
**MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE*:
MARGINALIZATION OF EUNUCH COMMUNITY AND WOMEN**

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Abstract: The Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani has given a valuable contribution in the field of Indian English Drama. Dattani has very boldly depicted the invisible issues of Indian society through his writings. He appears as a social reformist. His famous play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* revolves around the sufferings and marginalization of the eunuch community and women. A socio-cultural phenomenon sows the seeds of inequality, injustice, and suffering. Women and hijras are deprived of their basic rights under the weight of tradition, male domination in patriarchy, and prejudices. As a result, they live in isolation and loneliness. They try to get their identity. Marriage is a very important part of the lives of human beings and yet some characters suffer a lot in Indian society as heterosexual marriage is considered to be sacred. Kamala, a beautiful eunuch, is killed as she falls in love with Subbu, an affluent minister's son in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Unfortunately, the innocent hijra Anarkali is accused of murder and sentenced to jail and the real culprit is not arrested. On the other hand, Uma wants to know the truth behind the murder of Kamala. However, as a woman, she faces some obstacles in search of her research.

Keywords: Marginalization, Prejudices, Struggle, Male Domination, Hollowness in Marriage

Introduction: Mahesh Dattani is a leading figure in the world of Indian English Drama. His experimental and innovative techniques have contributed in growth and development of the contemporary Indian Drama. Being an actor, script writer, dancer, director and playwright, he has covered a wide range of themes in his plays. He has established his own theatre company 'Playpen' and started to write the plays with the purpose of stage performance. He has boldly presented the invisible issues or fringe issues of the contemporary society. Perhaps, as a social reformer, his plays presents the bitter realities of society through the complicated web of human relationships. The paper focuses on the marginalization of women and eunuch community. Women and hijaras present the agonies, suffocations, cries and suffering in the Indian society.

Like George Bernard Shaw, he depicts the burning issues of contemporary world more vividly. To his credit, there are a number of plays.

Seven Steps Around the Fire is the first radio play broadcasted by BBC Radio 9 January 1999. It was performed in the same year at the Museum Theatre in Chennai. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* revolves around the beautiful eunuch Kamala and her murder. The play begins with the chanting of Sanskrit marriage mantra around a fire. Marriage is the most important part in society. The marginalization on the basis of gender, class and status is considered at a greater level in the play. Constable Munswamy calls hijra as 'it'. In fact, the pronoun 'it' is used to refer non-living things. It seems that the hijras get inhuman treatment in the educated society. The use of language shows the indifference in treatment. Mahesh Dattani brings out the pathetic condition of hijras in society. On the other hand, Uma Rao calls hijra as 'she'. It clearly shows her respectable attitude towards them. Uma offers sisterhood to Anarkali and creates a bond of love and affection. Munuswamy's hatred towards Anarkali is an example of gender bias and negative mentality. Gender is a socio-cultural phenomenon and hampers the growth of individuals. Uma's husband expresses his biased perspective towards hijra. As Suresh calls:

They are as strong as horses. They are all castrated men. They are all liars. (CP, 238)

Suresh thinks that hijras are the liars, castrated men, and he always looks down upon them. He gives the contemptuous remark on hijra's personality. Even the hijras are marginalized for the rude and vulgar expressions. Anarkali calls Munswamy 'a sister-fucker'. She smokes a cigarette and Uma tells her to keep the whole pack of cigarette. Generally, people do not trust hijras and their poverty lead them in the world of frustration. They do not get employment due to social status. They struggle to get their identity but fail to maintain the relationship with other community. There are different opinions about the hijra's origin. As Dattani explains:

A brief note on...the origin of hijaras will be in order, before looking at claps gender based power implications... 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 main stream Hindu-culture where their presence is acceptable

marriage and birth ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature.

Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire God, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of "may you be the mother of hundred sons.(CP 239)

Eunuchs are the people who do not get the dignity and status in society like human beings. They appear on the auspicious events- marriage and birth. In Hindu culture, hijra's arrival at wedding is considered auspicious. Ironically, hijras are deprived of the same events. There is a main character Uma in the play who tries to focus on the neglected hijra community. Uma is the daughter of the Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University, daughter-in-law of a deputy commissioner, the wife of Superintendent of Police and a sociology scholar. She is doing her research on the origin and contemporary status of the 'Hijra Community'. She teaches Sociology and wants to make her research paper on 'class and gender violence'. She is bright and bold but the sense of isolation and loneliness makes her weak. She raises her voice against gender-related violence and crime. She wants to spread the equality and justice to the 'eunuch community'. In this regard, Jeremy Mortimer comments:

Mahesh's plays often feature characters who are questioning their identity, and who feel isolated in some way.(p,4)

