



Gender Discourse in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani uses theatre to sensitise people on the issue of gender politics. His theatre throws light on the lives of these victims who seek justice. Due to mainstream, traditional, and biased gender notions, much suffering has been unleashed on sexual minorities. Dattani problematises accepted notions of gender, questions the gender-binary, and includes the hijras in his gender discourse. Transgenders/hijras have always been denied an identity as human beings. While Dattani's plays, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara*, etc. deal with women's oppression, the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, for the first time in the history of Indian theatre, brings hijras' lives on the stage to portray their exploitation by the mainstream society. Dattani extends the scope of gender discrimination to include hijras. Giving a humanistic touch to the portrayal of their lives, Dattani tries to sensitise society to identify hijras as a distinct and separate gender, as human-beings, along with men and women. This is unique to Indian theatre which hitherto had witnessed only the portrayal of women's exploitation on the stage. Some of Dattani's plays also breaks traditional notions of sexuality by bringing to the fore homosexuality in plays like *A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Do the Needful*. The present paper attempts to explore how Dattani's theatre problemitises gender and associated sexualities. It reviews his radical stand on such victims of gender discrimination and on the denial of sexual rights. In relation to the theme of defending the criminalized transgender, and allowing a space for this identity in the discourse of gender, this paper probes Dattani's take on radicalism and Radical theatre.

Judith Butler in her seminal book *Gender Trouble*(1990) criticizes the feminism of the period for its restricted scope of gender and its received notions of male and female, leading to "exclusionary gender norms within the feminism often with homophobic consequences". Butler pleads for free a play of gender against the rigid gender binary of male and female.

However, this free play of gender is not approved by society, which is dominated by traditional, patriarchal, heterosexual, normative order. Any behaviour that attempts to deviate from the order is bound to be humiliated,

ridiculed, and criminalized to make sure that the order remains intact. Gays, lesbians, and hijras who do not fall under the gender-binary and whose sexual behaviour is deviant from hetero-sexuality, are excluded from mainstream society. These communities have to relentlessly face expulsion, discrimination, humiliation and suspicion as punishment; requiring them to fall in line or remain suffocated forever.

Mahesh Dattani uses his plays to give voice to such suffocated, marginalized communities, who are forced to remain mute due to rigid gender norms. Dattani writes in the realist mode like the playwrights Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, G.P. Deshpande, and Mahasweta Devi. These playwrights have mainly written on issues related to caste, community, religion, politics, poverty, gender, discrimination of woman, and post-independence disillusionment. However, Dattani radically moves beyond these mainstream issues to articulate more invisible, marginalized subjects like homosexuality, child sexual abuse, hijras, gender variants and communalism. Despite the fact that some of these issues were considered as taboo-topics, Dattani's theatre radically engages with such issues in order to initiate an open discussion about them in public.

His plays *AMuggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* uncover the prevalence of homosexuality in India. The plays bring on the stage the everyday trauma of homosexuals against the hetero-normative order. The play *Tara* not only traces the preference of a male child over a female child in India, but also underlines shallow gender divisions of male and female stressing their complementary, fluid nature as against accepted separate identity. The other plays which question existing gender order and patriarchy are *Dance Like a Man* and *Where There is a Will*, while *Seven Steps Around the Fire* brings on stage lives of hijras.

Hijras are a marginalised community in India, as their gender identity does not figure in the gender binary of male/female. Mainstream society considers their very existence a threat to the order of the gender-binary of male and female. In the traditional normative order, only this binary is 'right' and 'in order'; any identity outside the binary is 'wrong' and 'not in order'. Therefore such 'wrong' identities are not to be entertained in either social discourse or in social milieu to make sure such identities do not affect 'right' identities and 'order', leading to everlasting infliction of exploitation and denial of basic human rights. Hijras in India are subjected to an extreme level of stigma in almost every sphere of life, beginning from family, marriage, health, school/colleges, employment, social schemes and other civic amenities. The Supreme Court has accorded legal recognition to hijras as "third gender" in April 2015 only, and the Indian Census has never recognized transgenders while collecting census data for years. However the 2011 Census has separately collected data. As per this Census, total population of transgenders in India stands at 4.88 lakh. However these developments are relatively recent.

Dattani's play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a Radio play written in 1999, subsequently staged in India and abroad, brings this marginalized community on the stage for public discussion and deliberation. He gives voice to this voiceless, invisible community which lives on the fringes of society. In the context of stigmatization attached to hijras' lives, initiating deliberation and presenting them on the stage gains special importance, as it

may sensitise society to come up with fresh orientation towards this community. In the play, Uma Rao, a Sociology Research Scholar becomes the agent who travels largely untraveled path of hijras' lives and lifts the veil of suspense and plight surrounding their lives.

