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## Gender Inequality in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire*

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### Abstract:

The prejudice against third gender is often translated into aggression. The main reason behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that hijras do not conform to the accepted gender divisions. Male and female-these are the only sexual categories which have secured society's approval. Individuals, who do not fit into these two classes, have to bear social exclusion, separation and hatred. Politically, lawfully and generally the community of hijras is marginalized and victimized. The unseen authority of social forces does not allow the hijras to carve their own intend afar the patterns recommended and accepted by society. Mahesh Dattani gives the hijras of India a voice to articulate their feelings and predicaments in the English theatre through his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The case of a hijra is the central part in the play that secretly marries the son of a minister and has to bear terrible cost. The role of the police, politicians and the society as a whole is questioned.

**Keywords: Gender Inequality, Bias, Hijras (Eunuchs), Politics and Injustice**

As the note to the play states, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* was first broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio on 4 and 9 January 1999. The play highlights Dattani, a master of language and characterization. As a dramatist he was not frightened to work inside a comparatively conventional dramatic structure to tell a story that was bold and dominant without even being histrionic. The stated play beautifully deals with the pathetic dilemma of the *hijras*, their ways of life, their passionate sense of individual identity in a heartless and unkind atmosphere where a minister had the young *hijra* burned to death. Mahesh Dattani, a Sahitya Academy Award winner playwright from India, in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* has highlighted the difficulty of the *hijras* in the Indian society. Having a recorded history of more than 4,000 years, the *hijra* community is underprivileged of several rights under the civil rule because the Indian law recognizes only two sexes. They are lonely and segregated and constitute an 'invisible minority' within the society. They are the abandoned gender. They sing at the wedding and at childbirth with other *hijras* and people give them money otherwise they put a curse on them. They are measured as the 'chosen of God' and the curse by them cannot be revoked. The author has paradoxically portrayed this aspect that would not have otherwise received any concentration, for any matter related to the *hijras* is of no meaning to anyone. For many Indians – both upper and middle class – *hijras* exist at the margin of their concern, making themselves visible only on firm occasions. Dattani is the first playwright who has written a full length play about them. For the very

first time they get a representation in the theatre as human beings with their exceptionality who long for space in the society. 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. Dttani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order.” (*Aggarwal, Beena p.34*)

As we can pass on the term “Subaltern” to the marginalized group this “subaltern” in *Seven Steps around the fire* is required to uphold peace beside domination and injustice. Since the perception of marginality can be interpreted and used from couple of points of view: in the sense of not included into a barred from. The previous applies to a dualist view of society and refers to the people who are moving from one sector to other and not yet fully incorporated into the later relation the homosexuals. The later relates to those as trivial who are driven among from, or banned from participating in the main cultural and society which adds the *hijras* and transsexuals. It is an objection play next to the social exclusion of the *hijras*. Such exclusions can be found everywhere in the Indian society like the caste, class, religion or inclination based bias, but the *hijras* suffer this on the basis of their unbiased gender. Dattani underlines the truth that other than the social customs and bindings, the *hijras* have a ‘self’ that longs for self-respect and when it is denied the same, it tries to break free of such customs. When they complaint, most of the times their voice is covered up by the established order that prevails in the society. Dattani has added a new dimension to the theatre by taking up such themes in his plays. It is remarked:

“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.” (*Das, Bijay Kumar p.17*)

The play shows more like a detective literature as the subject of the chief plan consists of the study of the murder case. Kamla’s ‘body was found by some passer-by, after four days. The temple priest complained about the stench. It was thrown into the pond after being burned.’ (CP p.17) As the play progresses, the suspicion of murder shifts from Anarkali to Champa to Salim to Salim’s wife and then to Mr. Sharma. Dattani very smartly weaves the net of suspense to keep the audience on the boundaries of their seats. The drama is not only regarding the murder and study of a *hijra*, but also concerning their social positioning and the social setup where a *hijra* cannot long for his approach and emotions further than the patterns and limits recommended by the society. These individuals face risk or violence because of their situation in the society. The drama shows the social space of hostility faced by them and the spiteful social responses that they experience. Dattani himself 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 sense of isolation within given contexts. That's what makes us individual." (*The Hindu*)

