

## Seven Steps Around the Fire: A Play about injustice against Third Gender

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### ABSTRACT

Eunuchs are a social group, culturally defined either as “neither men nor women” or as men who become women by embracing women’s dress and conduct. In India, they have no respectable identity and are always discriminated and the injustice against them is often converted into violence. The reason behind their exploitation is the accepted gender divisions of Indian society. There are only two sexual categories which are socially approved by rigid Indian society i.e. male and female; the third gender or eunuchs are victimized, suffer from identity crisis because they belong to neutral gender, neither masculine nor feminine. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is much like a protest which holds up a mirror before the society that is something unusual. The play gives a voice to convey their feeling and depicts their helpless and miserable position in the society. Dattani’s *Seven Steps Around the Fire* has become especially relevant in the light of recent Supreme Court judgment recognizing the third gender as a distinct category. Dattani is a commercial playwright and his plays are meant to be performed. Dattani shows a fine balance between the commercial demands of theatre and his sensibility especially those related to gender. The proposed paper will analyse how Dattani produces a successful commercial play without sacrificing his deep concern for social reform.

**Keywords:** The third gender (Eunuch), invisible, discrimination, identity crisis.

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Mahesh Dattani is known for having established his theatre in India. His contribution has been acknowledged by all. Mahesh Dattani focuses on the educated articulate English speaking urban middle class. Both his audience and his characters are drawn from this urban middle class and therefore Mahesh Dattani is uniquely placed to convey radically new ideas and tackle startlingly new things in his plays. Mahesh Dattani himself states:

“I write for my milieu for my time and for my place middle class and urban India. My dramatic tension arises from people aspire to freedom from society...I am looking for something sensational which audience have never seen before, some subject which are under explored, deserve their space. It’s no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalized...Each of us have a sense of isolation within giving context. That’s why what makes us individual” (The Hindu).

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is a play that deals with the burning issue of transgenders in India. The history of transgenders in India is a long one. Unlike western society where transgender have become visible only now, in India transgender people appear both in myths and in history. In the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*, there is a character named Shikhandi who is male but born as a girl child. After changing her sex, she comes to be known as Shikhandi but as a eunuch. Another instance of myth in Hindu mythology is the story of Aravan, one of minor but crucial characters of *The Mahabharata*. He sacrifices himself for ensuring victory in the battlefield. But for the right of cremation funerary offerings he wants to get married but no woman wants to marry him, afraid of the ineluctable doom of widowhood. Hence, Krishna solves this dilemma by taking on his female form, Mohini and marries him. The next day, after immolation of Aravan, he mourns as a widow and after it, he comes to his real masculine form. It is said that it is Aravan’s lineage from where the transgender are said to have been born.

We see transgender people appearing as a guard of the harem in the medieval period of history. However, with the advent of ‘modernity’ the transgenders in India have become increasingly marginalized. Pushed to the margins to the main stream society, the transgender community has lost respectability and is viewed by most people as extortionists and prostitutes. Nevertheless, transgenders are visible, appearing during weddings, the birth of children and other auspicious occasions.

Mahesh Dattani has managed to create a sensitive and nuanced play out of the position of the transgender in contemporary Indian society. He is a versatile Indian playwright who provokes our thinking and

challenges the conventional attitudes and assumptions, prejudices of society, depicts the dilemma of what is right or wrong and leaves us to ponder on such invisible issues. His plays are much like protest plays in which social, political or environmental injustices are dealt such as *Where There's a Will* (1988) focuses on the patriarchal code and its problem; *Dance Like a Man* (1989) depicts the sorrow and sufferings of the genders if they go against the prevalent social rules and regulations; *Tara* (1990) is the story of two Siamese children in which the baby girl suffers because of her gender. His *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) depicts the pitiful condition of women in male dominated society while *Final Solution* (1993) highlighted the internecine truculent of castes. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) deals with the issues of homosexual, a sexual minority. Going through his plays we find ourselves facing a dilemma, a conflict which compels us to think about the several invisible issues which raise in our mind the rigid rules and regulations of the society.

