

Seven Steps Around the Fire: Interrogating Subalternity of Transgenders

Purnima Gupta
Research Scholar
Dept. of English
P.K. University
M.P.

Dr Shashikala Vishwakarma
Research Supervisor
Dept. of English
P.K. University
M.P.

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's drama *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a radical piece of literature challenging the marginal identity of the transgenders and interrogating the misconceptions in order to bring the hijra community in the mainstream of Indian society. The play is all about the traditional attachment of criminality and subalternity to the community of hijra and the resulting alienation and marginalization of this group. Mahesh Dattani unravels the miserable life of transgenders through the characters of Anarkali, Champa and Kamla who become subject of research and investigation of Uma, wife of superintendent of police, Suresh. The play opens with the murder mystery of Kamla simply because of her desire to enter the sanctity of married life with Subbu, the son of minister.

Keywords: Marginal, Subaltern, Hegemony, Subalternity

In the realm of drama, Mahesh Dattani is a name which does not need any recognition. He is a multi-dimensional literary artist assimilating the attributes of a director, actor, social reformist and a social realist. His works are an appropriate amalgam of entertainment and enlightenment. His dramas raise the issues which are 'invisible', that is to say, undiscussed openly. Mahesh Dattani aims at establishing an egalitarian society where there is no place for miseries, tribulations victimization based on caste, class, gender etc. A brief survey of his dramatic creations has consolidated his major preoccupation and concern with the marginalized sections of Indian society such as women, gays, lesbians, children, older generation, HIV afflicted people and the hijra community. Anita Myles comments upon

Mahesh Dattani's deep concern with subalterns in this way, " All the plays of Mahesh Dattani are rooted in realism focusing attention on subalterns, which are the neglect groups of society who are ostracized, exploited and suppressed."1

Subalternity refers to a condition of subjugation brought about by colonization or other forms of social, economic, racial, linguistic and cultural supremacy. The term 'subaltern' has now been adopted as a very popular umbrella term in post -colonial studies to denote all the marginalized classes of the society and the subaltern studies group of historians have emerged in South Asian society to express the dilemma of the subordinates and marginalised in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way . The term 'subaltern' was first used in a non- military sense by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist theorist. According to some scholars, he used the term as a synonym for the proletariat. It was a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in the society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes and who are lacking in autonomous political power . According to Bill Ashcroft , subaltern means inferior rank.

Transgenders are those individuals whose gender identity and gender behaviour do not conform to the gender identity of male or female. They have existed in every culture, race and class since the story of human life has been reported. Nevertheless, they have never enjoyed a respectable life because of their peculiar gender expressions. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a mockery of gender oriented social system where transgenders perpetually suffer from social discrimination, deprivation, inferiority and poverty. Dattani has made a bold attempt to give central space to the community of eunuchs in this play .

According to Gayatri Spivak, marginality can be acknowledged in terms of 'silence'and 'speech'. The transgenders are marginalized because of their silence and their inability to assert their independent identity in the society. Amar Nath Prasad writes, "Thus *Seven Steps Around the Fire* expresses the identity crisis of the hijras and their heartfelt longing for being treated as a social being in an indifferent society where people like the government minister seldom feel a qualm of conscience in getting a hijra born to death."2

The hijra community has been treated as marginal people because of their association with crime. Their association with the innate criminality was reinforced during the colonial period and is deeply rooted in the cultural consciousness of Indian society. The hijras are looked down upon as animals. They are not considered to be human beings. The deep rooted hatred for this gender was first consciously considered by Mahesh Dattani who has dared to talk about their subjugation, victimization and subalternity in his play. There have been a little literature about the hijra community. In the very beginning of the play, Mahesh Dattani presents the theme of his play. He claims that transgenders are common to every nation. It is not only India that is facing the queer identity of transgenders. According to his perception, transgenders are located at the margin of the social structure where they are yearning for belongingness to the central norms and traditions. Dattani questions about the two ceremonies prevalent in the patriarchal system, that is, marriage and child birth on the occasion of which the transgenders grace the events with their presence while being denied the same. This is the injustice openly inflicted upon them. Mahesh Dattani disapproves of this system and forces the audience and readers to think about it sympathetically and logically.

“There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable- marriage and birth- ironically, are the same privileges denied to them by man and nature.”(Dattani 10-11)

The drama opens with the investigation of the murder of Kamla , a young and beautiful eunuch. The play is constructed on the lines of a detective serial. As the play progresses, we come across other characters like Anarkali and Champa who disclose their hell like life and miseries through their dialogues. We also come across the behaviour of policemen and common people towards the hijra community. Munswamy calls Anarkali ‘worthless pig’(Dattani 8) The dramatist has reflected the biased attitude of policemen and people towards the hijras. Despite the fact that there is no evidence against Anarkali, the police suspects that the heinous crime of murder has been committed by her. This is just the result of the age long belief of hijras as the criminals. Nobody is ready to listen to her statement because a hijra is traditionally considered to be a liar. Anarkali admits her innocence in the Kamla murder case. She says, “I didn’t kill her. She was my sister!” (Dattani 9). When Uma

insists on Suresh to treat Anarkali with humanity, Suresh gets irritated. He says, “Don’t believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars.” (Dattani, 9). It is noticeable that Suresh uses the pronoun ‘it’ for Anarkali which means that he does not consider her to be a human being. He compares the hijras to the dogs. He also calls them ‘castrated degenerate men’. (Dattani 10) Anarkali is beaten by the male prisoners in the prison, but it does not make any difference to the policemen. This reflects the cruelty of people toward the transgender.

