

# The Spectrum of Gender Dysphoria in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire*: A Study

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## Abstract:

In the era of globalization talking about the spectrum of gender dysphoria in India means that we both men and women have accepted the fact that Hijras (third gender or transgender) and the people of peculiar sexes are inferior in terms of sex, gender and identity to men and women both physically and mentally. India is the land where Hijras have been worshipped in various religions. In spite of that since time immemorial, with some exceptions, female and other gender are in the flow of subjugation under the patriarchal set-up from various angles, is clearly heard in the voice of feminist. Therefore, they have been facing innumerable challenges such as domination, exploitation, marginalization, discrimination in opportunities, inhuman treatment, and alienation from the mainstream of human space. In this context the plight of them in terms of, sex, gender, identity, physicality, culture, and socio economic status become more pathetic and miserable which is beyond one's imagination because for this, they have been facing more discomfort, traumatic tragedies and psychological pangs in home as well as in unhomeliness than men and women and have been decentralized from the main stream of human's logo.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Gender Dysphoria, Hijras, Female, Subjugation, Discomfort, Psychological Pangs, Logo

The term 'gender dysphoria' refers to a sense of psychological uneasiness or dissatisfaction which occurs due to the lack of gender identity or peculiar external genitalia. It can rise up by the effect of internal or external humiliation and harassed or teased, which refers to the psychological distress that results from incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity.

Mahesh Dattani is a renowned name in the history of Indian English theatre. He is much acclaimed for his depiction of empirical view of modern Indian society through his art of craftsmanship which touches the issues of gender dysphoria. Therefore, he is widely appreciated for his technical excellences as well as the vernacular form of theatre, exploring a wide range of themes and subjects regarding the present social scenario in India, especially the pangs and pathos of women as well as the marginalized one in terms of power, gender, sex, physicality, identity, caste, colour, and religion in the grip of patriarchal gravity to reform the present social structure through bringing the social and cultural change. Therefore, he keeps on toiling to pour the ink through his pen power on the grief of the marginals in terms of sexuality, gender and identity to awaken the local as well as the global concerns for giving them the space to mingle with the 'human logo.' In this context, Dattani's own words echo when he says:

I write for my milieu, for my 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 (Qtd. in Parsad 3).

Gender dysphoria can impair many aspects of life. Preoccupation with being of another gender than the one assigned often interferes with daily activities. People experiencing gender dysphoria might refuse to go to outside activities such as school, college office and other social activities, due to pressure to dress in a way that's associated with their sex or out of fear of being harassed or teased. It can also impair the ability to function at any outside works. This can lead to depression and anxiety and have a harmful impact on daily life. In this context, the inner wound of Hijras or transgenders due to the gender dysphoria are more harmful and hurtful than anything that bleeds which is echoed by through the above mentioned play.

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 marginalised 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. In this context, Dattani questions the Indian notion of sex, gender and marriage. Jeremy Mortimer writes:

For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. The murder victim Kamla, a beautiful Hijra (eunuch), had, turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young Hijra burned to death and hastily arranged for his son to marry an acceptable girl. But at the wedding attended of course by the hijras whose sing and dance at weddings and births-Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijras community (Collected Plays 3).

At the beginning of the play, 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 hijra Anarkali. In this context, the play focuses the difficulties and discomforts of the hijras who are equidistant from men and women.

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. In this context, Miruna George in her writing "Constructing the Self and the Other: *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* notes down:

Dattani credits her with intelligence, sensitivity and determination enabling her to fulfill the task. Thus, she becomes the agent of change. This social agent is cauterized by an open mind, a consciousness that dares to think differently, reacting against social conditioning, questioning the existing social norms and their rationality and merit (Miruna 147)

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 behaviour. This time, the play revolves around the 'third' gender - the community of eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu.

Besides all these, Dattani uses the 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. In this point Uma's words are remarkable when she talks herself about them:

Nobody seems to know about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam, or are they part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionist? ... Did they really put curse? (Dattani 16)

Therefore, these are the unmistakable marks that the Hijras assumes to formulate a distinctive identity that sets them apart as community in India and are easily recognized by Indians which are the invisible and even unspoken nature of such identities. Though, they are born free but are in chain in everywhere and this chain is constructed by both the masculine and feminine gender which is ideologically invisible. And as a result, they have been sexually, identically, socially, economically, politically and geographically extruded from the main stream of human territory. The below conversation bears the testimony;

**Anarkali:** v We make our relations with our eyes... Oh, brother, give me a cigarette, na.

**Munswamy:** Shut up. And don't call me brother.

**Anarkali:** Just one, na (very sexual) I will do anything for you, brother. Give, na. **Munswamy:** Chee! Who would want to .... (flustered) I - I don't smoke.

**Anarkali:** If you had a beautiful sister, you will give her a cigarette for a fuck, no? (118)

Even, Uma is a normal woman, educated, pursuing her researcher who at the end of the play feels discomfort in the oppressive structures of custom, tradition, and gender. She draws her identity in multiple ways, firmly and perhaps happily, tethered to mainstream society. She works as a woman fully conscious of her social role as a daughter, daughter-in-law and a wife. Above all, she is portrayed as an individual, fully conscious of her roles and the fact that there exists a self, independent of all these socially imposed roles. She acknowledges the humanity and the emotional bond among the eunuchs, which places her at a higher level of social consciousness than Suresh, Munswamy- the constable, Mr. Sharma- the minister. Therefore, Paisley Currah in his book *Transgender Rights* (2016) notes down how the prejudices and violence against transgender people are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their Rights assesses the movement's achievements, challenges, and opportunities for future action. Besides all these, this book examines the crucial topics like family law, employment policies, public health, economics, and grassroots organization.

After the above discourse, it is quite clear to us that gender dysphoria is the psychological and to some extent physical dissatisfaction which the transgender and peculiar sexual urge oriented (gay, lesbian and bisexual) people and even women have been facing on the gender based society since the very beginning of human existence. Though, the Indian constitution has legalized the other genders. But, still, they are not accepted by the society. Psychologically they are subjected to stress, anxiety and frustration. They are disrespected and mocked by the society. Economically they are not having adequate employment opportunities which forces them into begging and becoming sex workers. Now, the time has come to catch the Indians' attention about the Rights and Activism for transgender community and needs to realise the

dysphoria of other sexes, transgender, lesbian, bisexual, gay and so on. Only then, they will get the wings to fly in human space.

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