



Depicting the Galaxy of Silent Pain and Peculiar Position of Hijra in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire*

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Abstract

One of the most distinctive characteristic of India is its social system. It has been driven by the factors like caste, religion, community, physicality, gender, sexuality, and so on which give rise to social exclusion of marginalized people. In this context, the plight of Hijras (third gender or transgender) in terms of gender identity, sex, physicality, culture, and socio economic status become more pathetic and miserable which is beyond one's imagination because for this, they are entangled in chain everywhere. This chain is constructed and ideologically invisible. They are suppressed, exploited and dehumanized by this dominant chain made by the upper class capitalist section. In this framework, the Sahitya Academy Award holder, a versatile genius, Mahesh Dattani is a big name who through his plays pens down the various social issues such as gender discrimination, exploitation, murder mystery, silent pain and pathetic condition of the transgender community, the problems of gay and lesbian people, communalism and dehumanization and colonization women as well as other marginalized community in the grip of patriarchal gravity which bear a hallmark of new dawn in Indian theatre. This paper is an attempt to analyze how Dattani's play *Seven Steps around the Fire* depicts the galaxy of silent pain and peculiar position of Hijra in India.

Keywords: Distinctive, Marginalized, Hijras, Gender Identity, Dehumanized, Mahesh Dattani, Peculiar Position

Since ages, society plays a significant role in one's biology, sexuality, gender, manner, marriage and so on in India. In this context, the position of transgender is so peculiar. They are not allowed to marry and even, they are not allowed to mingle with the common human stream. They have a special connotation to what it means to be a transgender in the Indian context, and the strong identifying marks revealed in how they speak, walk, clap, sing or dance weddings and childbirths. "The term Hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female'." (Dattani, 10) These are the unmistakable marks that the Hijras assume to formulate a distinctive identity that sets them apart as a community in India and are easily recognized by Indians which are the invisible and even unspoken nature of such identities. As a result, they are in chain constructed by both the male and female.

Theatre is the mirror of society which reflects the reality. In this sense, Dattani's theatre is an extraordinarily motivated and courageous through which he points out the problems of contemporary world which touch the local as well as global issues. He takes up his journey in the rather untrodden area of Indian English drama to explore its immense potential in theme and structure, issues and performances which show the global importance. Therefore, he has gained critical acclaim for his plays. In this context, Mrs. Chaudhuri comments about his plays by saying:

"Dattani obviously seems to have a point to make to his audience. But rather than directly preach, the playwright dramatizes and populates the performance stage with characters one begins to identify with, facing genuine, real life problems. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India's "queer culture". (Chaudhuri 51)

Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* (1998) is a radio play, first broadcasted as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9th January 1999 and later it was first performed on the stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC Production and Madras Players on 6 August 1999. The play highlights the suppression and oppression of the marginalized hijra community in Indian society through the murder mystery incident of a transgender named Kamala, a beautiful eunuch and at the same time it shows that

marriage is an institution which is fulfilled through chanting the Sanskrit marriage mantras that fade out to the sound of the rustle and hiss of fire.

The play is not divided into acts which are centre around Uma's choice to help Anarkali and free her from victimization, creating an aura of an unusual identity around her. In this sense she brings the words of the dramatist who questions how the pains, pangs, pathos, anguishes, psychological traumas and even voices of transgender and sexual identity have technically been disparaged and consciously taken amiss by the patriarchal gravity. In this context, she is an ambassador of modern women who defines her identity and set new standards of achievement which is a slap against the humiliation and harassed or teased.

The play delineates the story of a beautiful hijra namely Kamla who was murdered by the minister's people because his son, Subbu, was in love with Kamla and wants to marry her. Being a hijra she was denied to marry or take the seven steps around the fire. Secretly, Kamla and Subbu got married and the result was that she was killed. The fire which was once the evidence of their marriage now turned out to be the major factor of Kamla's death. She was burned to death. After some days, Subbu's marriage was arranged with a beautiful girl and in the marriage ceremony, hijra made their inevitable presence. While watching Anarkali, Subbu was reminded of his love for Kamla and finds himself in frustration. In order to console him, Anarkali gives him the photo which they have taken soon after their marriage. In utter frustration, he shot himself with a gun.

Uma, a Ph.D. scholar in Sociology discusses with her husband Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of police about the murder incident of the invisible minority' within the society. She, after getting monotonous and isolated from the dead marriage tries to inquire about murder of Kamala who is secretly married by Subbu, the son of a powerful minister. In order to get rid of Kamala, she is immolated and the charge of murder is leveled against another hijara Anarkali. Therefore, at first, Uma is in doubt that the cause of murder is competition between Kamla and Anarkali as Champa wanted to make Kamla the head of the community in her succession.

“Uma-Wait a minute, you mean-Kamla was your first choice?

Champa- Kamla was everyone's first choice.

Uma- And Anarkali, your second? I mean. Now that Kamla is dead, Anarkali stands to gain from Kamla's death?

Champa- Yes but what can I do? There is nobody else who I can....

Uma- Can I have my money back?

Champa- Why? What is your problem now? Anarkali did not kill Champa, I am telling you.

Uma- But it seems like she may have". (Dattani 23)

Champa surrenders to Uma's repeated blames of Kamla's murder and tells her about the photograph:

"Uma- Oh, I see.... What was he looking for now?

Champa- A photograph.

Uma- What kind? Of whom?

Champa- He says he wants a photograph that Kamla has of. Kamla and him together". (Dattani 25)

The playwright shows here two-folded marriages. One is the 'normal' arranged marriage where Subbu shoots himself and the other is the reference to his earlier 'hidden' marriage with the beautiful eunuch. In this framework if we deeply scrutinizes a number of unconventional questions are raised into our consciousness. Why is the first marriage 'hidden'? Why is the first wife Kamla burnt alive by hired goons? Why does Subbu shoot himself? Why is a Hijra not allowed to marry? Why does society play a significant role one's biology and sexuality? Why can the transgender people not be able to mingle with the common human stream? All these questions focus on the 'invisible' zones of social behavior which are global concerns. This time, the play revolves around the 'third' gender - the community of eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu.

In the hyper real world, reality is power centric. As a result, who is more powerful he/ she paints the reality with his or her own colour which is far from truth and as consequence, the marginalized sections of society in terms of power are socially, economically, politically and geographically excluded from the main stream of human territory. Though, they are born free but, they are in chains in everywhere and have been dominated, exploited, and dehumanized by the hegemonic group since ages. In this context, Dattani's *Seven*

Steps Around the Fire is a sonic glass which televises the real reflection. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhari notes down:

“the preoccupation with 'fringe' issues forms an important element in Dattani's work issues that remain latent and suppressed, or pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage - quite literally with Dattani, this becomes the only way to actually push these invisible issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence” (Chaudhari 47).

To conclude, we can say that through the plays Dattani reveals the inner pangs, and psychological traumas of transgender communities and attempts to give the voice of the voiceless through his artistic craftsmanship. He puts emphasis to make his readers to contemplate about the peculiar position of 'Hijra' in our society. Moreover, he advocates bringing these marginalized people into the prime stream of life by giving them the rights of marriage and birth. The condition of Hijra in India has improved but not up to mark yet. Now, the time has come to expand the periphery of transgender space. It is the time to dismantle male centric logo and deconstructs the centre on the basis of equality, liberty and fraternity. Only then the peace, prosperity and pleasure come to realize in this global village.

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