

Voicing the Unvoiced: An Exploration of Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a norm breaking and iconoclastic playwright rooted in his social, political and cultural milieu. He has the unique capacity and vision to recognise the problems and challenges spread in contemporary Indian society and smell the clashes between tradition and modernity. He is deeply interested in social problems and writes candidly and strongly about the oppressed or the marginalised sections of our society, minorities, women, gays and hijras etc. His art of presentation has been compared to that of Henrik Ibsen and G. B. Shaw. His plays subtly draw our attention to the complex prejudices of class, gender, race and religion. Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is a famous and remarkable play which explores and examines the miserable plight of the hijra community. The play presents the pathetic condition of the marginalised people of the society. The present paper discusses, explores and highlights the problems of the marginalised like hijras and homosexuals in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire (A Stage Play)* which occurs in *Collected Plays (Volume Two 2005)* of Mahesh Dattani.

Keywords: Hijra (Eunuch), Marginalised, Problems, Indian Society, Gender, Marriage etc.

Dattani has rightly been regarded by *The International Herald Tribune* as “one of India's best and most serious playwrights writing in English”. Mahesh Dattani is the first and only Indian English Dramatist to win the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his work *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. Dattani's two collections of his plays titled *Collected Plays* (2000) and *Collected Plays Vol. II* (2005) have appeared in Penguin India imprint. Most of his plays were staged in Bangalore and Mumbai. Some of them were broadcast on Radio and B.B.C. The first collection contains eight plays such as eight plays - *Seven Steps Around the Fire (A Radio Play)*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, *Final Solutions*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man* and *Where There's a Will*. In 2005 Penguin Books India published the second volume of his *Collected Plays* which contains ten (eight new and two already published) plays of Dattani - *Dance Like a Man* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire (A Stage Play)* are his early and already published plays. The eight new plays are - *Thirty Days in September*, *Clearing the Rubble*, *Mango Soufflé*, *The Swami and Winston*, *Morning Raga*, *Uma and the Fairy Queen*, *Ek Alag Mausam* and *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her child*. In 2010 Penguin Books India published his third volume *Brief Candle: Three Plays* which include - *Thirty days in September* (2001) (already published), *The girl who Touched the Stars* (2007), and *Brief Candle* (2009).

Like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar & Badal Sircar, Dattani questions some of the established norms and conventions of society affecting the life of the marginalized people

like hijras, homosexuals and the deprived. He wants to highlight the unseen, invisible and unspoken issues of the society which are swept under the rug and are presumed to be non-existent by the majority of people. His plays are issue based and deeply rooted in its milieu holding, as he himself comments in his essay “My Favourite Book” published in *Outlook* (October 2, 2000) “a mirror upto society” (XV). Commenting upon the contemporary issues Dattani remarks in the Sunday Special of *The Hindu* (March 9, 2003): “I write for my milieu, for my time and place. . . middle class and urban India . . . My dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire to freedom from society . . . some subjects which are under explored, deserve their space. It is no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalised, including the gays”.

Dattani’s remarkable play *Seven Steps Around the Fire (A Stage Play)* particularly deals with the miserable plight of hijra community in India, a much talked about issue in our society but ignored by almost everyone to acknowledge its existence. The play was first broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on January 9, 1999 and it was first performed on stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai on August 6, 1999. There are two plots in the play. The hijra episode (Kamla’s secret marriage with Subbu and her subsequent murder) forms the main plot of the play whereas Uma Rao’s marital relationship with her husband, Suresh Rao is the subject of the sub-plot. The story of the main plot begins with the conversation between Uma Rao and Anarkali in which Anarkali discloses the secret of Kamla’s murder. This is the first play dealing with the murder mystery of Kamla which is solved by Uma Rao, the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University. She is also the daughter-in-law of a DGP and is married to a Police Superintendent, Mr. Suresh Rao. She teaches Sociology at Bangalore University and is writing her paper on ‘class and gender related violence’. In the process of exploration, she comes to know about the murder of Kamala, a beautiful hijra eunuch who had, as it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a powerful Minister, Mr. Sharma. When the Minister came to know about it, he got Kamla burned to death and succeeded in creating the impression in society that Kamla was killed by her rival, Anarkali, another member of Hijra community. Anarkali was subsequently arrested and sent to prison. Commenting on the play *Manorama Trikha*, in her book *Post-Colonial Indian English Drama*, aptly writes, “The play is a powerful piece of work that discusses the social issues related to the power and corruption by focusing on the deplorable plight of a neglected section of humanity, the hijras. It is indeed disheartened that nothing happens even though subalterns speak in this power crazy and corrupt society” (227).