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is an atypical play, the only Indian play which revolves around emphasizing the woes of the transgenders or we can say Hijras. The play was first conceived on BBC Radio 4, on January 9, 1999 as *Seven Circle Around the Fire* and after its success, the stage version of the play was first performed at Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC Production & The Madras Players on 6 August, 1999. It is probably one of the best plays which paints the socio-psychological predicament of the Hijra community who are tattered between their personal desire and the social taboos. The play has detective story element, the way the play begins with such stage directions as someone is getting married according Hindu customs and at the same very moment there is a gunshot and the scream indicates the cry of the person who was hit by that shot and the flames engulf the scream:

“Sanskrit mantras fade in, the ones chanted during a Hindu wedding...The crackle of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras. She screams and tries to run but is now on fire...her scream turns silent as the sounds of the mantras and flames take over.” (CP 233)

Further, the story begins with the character Uma, a scholar, who is working for doctoral research on “Class and Gender related violence”. She is the wife of Suresh Rao, the superintendent of police and daughter in law of the deputy commissioner of police. She teaches sociology and wants to meet some Hijras to collect information about their community for her research analysis. One day, she comes to know about a Hijra who has been imprisoned in a case of murder. Somehow, she arranges a meeting with that Hijra named Anarkali in the police station. Through the meeting, she finds out about Kamla, a beautiful Hijra who has been murdered and Anarkali is arrested on the false charge of her murder. Anarkali is suspected for the murder by the police. While meeting Anarkali, Uma sees the ill treatment Anarkali meets in the prison by the police and the other fellow inmates because of her neutral gender.

Uma conveys to Suresh, her husband what she has been seen of the inhuman behavior of the police and the other prisoners towards Anarkali in the prison. Suresh mocks at her humanitarian perspective as their conversations shows that Suresh has also an inhuman attitude towards Hijras as Munswamy has. He tries to prevent Uma from having any kind of sympathy towards Hijras but it has no effect on her. The sympathy for the suffering of Anarkali grows in Uma and she is now engaged more in realizing as to who the real murderer is and whether Anarkali is really a convict or the murderer of Kamla. The police have no evidence against Anarkali but as Suresh says “we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her...It could be any one of them.” (CP 270) She is put in the male cell because there is no separate cell for the Hijras and Anarkali is physically, mentally, sexually abused there and nobody concerned about her.

In the second meeting with Uma, Anarkali speaks rather determine to be silent. Because of the gentle attitude of Uma towards her, she says:

“If you were a Hijra, I would have made you my sister.” (CP 342)

Anarkali remains silent before because she is fed up with the false sympathies of the journalists who come to meet her to get a different type of news as she thinks Uma to be a journalist. She reveals to Uma that Salim is the real murderer of Kamla. Salim is the trustworthy servant of Mr. Sharma and she is only a witness of that incident. She further says that due to influence of Mr. Sharma she has been imprisoned instead of Salim. Anarkali requested Uma to bail her out from the jail. Asked by Uma to speak the truth to everyone about the culprit, Anarkali says:

“They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail.” (CP 244)

The conflict which revolves around in the mind of Anarkali is that if she goes out on bail and speaks the truth, she would be killed by the real murderer of Kamla and if she remains silent, she would be tormented to death in jail to. That is the reason why Anarkali tries to hide their crime in spite of concealing it. She pleads with Uma to meet Champa and gives her money for her bail. She decides to die in freedom rather waiting for death in jail.

With a tumult of questions in her mind, Uma leaves Anarkali and moves to arrange money for her bail. On the way she meets Munswamy and discovers that Kamla was dressed as a bride when she was murdered. Uma is seems now perplexed. There is a dilemma in her mind that some Hijra may be criminals but there may be some others who are not. Somehow, Uma begins to believe that Anarkali is innocent and curiously, she is

ready to help her. She arranges money from her father for Anarkali's bail and also learn there that Mr. Sharma's son is shortly getting married. After leaving her father's house, she goes straight to meet Champa. On the way she thought:

"Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam or are they a 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? And why do they not take singing lessons?" (CP 246)

Champa is the head of Hijras. She takes care of all Hijras as a mother does to all her children. She is very tenderhearted and practical. Through her character, Dattani shifts light on the very traditions of the Hijras as she utters to Uma helplessly:

"We cannot speak...when we want to speak nobody listens. When we cannot speak..." (CP 259)  
Further, she says "There is no world for a hijra other than the one we make for ourselves." (CP 261)

First of all, Uma introduces herself as "a social worker" to Champa and tells the woeful condition of Anarkali. She offers money to Champa to bailout Anarkali but it appears that Champa does not have any kind of sympathy for Anarkali as she also considers Anarkali responsible for the murder of Kamla:

"Champa: ...But don't do any good work for that bitch Anarkali!

