

Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire*: a Space for the Eunuch

Dr. Anu Rathee
Associate Professor
Department of English
Chhotu Ram Arya College, Sonapat-131001

Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a play about the plight of the eunuchs. In this play, Dattani has pitted Hijaras against the powerful elite class of the society. Subbu, the son of a powerful minister, Mr. Sharma, secretly marries a beautiful eunuch Kamala. But this relationship is not acceptable to the family of Subbu. Uma is the messenger of the playwright, Dattani has projected her as the ambassador of modern Indian women who fights against the so-called hollow traditional ethos and questions the patriarchal hegemony. Thus, Dattani has added a new dimension to the theatre by boldly taking up a theme concerning the lives and identity of a section of society, which have been sidelined, neglected, abused and overlooked since time immemorial.

Key Words: Eunuch, hegemony, ethos, plight, patriarchal

Mahesh Dattani, one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English, is the first to be awarded the *Sahitya Akāḍmi* award. The plays of Mahesh Dattani emerged as 'fresh arrival' in the domain of Indian English drama in the last decade of twentieth century. "He is to be estimated on two counts: first his concern for the fair sex and second his visit to virgin landscapes, that is, of homosexuals, eunuchs, etc." says Jha (195). Mahesh Dattani concentrates on contemporary social reality in the fast changing world. His plays deal with such important issues as gender, religion, communal tension, and sexuality. His plays are fascinating because he presents the dynamics of moral and personal choices while focusing on human relationships. He delves deep into the human heart and creates characters true to life situation addressing the "invisible issues" of contemporary Indian society like homosexuality, lesbianism, gender relationship and the plight of eunuchs. 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. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order” (34).

With the spread of knowledge in post-colonial era, social activists as well as social thinkers devoted most of their time and energy in giving voice and space to the marginalized, victimized and rejected classes of the society.

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a play about the plight of the eunuchs, whose origins are believed to be dated back from the age of Rama, a Hindu God. The legend goes that when God Rama was sent to exile, his many devotees both male and female followed him. Rama was very much moved to see the devotion of the denizens of his empire and requested all the men and women to go back to their home. But some of the male followers were not willing to go back, they were rather adamant to accompany God Rama, even in exile, but they also didn't want to disobey their master. So they sacrificed their sexual organ, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. In modern India, Hijaras are considered as phenotypic men clad in female clothing, who have, ideally, renounced sexual desire and practice by sacrificing their sexual organ to *Bedhraj Mata*. Their presence is considered auspicious on occasion of marriage or childbirth as they are believed to be bestowed with the power to confer fertility to the newlywed couple or newly born child, but any intimate relationship with them will earn you contempt, resentment and the public fury.

In this play, Dattani has pitted Hijaras against the powerful elite class of the society. Subbu, the son of a powerful minister, Mr. Sharma, secretly marries a beautiful eunuch Kamala. But this relationship is not acceptable to the family of Subbu. In order to get rid of Kamala, she is immolated and the charge of murder is leveled against another hijara Anarkali. This murder case is to be investigated by Uma Rao. She is doing her research in Sociology. She is the daughter of the Vice-

Chancellor of Bangalore University and is married to Suresh, the Superintendent of Police. Uma is determined to unveil the mystery of Kamala's murder. She appears as an instrument of awakening and, therefore, she takes the responsibility to articulate the mute voices of eunuchs and to expose the community of elitists that drags them to the margin. Jeremy Mortimer also opines: "Mahesh's plays often feature characters who are questioning their identity, and who feel isolated in some way. Uma certainly feels isolated in her marriage, and this sense of isolation makes her empathize with Anarkali, the hijara she befriends." (Note on the play 4) Uma is the messenger of the playwright, Dattani has projected her as the ambassador of modern Indian women who fights against the so-called hollow traditional ethos and questions the patriarchal hegemony. It is attributed:

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).

Dattani reveals that hijaras are considered as liars, thieves, greedy, extortionists, and criminals by the society. Even talking to a hijara by the respectable member of the society is considered as taboo. When Uma requests Munuswamy, the assistant of Suresh to arrange a meeting with Anarkali, he says: "Why do you want to bring shame to your family, Madam? I beg of you go home." (Dattani 8) But Uma is much determined to meet Anarkali and even go to any extent to save 'her' from the clutches of hostile forces.