The play presents the pathetic condition of the marginalised people of the society. The plight of the Hijras is represented through the characters of Kamla and Anarkali who are not given even the legitimate right to freedom for their survival. Kamala is not given the right to marriage by the society even though Kamala & Subbu love each other passionately and marry secretly. Their secret marriage becomes the immediate cause of Kamala’s murder, because their marriage is against the ethical norms of our society. It is neither acceptable nor digestible to the powerful Minister, Mr. Sharma as it would certainly spoil his image in the society. Moreover, Mr. Sharma knows that a hijra can never ensure the continuance of his family. Therefore, he hastily arranges an acceptable girl for the marriage of his son. When the wedding ceremony is going on, Mr. Sharma expresses his happiness in the following manner: “My son is getting a wife from a fine family. I am happy to see that he is entering the phase of a householder” (276). It is really the happiest moment for any parent to watch the son performing these rituals. The marriage of Subbu with the girl of a rich and dignified family has virtually reached the end and people have started giving blessings to the couple. The situation takes a sudden turn when Subbu starts visualising Kamla in the dance of the hijras.

He remembers his intimate association with Kamla and is pushed into a melancholy state of mind. Kamla calls out to him, her arms beckoning him to join her:

Kamla. Subbu!!

Subbu. I - I am leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamla. (279).

In the meantime, in order to pacify the situation Anarkali hands over the photograph of Kamla to Subbu who looks at the photograph and says:

Subbu. They killed you!

Kamla (echoing). They killed me!

Subbu. Why?

Kamla. Because you loved me!

Subbu. I still love you Kamla!

Kamla. I love you, Subbu.....I am gone! (279-80)

Subbu is so much shocked by the incident that he backs away & begins to cry. He points the gun at his father and openly accuses him of killing Kamla. It seems as if he will shoot down his own father but instead of doing so he shoots himself, falls on the ground and ultimately breathes his last. A surreal spot-on Kamla is shown while the music is being played on. Subbu embraces Kamla. They kiss each other and freeze as if they are placed in a picture frame.

The real cause of the mysterious murder of Kamla is revealed before Subbu shoots himself. It is evident from the following dialogue between Subbu and his father:

Subbu. I - I am leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamla.

Mr. Sharma. Son, please put that gun down. Let us talk.

Subbu. No

Mr. Sharma. It was a mistake. I am sorry, son.

Mr. Sharma. Subbu you can do whatever you want. Give me the gun.

Subbu. Stay away! You killed her!

Mr. Sharma. Subbu, I did it for you! It was wrong. It was wrong Forgive me! (279-280)

It is at this point that Mr. Sharma openly admits the fact that it was he who got Kamla killed by Salim. The murder of Kamla became a mystery and with the arrest of Anarkali the matter was closed for police investigation. It clearly shows the police- politician- crime nexus which is a postcolonial development. Corruption is so rampant in the police department that without money or political power, justice is almost impossible. It is revealed through the statement of Champa in Act- I: "If I had the money I would throw it on that Superintendent's face and get her back. Sons of whores, all of them." (256)

Anarkali, Champa & other hijras know who was behind the killing of Kamla but they also know that the person is such a powerful politician that they will not be able to get anything done against him. He will rather get everything done in his favour. Anarkali was perhaps aware of this fact and that is why she tried her best to dissuade Kamla from moving in that direction further but in vain. Anarkali clearly admits this fact in the following lines:

So many times I warned her. First I thought Salim was taking her for his own pleasure. When she told me about Subbu, Madam, I tried to stop her. I fought with her. I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her. He wanted to marry her...I was there at their wedding...She gave me that picture to show to Champa. I saw the men coming for her. I told her to run... (cries for a while.) Here, madam, take this. (281)

Anarkali knew the truth regarding the murder of Kamla but she did not have the courage to say so. If she speaks the truth, they will kill her. If she does not, she will be lying in the

prison. Even Suresh, the Police Superintendent, knew the fact that there was no evidence against Anarkali. She was arrested simply because some arrest had to be made by the police just to save its position: "The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers...The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people..." (282).

Through the findings of Uma Rao, Mahesh Dattani pleads strongly for marriages based on the homosexual relationship of two persons. People should try to understand their genuine problems and provide legitimacy to such marriages. Dattani here speaks the language of the subaltern.