Uma: Oh.

Champa: She deserves to be where she is! I hope she dies." (CP 255)

During the course of conversation about the Kamla murder mystery with Champa, Uma encounters Salim, who starts abusing Champa with his entry and demands money, but Uma threatens him by revealing her real identity and he disappears. The presence of Salim in the house of Champa creates doubt in the mind of Uma. Leaving Champa, she starts believing that Champa is the real culprit and Salim assisted her in the murder. She is now more interested in the murder mystery rather than her research, but she has no idea that by doing this she is going to make herself a fool because she does not know that the culprit who is responsible for all these things holds a lot of political clout and they will never allow anyone to know the truth. Uma does not know that everyone deliberately hides the truth, even her husband.

In order to discern the identity of Salim, Uma unknowingly contacted the right person who is responsible for all these things i.e. Mr. Sharma. There she also meets Subbu, son of Mr. Sharma who looks uneasy. Mr. Sharma tells Uma that he is a bit tired with all the wedding preparations but Subbu says:

"I hate weddings...I don't want all these things! I don't wish to go ahead with this." (CP 267)

The climax of the play occurs at the wedding ceremony of Subbu where all the Hijras appear for dancing, singing and Mr. Sharma tries cleverly to get rid of them but it fails. The atmosphere fills with tension. The marriage mantras are being chanted. Suddenly Subbu snatches revolver from Suresh's pocket and tries to shoot himself. Everyone tries to stop him but he cries:

"I am leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamla". (CP 279)

His words reveal the whole mystery that he loved Kamla and it is Mr. Sharma who got Kamla killed. Salim had cheated Subbu and removed Kamla from his (Subbu) presence and had her killed. Uma is astonished at the revelation of the murder mystery. Anarkali moves forward with a photograph showing Subbu and Kamla as a newly married couple which means that they were already married but it has not been publicized. Kamla has been killed and at last Subbu too shoots himself and dies. In the representation of Eunuch, Dattani seems to consent that they, the subaltern, have no right to fight for their voice and to raise it against the injustice and humiliation. Anarkali and Champa know the whole mystery of Kamla's murder, though Subbu dies but nobody was ready to listens to them as Dattani speaks through his character Uma:

"...(they) have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not reported in the newspaper...Subbu's suicide written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people...but Anarkali's blessing remain with me...I did not want her blessings for a child. All I want is - what they want...To move on. To love. To live." (CP 282)

To conclude, the fear and frustration underlined in the play denotes the misery of identity crisis of Hijras being dealt as a social being in this multi-aspect of society and questions the social acceptability and tolerability of Hijra commune. Mahesh Dattani delineated the felicitous exposition of Indian society regarding Hijra community as we see through the play that how they are handled as non-living thing, their situation is even worse than the caste, the class or religious discrimination and are recognized as an aura of dislike and disgust. The agony, distress, conflicts, torments, insecurities, frustration, troubles of the Hijras are well dramatized in the proposed play. Regarding the Hijra community and their social position Dattani clears clarifies many doubts through his mouth puppet character Uma in the play:

"Case7. A brief note on the popular myths on the origin of the Hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications. The term Hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female'.

Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayana. The legend has it that God Rama was in the forest to cross the river and go into exile. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, 'Men and women turn back'. Some of his male follower 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. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love.

The two events in the mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable- marriage and birth-ironically, are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven-round witnessed by the Fire God, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessing of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons.' (CP 239-40)

Eunuchs or the Hijras have a 'self' that desires for dignity rather than the social rituals and regulations but are denied by the society. When they try to tear off such customs and protest against such prototype's rituals, most of the time they are humiliated and suppressed by the established rules and orders that predominate in the society. Thus, Dattani has a new proportion to the theatre by choosing such burning and controversial theme in the play. As Bijay Kumar Das in *Forms and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays* asserts:

"Dattani has done a good job by introducing a new theatre 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)

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