

MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE: PORTRAYING THE INVISIBLE HIJRA MINORITY

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ABSTRACT

Hijras (Eunuchs) in India have practically no respectable public identity. They have no acceptance and no protection from prejudice and abuse. The discrimination against them is often translated into violence. The main factor 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 ostracism, isolation and contempt. Politically, legally and socially the community of hijras is marginalized and victimized. The invisible clutches of social forces do not permit the hijras to carve their own design beyond 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 focused in the play who secretly marries the son of a minister and has to bear dire consequences. The role of the police, politicians and the society as a whole is questioned.

Keywords: Hijras(Eunuchs), genders, unacceptable, invisible, marginalized, victimized.

Mahesh Dattani, a Sahitya Academy Award winner playwright from India, in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* has spotlighted the plight of the *hijras* in the Indian society. Having a recorded history of more than 4,000 years, the *hijra* community is deprived of several rights under the civil law because the Indian law recognizes only two sexes. They are isolated and segregated and constitute an 'invisible minority' within the society. They are the neglected 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 considered as the 'chosen of God' and the curse by them cannot be revoked. The author has ironically portrayed this aspect that would not have otherwise received any attention, for any matter related to the *hijras* is of no importance to anyone. For many Indians – both upper and middle class – *hijras* exist at the periphery of their concern, making themselves visible only on certain occasions. Dattani is probably the first playwright who has written a full length play about them. For the very first time they get a depiction in the theatre as human beings with their individuality who crave 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)

It is a protest play against 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 neutral gender. Dattani underlines the fact that other than the social customs and bindings, the *hijras* have a 'self' that longs for dignity and when it is denied the same, it tries to break free of such customs. When they protests, most of the times their voice is suppressed 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 was broadcast on BBC Radio 4, on January 9, 1999 as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* and was first performed on stage at Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC Production & The Madras Players on 6 August, 1999. It is probably one of the best plays of Dattani that discusses the socio-psychological crisis of the *hijras* who are torn between the social taboos and their personal desires. It dramatizes the conflicts, anguish, dilemmas, insecurities, fears and frustration of the *hijra* community that is granted no honourable social space. In the first 'voice-over', Uma clears many doubts regarding the *hijras* and their social positioning:

"Case 7. 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 going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, 'Men and women, turn back.' Some of his male followers 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 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 rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons'." (CP I pp. 10-11)

The play has a very strong exposition and we come across Uma Rao, a teacher from Bangalore University, who is wife of the Jail Superintendent, the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and daughter of a Vice-chancellor. She belongs to a reputed section of the society and she is writing her thesis on class-gender-based power implications. She is a model for those women who wish to establish their individual identity in the male dominated society. Instead of any conventional cases of domestic violence and dowry deaths, she is

interested in a *hijra* (Kamala) murder case for which one of the *hijra* of her community, Anarkali, has been arrested. The police had no proof against Anarkali but as Suresh puts it, “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 p.33) There is no separate prisons for the *hijras* and she is put in the male cell. The play reveals the chain of injustices that a *hijra* has to encounter in the society that has inborn bias against them. Anarkali is physically, mentally, verbally and sexually abused in the lock up but nobody bothers about her. She herself is fed up with the false sympathies of the journalists who come to meet her to get a different type of news. She even refuses to meet Uma at first as she mistakes her for a journalist. But Uma is able to win her confidence and assures her of her release. She is the mouthpiece of the playwright and Dattani has projected an image of modern Indian woman through her who fights against the traditional useless values and questions the patriarchal system. It is attributed:

“Dattani credits her with intelligence, sensitivity and determination enabling her to fulfil the task. Thus she becomes the agent of change. This social agent is cauterised 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.” (George, Miruna p.147)

She is not only sincere to her research only but also towards the cause of *hijras* that she has undertaken and works tirelessly to achieve that. Gradually Uma gets so much concerned with the *hijra* cause that her research gets subordinated and she starts thinking of leaving her research. Her conversation with her guide on the phone reveals: “I am wondering whether I could leave out the case study on the *hijras*... Well, it all seems a little too sordid and I find it more and more difficult to do through research...” (CP p. 28)

Uma after her meeting with Anarkali, decides to visit Champa, the head *hijra* and ponders over the nature of *hijra* community and their isolation. Uma (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 extortionists? And why do they not take singing lessons?” (CP 16-17)

Champa, the head *hijra*, who lives behind Russel Market in Shivajinagar is the only person who can bail Anarkali out because nobody else would care. She does not have enough money to get her released on bail. Uma borrows Fifty Thousand rupees from her father. She tells a lie to her father while borrowing money and gives it to Champa for Anarkali’s release. Her visit to Champa’s house reveals the remoteness of the *hijras* from the social stream. Here Dattani has exposed the multiple layers of realities that co-exist in the Indian society. The reality of *hijra* existence is invisible to the society. Isolated and humiliated, they are considered as the lowest of the low, but they crave for love and family. The invisible chains of the society deny them family and love. Those who try to break free have to face dire consequences. The same thing happened with Kamla, who loved Subbu and secretly married him, but was eventually murdered on the bidding of Mr. Sharma, who is an influential politician and Subbu’s father.