In the process of commenting upon the miserable plight of hijras in our society, Mahesh Dattani has tried to trace the origin and growth of hijra community:

The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian, & Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female'. Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayan. The legend has it that God Ram was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, 'Men and women turn back'. Some of his male followers did not know what to do.....they sacrificed their masculinity to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Ram was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. (239).

Hijras belong to the lowest strata of the society. Commenting upon their present position in Indian society Uma Rao regards them as "the lowest of the low" who "yearn for family and love. The two events in the mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable -- marriage and birth -- ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man & nature" (239). Is it not a pathetic fact that the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man & woman in matrimonial relationship are denied to them? They cannot be blessed with marriage or motherhood. Hijras are the pariah of the society. They are always placed on the periphery of the social hierarchy. The ending of the play is symbolic of their status in society:

The Hijras do their dance in slow motion, smiling, clapping in slow motion. Uma remains fixed in a spotlight in the centre while the hijras move into shadows on the periphery. (282)

Uma Rao realises that society does not allow the hijras to live in peace. She voices their aspirations in the following manner: "All I want is.... what they want.....to move on. To love. To live." (282). In our society hijras are not treated like human beings. They are treated like non-living objects of the earth and that is why 'it' is used for a hijra by persons like Constable Munswamy, though Uma uses 'she/ her' for a hijra in society. This shows their difference of attitude towards the hijras:

Munswamy. You may see the hijra now if you wish, madam.

Uma. Will she talk to me?

Munswamy (chuckling). She! Of course, it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. (233)

Hijras are the hated and the neglected members of the society and hence gradually they develop a sense of alienation and frustration in their life. They are given brutal treatment in the prison, as is evident from the dialogue between Uma and Suresh.

Uma: Suresh, why is she in a cell with men?

Suresh: They are as strong as horses.

Uma: She is beaten up by all the male prisoners.

Suresh: They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fight like dogs every day. (237-8).

They feel as if they are not even the bonafide members of the society. They realise that they can never become an inseparable part of the rest of the society. There is none in the society – neither the politician nor judiciary nor police which is ever worried about the pathetic conditions of transgendered people. Their inner urges for being treated as dignified members of the society may be seen in the ironical dialogue between Champa and Uma:

Champa: Oh. So you are a social worker. Say that.

Uma: Yes....I am a social worker.

Champa: Please excuse me, madam. I did not know.....you see us also as society, no? (254)

We thus see that the play focuses our attention to the problem of identity crisis which the hijras face in our contemporary society. The society is so indifferent to them that the Minister does not even hesitate in getting a hijra burnt to death. The hijras are always placed on the margin of the society, because they are regarded as serious stigma to the social structure. They are neither males nor females. They inhabit tiny pockets of Indian cities and tread the areas that are generally brushed aside to the fringes. It is difficult for Uma Rao to investigate the crime situation in the marginalised hijra community because the hijra community, says A. K. Chaudhuri in her book, *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction* (2008), “has grown around itself thick, impenetrable walls of incomprehensible myths and superstitions so that it may survive in its isolation” (64). The dialogues between Anarkali and Uma reveal many layers of veiled truths and cultural beliefs regarding the relationships among the members of hijra community and their relationship with the outside world. On account of their suspect sexuality Anarkali, Champa and Kamla become the symbols of the ambiguous spaces which they occupy in human society. Dattani gives so much importance to the marginalised hijras that even the absent presence of the dead Kamla keeps haunting us throughout the play.

Dattani endows Uma Rao with proper intelligence, sensitivity and firm determination and enables her to fulfil the task of disclosing the murder mystery. She becomes the agent of social transformation and seriously questions the existing norms of society. Availing all the resources and ‘connections’ at her disposal Uma Rao visits ‘invisible’ places of the eunuchs as well as the hallowed portals of the local minister in order to find out clues to the real murderer of Kamla. The final conclusion submitted by Uma Rao is certainly a shocking but genuine revelation of the real state of human society: “They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. (282)”. Dattani not only talks about the extremely marginalised, invisible groups of eunuchs with undefined sexuality but also presents a marginalised male character, Mr. Subbu whose urges for homosexuality results in his suicidal end in the midst of the sounds of the fire and marriage *mantras*.

