



Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire: Breaking the Stereotypes

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Abstract— *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is one of the most widely read of Mahesh Dattani's dramas which depicts the miserable plight of neglected and marginalized eunuchs through the research work and enquiry of Uma Rao who is the daughter of the Vice Chancellor and wife of Chief Superintendent of police, Suresh Rao when she happens to meet other eunuchs Anarkali and Champa. Except the two occasions of child birth and wedding, the eunuchs are looked down upon due to their inferior gender. They are not welcome. The drama is about the murder mystery of Kamala, a eunuch, who is mercilessly burnt to death by the powerful minister Mr Sharma just because she dared to love and marry his son Subbu. Through this drama, Dattani has tried to break the stereotypes regarding the hijaras in our society. Hijaras are human beings like us; they have equal rights to be respected like us and they have also equal right to get married and to be parents.

Keywords— *Stereotypes, marginalization, subaltern.*

Although dramas were written in abundance between 1831 and 2007, we had hardly a few dramatists of mark. Beginning with Krishna Mohan Banerjee and journeying through Madhusudan Dutt, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, G.V. Desani, Asif Currimbhoy and Manjula Padmanabhan, the Indian English drama had not taken roots in our soil; it had no tradition to fall back on except a few dramatists who got only limited success such as Asif Currimbhoy and Nissim Ezekiel. Girish Karnad was a successful playwright, but he wrote originally in Kannada and later transcreated into English. Moreover, he turned to Indian Myths and epics for themes. Badal Sircar wrote in Bengali and Vijay Tendulkar wrote in Marathi. At this juncture, it was Mahesh Dattani who rose as a star dramatist to illuminate Indian theatre with his revolutionary themes and dramatic technique.

Mahesh Dattani ranks as one of the most appealing dramatists of the contemporary Indian drama by virtue of his universality and approachability to the every possible heart of Indian readers. Drifted towards his dream of writing a type of drama having Indianness in its soul and sentimentality, he became a successful playwright, actor

, director and filmmaker. He was impressed by the popular Gujarati plays he saw during his childhood in Bangalore. He found that the translations of dramas into English language did not do the justice to the original thought and passion, so he felt the urge to write in English instead of his mother tongue Gujarati. He devoted himself to the task of indianizing the theatre in English language full time and the result was his marvellous plays. In Dattani's views, theatre has the power of capturing the attention of modern viewers and readers more powerfully than other forms. Talking about the role of theatre in an interview to *The Hindu*, he says, "The question ought to be dead, not theatre. The fact is that theatre is around, despite more easily accessible mediums of entertainment like television and cinema. People still take that effort to set aside time for theatre; so it means that there is something unique that it offers, which they can not get anywhere else. It forces its audience to suspend disbelief, to be imaginative, to be an active spectator and that's wonderful."¹

Through the medium of theatre, Dattani has tried to address wide range of issues concerning contemporary Indian society and this is the charisma about him. His plays

throb with the sentiments and passions which his predecessors lack. The wide range of modern themes covered by his plays include gender identity, communal tension, religious fundamentalism, homosexuality, human relationship and queer themes. His plays cater to the taste of every class of audience. R.K. Dhawan writes about him, "Dattani's plays have universal appeal. They can be staged anywhere in the world; they would draw full attention of the audience. Dattani moulds his subject in such a way that it is both topical as also has a wider appeal. His plays speak across linguistic and cultural barriers."² He deals with the problem of subordination in terms of caste, religion, gender and class. In other words, his plays are concerned with the subalterns who were forced to remain silent against oppression and injustice. Leela Gandhi defines the subaltern in this way, "Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for or to sound the muted voice of truly oppressed."³ His plays have contemporaneity. Preeti Zachariah writes, "His plays, mostly set in urban, middle-class India, are soul searching, dark narratives that manage to rip apart the superficial placidity of humdrum living, exposing a core that seethes with fractured emotions, tumultuous thoughts and unanswered questions."⁴

Mahesh Dattani is known for uplifting the cause of the neglected and marginalised section of the society. He wrote a number of significant plays published collectively in two volumes—*Collected Plays* (2000) and *Collected Plays Vol. II* (2005). His noteworthy plays are *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Where There's a Will, Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, *Dance Like a Man* and *Seven Steps around the Fire* etc.

Seven Steps Around the Fire was first broadcasted by BBC Radio 4 on 9 Jan, 1999 under the title "*Seven Circles Aaround the Fire*" It was first performed in theatre on 10 July 2004. It portrays the miserable plight of the transgenders or hijaras in Indian society. Dattani's interest in the queer themes of homosexuality and transgenders has made this play most attractive and radical.