As part of her research work, Uma takes up a case study: the murder of a hijra named Kamla. With the aid of her husband Suresh Rao, Superintendent of Police, Uma meets Anarkali, a hijra, in prison arrested on accusation of murdering Kamla. Uma finds Anarkali in the male prison against her hijra identity. As she is not provided separate cell, she is subjected to sexual harassment by male prisoners in the cell. Constable Munswamy is amused at Uma calling Anarkali, "she". His inhuman and prejudiced treatment of Anarkali finds liberal expression in the following reference:

Munswamy: She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. (Dattani 7)

By referring to Anarkali as "it", Munswamy forces her identity to that of a mere non-living object. For him, Anarkali, because she is hijra, is not trustworthy. He thinks a hijra case is not fit to be studied by a lady from a respectable family like Uma Rao; instead he advises her to take more mainstream crime cases like "man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother....dowry related cases". This mentality points to how hijras are marginalized even in the judicial system as their lives are not tagged with essence. Uma finds the same lethargic attitude in Suresh towards Anarkali. His thinking and actions are also guided by established prejudiced, stereotyped conception of hijras in society. Reasoning on why Anarkali was put in a male prison, Suresh calls hijras "as strong as horses" and brands them as "liars". He finds it amusing to think of a possible bond of sisterhood between Uma and Anarkali:

Suresh(off) : What's that you said? Sister?(Re-enters.) There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerate men...." (Dattani 10)

Through this, Suresh denies any possibility of hijras forming any relations with anybody other than hijras, depriving them inclusion in the social milieu. By calling them "castrated degenerated men", he is also failing to recognize hijras as a separate-gender identity. Not surprisingly a vein of mistrust and apathy also runs through his attitude about hijras.

Uma Rao as a sensitive researcher overcomes prejudices and succeeds in winning the confidence of Anarkali, who frankly claims that she has not killed her sister. She calls Uma sister, and requests her to help her get bail. Champa, the head of the hijra, gets Anarkali released as a result of the financial assistance extended by Uma. Uma often meets them in their ghettos while interrogating Kamla's murder.

The play reaches the climax in the marriage ceremony of Subbu, the son of a minister, Mr.Sharma,. The marriage is attended by Uma and Suresh also. The events take a strange turn with the arrival of Champa, Anarkali and other hijras to bless the couple with their dance and songs. Even as Mr.Sharma is furious at their very presence, Subbu snatches a gun from Suresh, and shoots himself to death on seeing the joint photo of him and Kamla, claiming that he cannot live without Kamla. Anarkali recalls that Subbu was in love with Kamla. Anarkali and Champa knew this; they even tried to stop Kamla not to continue the alliance. Their attempts to stop Kamla loving Subbu go in vain as they get married. However this marriage against tradition and the heterosexual normative order is not acceptable to the orthodox Mr.Sharma. He cannot imagine his son marrying a hijra, deviating from traditional hetero-normativity. To do away with the prospective shame that may descend on him and his family and to make his son get back to the 'order', he got Kamla burnt alive-to makes sure that the couple are separated forever.

Though Champa and Anarkali knew who killed Kamla, revealing the truth would only prove fatal to their own lives, as the system would not trust them. Though Mr.Sharma succeeds in upholding heterosexuality, he might not have thought it will cost him his only son. He witnesses how his strong-rooted conservative beliefs adversely affect him and his family. However, politics of gender hegemony and money power, make sure that he is not tried by the law of the land; despite Uma possessing evidence against him. Subbu's death is hushed up as an accident and the "photo was destroyed, so were the lives of two young lives" (Dattani 42).

Symbolically, the play opens with the sound of Sanskrit mantras chanted during a Hindu wedding in the presence of holy fire. Even as the sound of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras, a scream emerges only to be engulfed by the sound of flames. Here, Sanskrit mantras symbolise traditional orthodox cultural values and practices, the fire symbolizes their violent destructive nature and the sound of flames engulfing a scream denotes how traditional values and customs may devour and destroy individual freedom and conscience. Thus the play effectively cautions spectators to be cautious about the very value system, they follow and nurture, which can be shallow and hypocritical.

The play also hints at existing discrimination and inequality meted out to women in society. In the very beginning of the play itself, Constable Munswamy introduces Uma to the prisoners as "the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and the wife of our Superintendent!". Under the umbrella of patriarchy first she is daughter -in-law of the Deputy Commissioner; then she is wife to Suresh; her self-identity is forced to stand at a tertiary level. About their being childless for years, family compulsions make Uma undergo a medical test, which confirms that there is no problem with her. Despite suggestions by doctors to undergo such test, Suresh denies to heed to the advice. He is not ready to allow others to question or even to suspect his manliness. For him impotency can only be associated with hijras, not with a full-blooded man like him. For Anarkali's repeated plea seeking help in release her, Uma says "I don't have any power!".Anarkali categorically replies to Uma "May be you are more unhappy than me". Towards the end of the play, Uma is able to have a harmonious bond

with Anarkali and Champa. While Uma, herself belonging to a subjugated gender of female, helped Champa in the release of Anarkali and fights her best to get justice for the killing of Kamla, Anarkali, a hijra, a more subjugated gender, calls Uma “sister”, wishes “happy life” to Uma and hands over a special mantra to wear, wishing her to have children.

Conclusion: The cordial relation has special meaning in the context that both the subjugated genders may unite and put a solid resistance against the oppressive opponent, that being the same, i.e. patriarchy and associated value systems like heterosexuality.

Bibliography

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