Though Uma Rao belongs to the higher strata of society in the social hierarchy, she is discriminated on the basis of her gender. Her role as a wife is confined to motherhood and sexual pleasure only. As a wife she is expected to abide by the norms of loyalty, obedience and motherhood. Gender discrimination is quite evident in the following dialogue between Uma and her husband Suresh:

Uma. I went to the doctor again. Your mother insisted she takes me.

Suresh. What did they say?

Uma. Nothing..... they want to see you.

Suresh. I don't think so.

Uma. Just a test for your sperm count.

Suresh. I don't have to go..... (269)

The play throws sufficient light on the miserable plight of the educated women also. Uma Rao's husband, Suresh Rao (a police superintendent) bluntly refuses to subject himself to any medical test to rule out barrenness of his wife. Only the woman is to be blamed for her barren state. Male refuses to shoulder any responsibility in that context. Dattani thus questions the sanctity of marriage, of taking seven steps around the fire when husband- wife bonding is not based on the principles of equality and mutual trust.

Uma, by befriending Anarkali and Champa moves deeper into the inner circle of the transsexuals and brings them from the margin to the centre. By focussing our attention to the miserable plight of the transgendered, Dattani wants to highlight the relevance of their voices being heard, signalling the dawn of a new social awareness. In the play Dattani does not present them in the demeaning fashion, but endows them with self-confidence and inner strength to endure their sufferings and frustrations. Discriminatory social norms have been challenged and anomalies brought to the notice of the common people.

Dattani wants to break down the barriers and demolish the boundary lines so that no one is forced to live in isolation. In this regard Jeremy Mortimer, in *A Note on the Play*, aptly remarks that "Mahesh's plays often features characters who are questioning their identity, and who feel isolated in some way. Uma certainly feels isolated in her marriage, and this sense of isolation makes her empathize with Anarkali, the hijra she befriends" (04). Further, Dattani wants to project how the police which is supposed to be the guardian of law, become the perpetrator of humiliation and crime against the transgendered people who aspire for justice and self-identity. In his article "Dattani's Exercise in Post-colonialism", published in *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani* ed. by Dhawan and Pant, G.S Jha has compared *Seven Steps Around the Fire* with Narayan's *Love, Stars and All That* which also "presents eunuchs, their ambivalent gestures as exposure and affirmation of fixedness and negation of ethnic differences functioning as referential system of representation but in all the cases ethnicity is situational" (156).

While reviewing post-Independence Indian English drama we find Mahesh Dattani a very prominent, highly successful and celebrated playwright who is mainly concerned with the presentation of the problems which the deprived and the marginalized people very often face in their day-to-day life. Dattani is rightly regarded as one of the best and most serious Indian contemporary playwrights. In the early phase of his dramatic career, he was influenced (as he himself has acknowledged) by the plays of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Madhu Rye and Vijay Tendulkar. He had expressed his sense of indebtedness to Alyque Padamsee who discovered his talent and brought it out to the larger world of theatre. We have no hesitation in accepting the assessment of Padamsee who openly admits that we have finally got a playwright who has given an identity to sixty million English speaking Indians. He is undoubtedly an acknowledged playwright, actor, director, dancer and above all a compassionate human being. Like Ibsen and Shaw, he uses theatre as a platform for the presentation and exploration of complicated human problems and their satisfactory resolutions.

To sum up, Dattani picks up such sensational issues of the society which we talk about but refuse to acknowledge. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire* Dattani explores and examines the miserable plight of the hijra community. The plight of the *hijras* is represented through the characters of Kamala and Anarkali who are not given the legitimate right to marriage by the society even though they love each other passionately and marry secretly. Their secret marriage becomes the immediate cause of Kamala's murder, because their marriage is against the ethical norms of society. Dattani wants to break down the barriers and demolish the

boundary lines so that no one is forced to live in isolation. The concluding lines regarding the play by Bijay Kumar Das is very apt and thought provoking and, simultaneously, deserves our special attention. B. K. Das, in his book *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*, writes that the play can be interpreted as a "protest play against the injustice meted out to the downtrodden in the society. Dattani is questioning the age-old belief of marriage being based on heterosexual relationship. He seems to say that homosexual and lesbian relationships being as natural as heterosexual relationships, same sex marriage should be permitted in India. Laws should be made to this effect" (17). And further moving on the same page and applauding Dattani as well as the theme of the play, he writes "Dattani has done a good job by introducing a new theme to Indian English Drama. Conservatives and social activities should not turn a blind eye to reality.... homosexual relationship is as natural as heterosexual relationship. We have to accept the reality of life, painful that might be" (17).

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