



Denial of Space in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

Dr. Aarthi. P

Assistant Professor

Department of English (SF)

Nirmala College for Women

Coimbatore-641045

ABSTRACT

Discrimination against hijras in the developing world is a devastating reality. It results in number of individual tragedies. Hijras have been denied space, isolated and humiliated, considered as the lowest of the low. The invisible chains of the society deny them family and love. They are denied space because of their position in the society. The discrimination against hijras hampers their growth at social, economic and personal level.

Gender discrimination is the major thematic concern in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. The study proposes to analyse the discriminations faced by hijras in the society in the play *Seven Steps around the Fire*, which affects their social positioning and growth as an individual. Dattani has spotlighted the plight of the hijras in the Indian society. The hijra community is deprived of several rights. They are isolated and segregated and constitute an 'invisible minority' within the society.

Key Words:

Gender discrimination, isolation, segregation, humiliation, hijras.

Mahesh Dattani is the renowned playwright and an active theatre practitioner. Mahesh Dattani is one who explores the issue of identity crisis of hijras in his plays. Dattani excels in mirroring his society. He tackles issues that afflict the society all over the world. It is not always a story and a tale that Mahesh Dattani wants to tell his audience across the world. It is sometimes a cause, a point of view, a sense of contemporaneity and a social message too. Dattani exposes marginalization of third gender people in his play *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Dr. Beena Agarwal in *A New Horizon in Indian Theatre* asserts the power of Dattani's ability of representation through dramatic art says, "Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order (34).

Asha Kuthari Chaudhari observes that Dattani's theatre deals with taboo subjects that should ideally not be heard or spoken about in traditional Indian families, highlighting such fringe issues in play after play, a fact the playwright has himself admitted in the book *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani*, "I'm strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leitmotifs of my plays" (159).

The society responsible for the construction of the concept of gender is very much hypocritical in treating the third gender people as the lowest of the low. It feels no shame in using the hijras for sexual pleasures. Pushed to the margins of the society, they are forced to live as accursed beings. The mainstream society is not ready to accept, and accommodate them in it. The society often ridicules and abuses them in public places, stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals. They are sidelined and treated as untouchables. "Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love"(11).

Transgenders or Hijras in India have practically no respectable public identity. The discrimination against them is often translated into violence. Through *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani highlights the omnipresent hijras and their position. With their glittering saris, bright makeup and a reputation for bawdy song and dance, hijras, India's transgender minority, are hard to miss. Hijras, who can be eunuchs, intersex or transgender, have been part of South Asia's culture for thousands of years. Hijras are celebrated in sacred Hindu texts such as the Mahabharata and the Kama Sutra. They also enjoyed influential positions in the Mughal courts.

When the British came to power in India, the community's fortunes changed, with the disgusted colonists passing a law in 1897 calling all hijras or eunuchs as criminals. Since then many have been ostracised – either for cross dressing or being intersex – and have gone on to form their own communities, around a guru or mother figure to provide emotional and financial security. More recently, hijras have been seen as auspicious and are often asked to bless celebrations such as marriages and births. In India's larger cities this has waned, forcing many to rely on begging or prostitution.

Uma's voice-over in *Seven Steps around the Fire* tells the myth about hijras in the play:

The legend has it that God Rama 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 could not disobey him.

So they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. (10)

The play looks like a detective story. Before the play opens, a beautiful hijra, Kamla, has been murdered. Anarkali, another hijra, is imprisoned on the false charge of her murder. She is badly beaten up in the prison. She is also inhumanly treated and abused. Uma Rao, the sociology researcher, comes out as the most powerful character in the play. She struggles hard to establish the identity of a eunuch who was murdered. She is married to Suresh Rao, the chief superintendent of police. Suresh Rao harbours a dream to succeed his father as police commissioner. Uma pursues research in class and

gender related violence and is writing a paper on eunuchs. During her research she accidentally unearths the truth behind a murder of a hijra. Kamla, the hijra was put to death because she was secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy minister. The minister hires an assassin to eliminate Kamla and hastily arranged for his son's marriage with an acceptable girl. But at the wedding, Subbu discovers the secret behind the murder. He shoots and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up and the case is not even reported in the newspaper. The incident throws light on the powerful nexus between the underworld, politicians and the police.

The tragic story of a hijra who is murdered just because she has fallen in love with Subbu a young man of social standing fills with shock and feeling of injustice. Kamla's sister Anarkali, another hijra ends up implicated in the murder of Kamla. No one would question that Anarkali was on the wrong side of the law purely on the basis of her being a hijra. The play exposes the civilized society's brutality towards hijras. The whole hijra community knew who the murderer was, but dared not open the mouth as they were in terror of their life. The society views hijras as criminals fit only to be imprisoned. Suresh Rao confesses that there is no proof against Anarkali, "Any way we only arrested her, because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of that" (33).

Hijras are ill treated and bad mouthed by the people in general and the police in particular. Gays are more vulnerable to oppression, police harassment and arrests for various crimes. Uma on her study visit to jail was horrified to witness the abuses meted out to the third sex:

Munuswamy: I'll come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig.

Beat it! Kick the hijra. (9)

Munswamy, the constable escorting Uma dislikes Anarkali probably because she is a hijra. The objectification of hijras is perhaps best expressed through Suresh and his subordinate. They use the pronoun 'it' for the hijra instead of he or she and use phrases like 'this thing' or 'that thing' to refer to Anarkali.. They are more vulnerable to oppression, police harassment and arrests for various crimes.

The following words of Munuswamy bears testimony the abuses and violence meted out to the third gender, “I’ll come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig. Beat it! Kick the hijra”(9).

As a castrated male, Anarkali occupies a gendered space that is neither here nor there. That the ‘it’ considers herself female does not deter the authorities from consigning her to the male section of the Central Jail in Bangalore. Her unstable gendered position coupled with the unfortunate circumstances in which she finds herself make her reach out to Uma as a ‘sister’, though she had mocked the notion of sisterhood initially because of the class divide that separates them.

Seven Steps around the Fire highlights the ridicule and discrimination against the transgendered in the society. The dehumanized conditions of their existence and the humiliation of sexual abuse even within the prison premises point out how the guardians of law become the perpetrators of crime against the transgendered. It is made clear that what they long for is restitution of self-respect, understanding, identity and justice. Dattani’s plays show different attitudes that society has towards anybody who is different or who is at the lower end of the political balance. These subaltern sexualities face threat or aggression because of their position in the society that are often overlooked in registering their lawful claim through literature politically and socially without a voice to be heard. Dattani’s *Seven Steps Around the Fire* gives hijras a depiction in the theatre as human beings with their individuality who crave for space in the society. Remarking on the theme of the play, Dr. Beena Agarwal remarks:

Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. (31)

Dattani lends an eloquent voice to the suffering. For the first time, someone has reminded that the hijras are human beings, and that they must be respectfully treated as such. Dattani undertakes to shed light on the way gender is perceived and constructed, he succeeds in touching the hearts of his

audience. He gives Anarkali an identity, which is strong enough to show the various wrongs perpetuated on hijras in the society, whether in infancy or adulthood or even in after life. Dattani aims not at changing the society but only seeks to offer some scope for reflection in the hope that his plays will give audience some kind of insight into their own lives. Thus he uses theatre as a powerful tool to bring hijras from the periphery to the centre and gives them a space.

References

Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Jaipur:

Book Enclave, 2011. Print.

Choudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Foundation

Books, 2005. Print.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.