In this play, Mahesh Dattani dares to speak for the hijaras who have hardly been voiced by other dramatists. The eunuchs are discriminated and treated as minority. Male and female sex are in the mainstream of life but the transgenders have still to attain the status quo. They have to bear social ostracism, isolation and contempt. Through this drama, the dramatist has given voice to the throes and pangs of the third gender. Dattani has given a symbolical and significant title to the play. "*Seven Steps Around the Fire*" is a suggestive phrase connoting the concept of the holy bond of marriage which is accomplished through the seven steps around the

fire. In Indian society, one of the marriage rituals is called 'Saptapadi' in which the bride groom and bride complete seven rounds of the holy fire and take seven oaths to keep their marital bond strong. In the drama, Kamala, one of the hijaras is denied this ritual and not allowed to be united in the marriage bond with Subbu, the son of an influential political minister Mr Sharma. The whole plot of the drama revolves round the murder mystery of the victimized hijara, Kamla, who was so beautiful that Subbu, the son of minister, wished to marry her.

The whole truth about the murder of a hijara, Kamala and the miserable plight of hijara community is brought about by Uma, daughter of Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University and wife of Chief Superintendent Suresh Rao. As a research scholar of Sociology, she uncovers the facts about hijara community. She informs Anarkali about her research, "I am doing my paper on class and gender related violence." (Dattani, 12) The purpose of her case study was to show the position of hijaras in our society. She explores the Indian popular myths and history about the origin of hijara and gender based power implications. She says,

"The term hijara, 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." (Dattani, 10)

She finds that some males did not go back and followed Lord Ram to the forest. Shri Ram was so pleased with their devotion that he blessed them. She also observes that the two events in the main stream of Hindu culture are supposed to be incomplete without their presence—birth and marriage.

The dramatist exposes the double standard adopted in Indian society through his protagonist Uma. The ritual of marriage is allowed only for male and female sex categories; it is unacceptable and even a heinous crime for the hijara. Uma thinks, "The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable—marriage and birth—ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature." (Dattani, 11) Here, the dramatist becomes radical and breaks the stereotypes of heterosexual marriage. He seems to say that even hijara can opt the ritual of marriage. Bijay Kumar Das also writes that, "Dattani is questioning the age old belief of marriage being based on heterosexual relationship."⁵ The only sin which Kamala committed was her desire for involving in seven steps around the fire, that is, marriage. This unacceptable desire for marriage by a hijra caused her cruel and pitiless murder. Uma notices the irony in our Indian society that hijras are treated as ominous on the occasion of marriage; they sing songs and give blessings on the occasion of birth and marriage but they themselves are denied these rituals. A hijara can not become a wife, mother, father or husband.

The dramatist pleads for them on humanistic grounds. Uma says, "Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love." (Dattani, 11) The love affair of Kamala and Subbu and their secret marriage in some remote temple burned the Minister Mr Sharma into fire. Mr Sharma could not accept it; so he arranged to have Kamala burned to death.

Besides Kamala, we meet other hijaras such as Anarkali and Champa. Anarkali is oppressed because of being a hijara. She is arrested for the murder of Kamala only on suspicious grounds. The fact is that everybody knows the murderer, but the police traps Anarkali to protect the actual criminal because he is the powerful person. Innocent Anarkali is arrested though she did not murder. She is abused by policemen and beaten by other prisoners while the viewers only scream with pleasure. This is absolutely disgusting.

It is noticeable that the subaltern hijaras are silenced to the extent that they can not express the reality. Anarkali says, "They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail." (Dattani, 14) The dramatist shows how the murder of Kamala has terrified other hijaras that they cannot reveal the truth and cannot get justice to the dead soul. Nobody wants to talk on the topic of a hijara's murder mystery. They are forced to curb their desires and their pangs. When Uma visits Anarkali and make enquiries about Kamala's death, she hardly tells anything. On persistent request, Anarkali reveals the situation. Champa suspects Uma to be a police and does not want to tell her anything. Champa says that she cannot speak. When she wants to speak, nobody listens. At the end of the play, Uma concludes, "They have no voice." (Dattani, 42) It was very strange that the murder of Kamala was not reported in the newspaper. The Police made no arrest.

Through the characters like Suresh Rao, Munuswamy and Mr Sharma, the dramatist depicts the prevailing stereotypes and notions of Indian society about the transgender. The hijras are called "dogs", "castrated degenerate men". (Dattani, 10) They are addressed using the pronoun 'it'. Nobody has compassion for them. Suresh Rao advises Uma not to have sympathy with the hijara community. He says, "Look, it is one thing that I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel any compassion for them. They will take advantage... Keep your soft heart for me." (Dattani, 10) Hijaras live in their own world. They have sisters, daughters in their own gender. Anarkali says,

"One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband." (Dattani, 35)

Champa treated Kamala as a daughter and Anarkali treated her as her sister. Uma realises the bond of love among the

hijaras. The eunuchs live in their own world because they are segregated from the society.

In conclusion, we can say that the dramatist wants his viewers and readers to think about the injustice society have been doing to these marginalized people. He wants to bring the eunuchs into the main stream of life. He pleads that marriage and birth rights should be allowed to the hijara community also. They should also be entitled to love, relationship and family on humanistic grounds. Here, Mahesh Dattani becomes a radical thinker and breaks the stereotypes of Indian society in matters of marriage and birth.

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