A transgender most commonly adopts the attire and outfits of female counterparts and are exploited sexually by men. We find that Anarkali is sexually exploited by men in the prison. This shows that a transgender is not safe and secure, either outside the prison or inside the prison. When Uma tries to talk to Anarkali, Anarkali feels exhausted because of the oral sex with the men in prison.

When Uma Rao tries to converse with Champa, the head of hijras ,she is not willing to speak anything because nobody is ready to listen to her. Here, we can see the power of speech of the dominant society which pushes behind the weaker and inferior section by silencing them and not giving them opportunity to speak.

Dattani points out to the separate world of the transgenders where they have their own alternative family structure. Being deprived of love, friendship and relationship from the gendered society, the transgenders have carved out their own world where they can freely address one another as sister or daughter; where they have no fear to be beaten or criticized or abused. The mainstream society does not accept them as common and natural human beings and , therefore, the society does not allow them to love anyone or to marry anyone. Kuhu Sharma Chanana is of opinion that on one hand , people fear from them on account of their power to curse and bless with fertility, while on the other hand, their daily life is made miserable in reality .They are denied and deprived of the dignity which a normal human being is entitled to.(Chanana 79)

The play is sarcastic in tone when Dattani raises the issue of marriage and love for the transgenders. He has deliberately assigned the title of hindu ritual to the play ,thereby, asking

the question to the common people why a hijra can not love and marry like a common man or woman. The title of the play has been taken from the pious ritual of Hindu matrimony.

Mr Sharma feels restless after knowing the marriage of Subbu with Kamla. His confrontation with a hijra is the confrontation of the centre with the margin. Mr Sharma represents the fear which every centre has about the shift of margin towards the centre during which the centrality would lose its value and would naturally demolish. He is afraid because the marginals are posing threat to his power. The marriage between Kamla and Subbu is an act of resistance. The hijra characters like Anarkali and Champa are silenced and so they are marginalized. The moment they start speaking, they are not listened. Silence is the cause of their marginalization. They are unable to voice their humiliation and injustice. Suresh and Mr Sharma represent the voice of centre while Champa and Anarkali represent the voice of the margin. Kamla's desire to marry Subbu is a call from margin to seek space in the centre, but by murdering Kamla the centre has proved its dominance and hegemony over the margin. The dialogue between the two gives a better understanding of the marginalization of the transgender in our society. The truth was not propagated even after the suicide of Subbu. Suicide was reported as an accident and every evidence of Subbu's marriage with Kamala was destroyed. The case was closed and Uma concludes that the transgenders have no voice.

To conclude, Dattani has glorified the nobility of transgender community by referring to the legend of *Ramayana* when God Ram blessed them for their obedience and devotion. Blessings of transgenders on the occasion of birth and marriage can offer happiness and bliss to the human life, but their curse can destroy everything. This is what Uma feels. Mahesh Dattani adopts humanistic approach to deal with the issue of the transgenders who feel isolated due to their sexuality and gender. They are butt of laughter for the common people. Their condition is no better than animals. The writers of gender theories have clarified that sex and gender are two different things. Sex of a person is assigned to him at birth on visual assessment of baby's genital presentation. But gender is an identity that is given by the society. Gender expression is an outward expression of sex, which cannot be confined in the binaries of masculine and feminine. Gender expression is independent of sex. In the light of above studies, we can better understand the predicament of the transgenders who need our moral support and general acceptance. The unique judgement of The Supreme Court of India

in April, 2014 has proved a milestone in extending dignity and freedom to the transgenders as a Third gender. The Supreme Court of India confirmed that one's sexual orientation is the integral part of personality and said that third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human rights issue. The court directed the government to open education and job opportunities to all third gender groups. Another Act Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was passed which prohibits discrimination against a transgender person in areas such as education, employment and health care. This was an important step forward in terms of basic legal rights for hijras. Recently, hijras have regained some of the rights and freedoms which they had been denied.

Works Cited

- 1.Myles, Anita. "Mahesh Dattani", *Contemporary Indian English Drama: An Overview* New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2023. p. 116
- 2.Prasad, Amar Nath. "The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Fine Fusion of Feeling and Form" *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Response* Ed. By R.K. Dhawan and Tanu Pant, New Delhi :Prestige Books, 2018. P.161
- 3.Chanana, Kuhu Sharma. "Violence on Hijras Through the Lens of Biphobia" *LGBTQ(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Identities in Select Modern Indian Literature*, New Delhi: Suryoday Books, 2015. P.79
- 4.Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000. (All textual references have been drawn from this edition of book.)