Eunuchs have genderless identity but Uma addresses Anarkali with pronoun 'she'. In contrast to her sympathy, Munuswamy spits all the contempt against Anarkali. He ruthlessly asserts, "She! (Chuckles) of course it will talk to you" (Dattani 7) and further continues his observations in highly abusive tone. Even Suresh warns Uma to keep a distance with these people and advises her "Don't feel compassion for them. They will take advantage" (Dattani 10). Even the hijaras themselves have forced to accept the reality that they are "invisible minority" (Dattani 21) and have no respectable space in the society. Champa, the Guru-hijra, requests Uma "Madam, you should not mix with people like us" (Dattani 28). This feeling has left an indelible mark on the psyche of these people that they don't even

think of mixing with the people of the so-called respectable class of the society. Champa considers the elite class as an “outside world” (Dattani 33) and they can not remain happy among them. Due to constant and regular humiliation, their contempt, their anger, their verbal assaults at the hands of the elite class, they created their own cocoon around them. That’s why hijaras suffer social discrimination, social deprivation, poverty, inferiority, mental torture and to quote Dattani “one hijara less in this world does not matter...” (Dattani 35). Their birth is treated as the curse of the divine and their death is taken as festivity- a state of redemption. Being not conforming to the set standards of gender division, Hijaras are not allowed to involve in intimate relationship with others. They are deprived of the pleasures of family bliss but their presence is welcome on the occasions of marriage and childbirth. The word ‘Eunuchs’ denotes the idea of “a castrated man”. Suresh, the police officer who is investigating the murder of Kamala, puts Anarkali, the prime accused eunuch, in the male section of the prison without bothering the fact that the eunuchs do not fall in any established gender category of male and female defined and prescribed by our society. Suresh to fortify his assertion, he says, “They are all castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs, every day” (Dattani 10) because the society believes that Hijaras are not born third gender either; rather they are made, as procreation is not possible in this community, so to maintain their community they are castrated by the fellow hijara, the only way out is to fabricate the new members artificially as helping hand and financial security for them in old age while some of them become willingly to get themselves castrated because of poverty with a prospect to get financial assistance and safe haven for the rest of their life. Even hijaras are identified not from the face or fingerprints rather from the sexual organs. When police discovers an unidentified dead body, Munuswamy discloses to Uma, “after we found out the body was man’s without ...that the body was a hijaras, we called” (Dattani 17). This is how they establish the identity of the deceased as Kamala.

Hijaras are also so insecure that even the thoughts of getting any member of the third gender mixing up with the established genders make them insecure and aggressive. This insecurity and aggression prompt them to take law in their hands. In the play, when Anarkali comes to know that Kamala, the beautiful eunuch, is having an affair with Subbu, the male of the society, she becomes angry and scratches her face with a razor “hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her” (

Dattani 41) Undeterred by this brutal act, Kamala continues her relation with Subbu because she is also a human being with heart full of love and emotions. Intolerance, hatred, contempt, anger and disrespect take the toll in the form of Kamala's murder by the powerful and mighty MLA, who is none other than Subbu's father.

Dattani brings a fresh perspective on the lives of hijaras in the play and ushers us in a new era. He asserts that despite all the negatives associated with their lives by the 'respectable class', they are after all as kind, as loving, and as considerate as the people of other established genders. They are also made of flesh and blood. They have also body and soul. He asserts that these transgendered people have a 'self' that yearns for respect, esteem and dignity, and when these are denied, they try to break free of such bondages. When they try to break the so-called walls, most of the times their voice are muted by the established class that has usurped the society.

Dattani raises many issues about the identity, integrity of this "invisible minority" (Dattani 21).

Uma thinks:

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).

These questions are addressed to the audience for introspection and for evaluation. It is well remarked by Das:

Dattani has done a good job by introducing a new theme to Indian English drama.

Conservatives and social activists should not turn a blind eye to reality...We have to accept the reality of life, however, painful that might be (17).

Thus, Dattani has added a new dimension to the theatre by boldly taking up a theme concerning the lives and identity of a section of society, which have been sidelined, neglected, abused and overlooked since time immemorial. Jha points out: "Dattani appears to be a reformist, with a setting both traditional and modern, unable to find out any alternate/solution." (199) Dattani 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).

Works Cited:

- Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2011. Print.
- Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani*. New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2005. Print.
- Das, Bijay Kumar. *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*. New Delhi: Atlantic. 2008. Print.
- Dattani, Mahesh. "Seven Steps Around the Fire." *Collected Plays Vol. I*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. 3-42. Print.
- George, Miruna. "Constructing the Self and the Other: *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*." *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspective*. Ed. Angelie Multani. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. 145-155. Print.
- Jha, Gauri Shankar. *Current Perspective in Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic. 2006. Print.
- Joshipura, Parnav. *A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays*. New Delhi: Sarup Books Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2009. Print.
- Mortimer, Jeremy. A Note on the Play. *Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. 3-4. Print.
- Multani, Angelie. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. Print.
- Parsad, Amar Nath. *The Dramatic World of Mahesh Dattani: A Critical Exploration*. New Delhi: Sarup Books Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2009. Print.
- Tiwari, Shubha. *Contemporary Indian Dramatist*. New Delhi: Atlantic. 2007. Print.