and their curse to be satanic one having a certain and permanent effect in our life. Hijras are not even considered as a human being by people like Mr. Sharma, Suresh, and even Muswamy. We find Manswamy who represents the prejudiced society against the eunuchs, refusing Anarkali's identity as a human being and addressing her as 'it'.

"Uma: Will she talk to me?"

Munswamy (chuckling): She ! of course, I will beat it up if it doesn't (Ch 7)"

Even Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of Police of Bangalore, in spite of belonging to an elite class, refused to acknowledge eunuchs as fellow human beings. He remarks.

"They are all just castrated degerate man" (CP-10)

In the one hand, he is afraid of facing the truth of his barrenness of not producing the child, on the other hand he exposes his hypocritical nature when he remarks on the dauntless strength of the eunuchs.

"They are as strong as horses" (CP-9)

We find Anarkali to be humiliated behind the bars for being a hijra by the other criminals. Hijras are excluded from the society for their infertility but they can be openly molested on humiliated by their feminine attire and behaviors.

In a passion driven moment Champa, the mother of other hijras, is found crying for respect at least "in my own house" - before Salim and Uma. Champa represents those among the Indian eunuchs who are still struggling for existence by balancing their fear cum worldly-wiseness and their passionate desire for respect from the society.

Both Kamla and Subbu break the conventional social norm as by marrying each other but cannot establish their revolutionary spirit. They could not last before the demands of superstitious social beings. Their hope, desire, and love were burnt in the same fire around which they took seven sacred steps.

Anarkali, being a worldly-wise hijra, has no courage to protest against society's established rules. She is afraid of asking for respect from people and even of feeling any human affinity with them. We find rudeness and vulgarity in her behavior with Uma in the beginning. Traditional ill-treatment towards them makes their behaviours rude to the world. But

soon Anarkali find humanitarian affinity in Uma who is genuinely interested in her well being and willing to help her by releasing her from jail. Anarkali is now ready to give and get a sisterly affection from Uma which initially proves that they are eager in establishing a bonding of love and respect with the social beings. Anarkali says "If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister." Uma responds with the same warmth "I would love to be your sister, if you will be mine."

Champa, being an experienced one, is aware of the injustice of society. she knows very well that Anarkali is wrongly framed as the culprit for murdering Kamla. The real culprits are hiding behind hypocritical class maintainer. In spite of that, she is reluctant to take any step. For she knows that there is none to help them in raising voice against injustice but are many to crush their voice. She is heartbroken to see the fallen reputation of their community. But she is aware of the fact that there is no proper place for them in the society to which they belong. She is anxious about her community's deteriorating social and cultural image in the society and is upset at the fact that hijras are treated as anti-social elements. In spite of having a strong biological voice, they are actually voiceless in the society. Uma, the mouthpiece of the playwright, painfully makes her final remark.

"They knew, Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice.

The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the live of two young people..." CP - 42)

The plight of the hijras in the society is bravely presented in this play. They are treated as outcasts by so-called social beings. If anyone of them try to mingle with the mainstream, it has to suffer brutally. Even the criminal of it is not given any punishment. Mr. Sharma is able to get the photograph, the only evidence of Subbu and Kamla's seven steps around the fire, after the death of his son. He is ready to sacrifice his son's life but not his prestige and reputation in the society. Mr. Sharma uses his political power and the power of dominance over society to destroy the spirit of a marginalized class by killing one and accusing of her murder another. Whereas he could reconstruct the society by accepting Kamla as his daughter-in-law to break the conventional social norms and prejudices against hijras. Ministers are the means of social welfare. But here minister. Mr. Sharma acts just opposite to it. Even his son's life is less important than his reputation and social convention.

Salim was the one to whom Subbu put his trust. But human values like faith and trust are simply valueless before power and money.

We find various characters in the drama interacting with the hijras with their pre-established notions of hatred regarding them. They are reluctant to give their ideas up about the hijras. It is Uma alone who fearlessly coming out from the rigid boundary of the prejudice ridden society, empathizes with them and fights for their justice.

The hijras are used to the hatred and ill-treatment expressed towards them. They have accepted and compromised with the plight of their lot. This makes the tragedy of the hijras more intense.

Anarkali admits the fact that hijras can only be the subjects to hatred in the society and if someone loves a hijra, that can lead to some tragedy. This is what ultimately happens.

"....So many time I warned her. First I thought Salim was taking her for his own pleasure. When she told me about Sabbu, madam, I tried to stop her. I fought with her. I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her."

Hijras are habituated in being entertained but not in being respected with marriage. Marriage is more threatening than molestation to them.

This is the story of the protagonist Uma's journey from innocence to experience. She started her journey as woman obsessed with childlessness. She blames her parents for her misery as they did not allow the hijras to bless her on the day of her wedding. Her journey finds completeness with Anarkali's blessings. But at the end for her journey she understands that the world is not pure enough to rear a child up into a good human being filled with love and compassion. The world is not yet ready to receive the innocence. She says, "but Anarkali's blessings remain with me. I did not her blessing for a child. All I want is what they want to move on, to love, to love."

Through Uma's eye and experience, we come to know the plight of the most marginalised of the marginalized class of the society. The mother-daughter relationship among Champa and Anarkali and the sisterly relationship among Kamla and Anarkali prove that they have dared to challenge the nature and God enforced marginalization. But they have failed to cut the cocoon of marginalization created around them by society. Through Subbu and Uma Dattani shows ways to help hijras to be included in the mainstream and thus assigns a new direction to subaltern studies.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Agrrwaal, Beena (2011) *Mahes Dattani's play A New Horizon in Indian Theatre - Jaipur, Bokk Eclave, p 34 print.*
2. Dattani, Mahes (2005) *Collected play I New Delhi, Penguin Print.*
3. Pannikot, Dhishna. "Exploring Kinesthetics of Gender Identity Through Select Transgender Autobiographies." (2016).