At outset level, she possesses the dignity and status. However, she is deprived of basic rights. She becomes helpless in case of Kamala's murder and cannot find justice and freedom to flourish in the male dominated world. Uma is financially dependent on others. For Anarkali's release from jail, she takes money from her father. It seems that she is economically not independent. Sometimes, Uma becomes weak and subservient. Even her mother-in-law and her husband forces her for impotency check up. In fact, Doctor advises her husband Suresh for medical examination but he refuses to check his barrenness and impotency. As a woman, Uma becomes the victim at her own house. Women and eunuchs are considered as an object or a thing of an entertainment. The serious issue of male domination in patriarchal society makes Uma more deplorable. She is not a victim but a rebellious and obviously she is marginalized but fights back to prove her identity as a modern educated Indian woman in patriarchal society. Her husband

Suresh Rao is found as a culprit in the case of Kamala's murder. Suresh knows the truth of Kamala's murder but he does not tell his wife. Uma's father, husband and father-in-law appear as custodians.

Subbu, son of an affluent minister Sharma, falls in love with a beautiful eunuch Kamala. Initially, he used to meet her and later on they married secretly. But Kamala is burnt to death. Kamala is burnt alive to death. After four days, her body was found by a passerby. The complaint was not registered but the temple priest complained about the stench. Kamala's body was thrown into the pond after being burned. And Subbu's second marriage is arranged by his father, Minister Sharma. The hijras come there for gracing the occasion of wedding. The hijras dance and sing but Subbu does not tolerate it and he himself shoots with gun. Subbu and Kamala are the victims of age old social conventions and prejudiced mindset of people. After their marriage, the photograph of wedding is destroyed and the evidence of their marriage is removed from society. The inquires go on, first the suspicion of the murder is on Anarkali, then Champa and Salim and finally from Salim's wife to Mr. Sharma. Mr. Sharma does not accept their marriage. Another eunuch Anarkali is accused on the charge of Kamala's murder. Anarkali says:

I didn't kill her, she was my sister. (CP, 236)

It arouses the sympathy of readers/viewers and makes deplorable. Anarkali gets inhuman treatment in the prison. The word 'sister' shows the close bond between Anarkali and Kamala. She is kept in the cell of the male prisoners. In the jail, she has to face the journalists who come to get the news for popularity. Therefore, at first she thinks Uma is a journalist and refuses to meet her. But Uma handles Anarkali very affectionately, sisterly and slowly Anarkali opens her mysteries. Uma's conversation with Anarkali unfolds the truth behind Kamala's murder. Uma decides to meet Champa, the head of the 'hijra' community. As Dattani tells in the interview:

I write for my milieu, for time and place-middle-class and urban India...My dramatic tension arises from people who aspire to freedom from society...I am not looking for something sensational, which audience have never seen before...some subjects, which are under-explored, deserve their space. It's no use brushing them under carpet. We have to understand the marginalized, including the gays. Each of us has a sense of isolation within given contexts. That's what makes us individual. (Hindu)

Kamala, Champa and Anarkali are the victims of social assumptions and rigid conventions. They do not enjoy the status and dignity in society. Through the characters of Kamala, Champa and Anarkali present the voice of hijra for their identity and freedom. Even Uma raises her voice to protest the eunuchs. Kamala's murder and Subbu's suicide presents the wretched condition and put them in the marginalized world. Society does not accept the relationship between a hijra and a gay. Kamala breaks the social rules of society. The dominance of heterosexual marriage occupies the more space and dignity as a procreative. But Kamala's marriage is not accepted in society. The social norms, prejudices, economic values, cultural elements are the major causes for the marginalization of hijras and women. Like Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani exposes the darker realities of the contemporary society. Mahesh Dattani boldly raises the invisible issues.

Conclusions:

To conclude, the hijra community faces the obstacles in day to day life situation. Generally Anarkali behaves in a friendly way but when constable Munswamy misbehaves with her, she retorts back and sometimes she gives cures. Kamala's death is considered as a stigma on humanity. Anarkali, Champa and Kamala live in isolation and far from the mainstream of society. Sometimes they are marginalized due to their behaviour and vulgar language. Their physical appearance seems gaudy and it shows their appearance does not suit to the decent society. On the other hand, Uma Rao as a woman does not enjoy freedom. As an individual, she suffers and struggles to get identity in society. Although she is modern educated, she faces problems. Uma's husband does not accept the doctor's advice for the test of his impotency but he insists his wife for the medical examination. This seems that women are only responsible for the barrenness and impotency whereas men are not responsible for the same. Suresh shows the strong air of superiority in his behaviour and attitude. The society is responsible for the construction of social conventions. Both hijras and women get the secondary status in society like Kamala, Champa, Anarkali and Uma Rao.

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