Different characters are revealed interact with the *hijras*. They have their pre-established ideas of detestation concerning the *hijras* and do not want to change those ideas. It is Uma alone who empathizes with them and fights for their integrity. Suresh, Uma's husband regards them all as 'degenerated men' who never speak the truth. Munuswami, Salim and Mr. Sharma have parallel opinion too. What makes the tragedy of the *eunuch* stronger is that they are used to this hatred spoken towards them and have established and compromised with the dilemma of their lot. Their communication with the universal society and other persons does not guide to any kind of pleasure. Anarkali scratches the face of Kamla with a knife, because she knows that they can only be subject to hatred in the society and if someone loves a *hijra* that can just lead to some tragedy. This is what ultimately happens:

"... So many times I warned her. First I thought Salim was taking her for his own pleasure. When she told me about Subbu, madam, I tried to stop her. I fought with her. I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her. He wanted to marry her... I was there at their wedding... she gave me that picture to show to Champa. I saw the men coming for her. I told her to run... (*CP p. 41*)

The dialogues and words of the drama are sharp, hard and practical. A few of them are taken straight from the *hijra* words. Dattani apply extremely courageous words in the play; language that a customary Indian society does not enjoy publically. But that is to make the viewers have a peek into the shame and disgrace that *hijras* face daily. One does not have to read between the lines. Dattani is forever admired for his excellence of expressing the truth in its naked and acidic form. He knows the theatre requirements and writes for that reason. It is attributed:

"Dattani is intrinsically a theatre person, rather than a writer, is evident in the way he is able to structure the stage mechanism effectively and how at times allows the text to speak for them and to look at their own workings and methodology. He employs a language that is often pungent, clear and sharp, pushing the spoken word to its limits and interfering them with pregnant silence and that only someone with an intimate inwardness with theatre can." (*Choudhuri, Asha Kuthari p.105*)

The drama was first conceived as a radio play and after its success; the stage description of this play was completed. That is the reason, it's a full of music. The very significant and characteristic is the music that accompanies the uncouth *hijra* songs accompanied by the archetypal applause of the hands. There is no pace or example in the songs of the *hijras* as they have no proper music training. Dattani has used this harmony to bring it closer to reality and give it a typical Indian 'hijra-effect'. The drama has particular sound effects that are well-designed and are required to stick the concentration of the spectators to the play. Even the minute sounds like the whirring of fan, rustle of paper, hitting of sticks on prison bars, striking a match, throwing of coins, zipping of a bag, starting of car etc. are

taken care of to provide all a sensible touch. In addition, in a radio play, the achievement lies in manipulating the sounds at the right instance. Dattani is an expert in such techniques and he has portrayed it extremely fruitfully in this play.

Dattani by dedicating the entire drama to the *hijra* reason has brought the edge to the centre; the underdogs to the forefront. He has decided them and spectators who never thinks or has no concern concerning the *hijras*. He is not only advocating their cause but also underlying the fact that what they need is not pity or understanding but sympathetic and concern. The usual rules and norms are challenged and the insincere social system is uncovered. Dattani sensitizes the viewers with the issue without being instructive and the audience is made to think of the state of relationships of the *hijras*. The drama portrays not the tragedy of the *hijras* alone but the tragedy of the whole political, legal and social arrangement of India. It is the society that acts as the scoundrel and Dattani is ruthless in exposing such insincere society. It is attributed:

“Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties, his characters encounter, instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and assumptions. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for all of us.” (*Mortimer, Jeremy p.3*)

To Sum up, we can say that Mahesh Dattani’s play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* raises a lot of questions about *hijra* individuality, their establishment, connotations, their social satisfactoriness and acceptability. They are the ‘invisibles’ in the society, the lowest of the low on the steps of social hierarchy. They face a twice risk as they are the victims of natural world as well as of the society. The prejudice against them is even inferior to the class or caste or religious bias. They are not even recognized as the members of the society. There is an atmosphere of disgust and have an aversion to related to them. Their doubts and frustrations are underlined in the drama. They are human beings but voiceless, no sympathies, no love, no justice and most likely no expectation of adequacy in the society. Dattani’s plays do not end. They are just preambles of the advancing complexities that are yet to be faced. Mahesh Dattani’s plays show different attitudes that society has towards anybody who is different or who is at the lower end of the political balance. These subaltern sexualities face threat or aggression because of their position in the society that are often overlooked in registering their lawful claim through literature politically and socially without a voice to be heard. Dattani is narrating the oppose claims of the ‘subaltern sexualities’ in a society that promise more in the name of democracy and freedom. His plays portray the social space of violence faced by ‘subaltern sexualities’ and theatrical validity gets transferred to rightful social response.

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