“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* who sing and dance at weddings and births – Subbu produces a gun and kills himself.” (CP Notes on the play p. 3)

The play appears more like a detective fiction as the theme of the main plot consists of the investigation 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 cleverly weaves the net of suspense to keep the audience on the edges of their seats. The play is not only about the murder investigation of a *hijra* but also about their social positioning and the social setup where a *hijra* cannot crave his feelings and emotions beyond the patterns and boundaries recommended by the society. These individuals face threat or violence because of their position in the society. The play depicts the social space of hostility faced by them and the vindictive 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 a

sense of isolation within given contexts. That's what makes us individual." (The Hindu)

Various characters are shown interacting with the *hijras*. They have their pre-established notions of hatred regarding the *hijras* and do not want to change those ideas. It is Uma alone who empathises with them and fights for their justice. Suresh, Uma's husband regards them all as 'degenerated men' who never speak the truth. Munuswami, Salim and Mr. Sharma have similar thoughts too. What makes the tragedy of the *hijras* more intense is that they are used to this hatred expressed towards them and have accepted and compromised with the plight of their lot. Their interaction with the general society and other individuals does not lead to any kind of happiness. 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 dilemma that Anarkali faces in jail is whether to tell the truth that none would believe or to bear everything silently. If she keeps silent, she will be convicted for Kamla's murder, a crime that she has not committed. But if she speaks out the names of the murderers, she will be surely killed by those influential people. Finding herself in a checkmated position, she resigns to fate till Uma turns up by chance in the jail. The voice-over of Uma reveals the social-setup that allows them 'no voice' and extends no compassion:

"Uma (voice-over). They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people..." (CP I p.42)

Subbu's reluctance to marry the girl of his father's choice and then his suicide during his marriage shows that he suffers from a guilty conscience and his intense love for Kamla. The photograph of his marriage with Kamla and the presence of the *hijras* at his new marriage party move him so much that he snatches the gun from Suresh and shoots himself. He pays for the sins of his father.

Uma-Suresh relationship gives another dimension to the plot of the play. While Uma is a passionate and enthusiastic lady, Suresh is a practical person. He knows the influence of the people like Mr. Sharma who is a minister and is on duty to protect him and check the security on Subbu's marriage. He knows that Anarkali is innocent but uses her as a scapegoat. He is more interested in pleasing his seniors than in protecting the law. While Uma works selflessly to bring the culprits to justice, Suresh is out to protect them from public disgrace. At home, he argues with Uma regarding his health check up as the doctors had given Uma the clean chit regarding her fertility. He argues and ultimately declines Uma's request to have a test of his sperm count as this request hurts his male ego.

Mahesh Dattani is a great theatre craftsman. He uses different techniques in different plays to make his play forceful and appealing. In this play he uses the voice-over technique to bring the audience round to his ideas. Many doubts and myths regarding *hijras* and the sequence of events that happened are cleared in the voice-overs of Uma. Voice-over is similar to the soliloquy. The only difference between soliloquy and voice-over is that in soliloquy, the character comes to the front of the stage and expresses his ideas to the audience and the other characters of the play remain ignorant of the views of that particular character. But in the voice-over, the stage is solely occupied by the character giving the voice-over and there is no other character present on the stage. It is a technique used by the dramatist to change the scene and is like a fill up when the other characters are getting ready for the next action. But it is a very useful fill up where the off stage action is reported or some very important information is to be revealed to the audience which cannot be given in the regular action of the play.

The dialogues and words of the play are pointed, crisp and functional. Some of them are taken directly from the *hijra* vocabulary. Dattani uses very bold language in the play; language that a traditional Indian society does not relish publically. But that is to make the audience have a peep into the humiliation and disgrace that *hijras* face daily. One does not have to read between the lines. Dattani is always praised for his quality of expressing the truth in its naked and bitter form. He knows the theatre requirements and writes accordingly. 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 themselves 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 play was first conceived as a radio play and after its success, the stage version of this play was made. That is why, it is full of music. The most important and typical is the music that accompanies the coarse *hijra* songs accompanied by the typical clapping of the hands. There is no rhythm or pattern in the songs of the *hijras* as they have no formal music training. Dattani has used this music to bring it closer to reality and give it a typical Indian ‘*hijra*-effect’. The play has special sound effects that are well-designed and are required to glue the attention of the audience 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 give everything a realistic touch. Moreover, in a radio play, the success lies in manipulating the sounds at the right instance. Dattani is an expert in such techniques and he has portrayed it very successfully in the present play.

Dattani by dedicating the whole play to the *hijra* cause has brought the margin to the centre; the underdogs to the forefront. He has granted them an audience who never thinks or has no concern regarding the *hijras*. He is not only advocating their cause but also underlying the fact that what they need is not pity or sympathy but understanding and concern. The traditional rules and norms are challenged and the hypocritical social setup is exposed. Dattani sensitises the audience with the issue without being didactic and the audience is made to think of the state of affairs of the *hijras*. The play portrays not the tragedy of the *hijras* alone but the tragedy of the whole political, legal and social system of India. It is the society that acts as the villain and Dattani is ruthless in exposing such hypocritical 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 conclude, we can say that Mahesh Dattani’s play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* raises many questions regarding *hijra* identity, their constitution, connotations, their social acceptability and tolerability. They are the ‘invisibles’ in the society, the lowest of the low on the steps of social hierarchy. They face a double jeopardy as they are the victims of nature as well as of the society. The bias against them is even worse than the class or caste or religious bias. They are not even recognised as the members of the society. There is an aura of disgust and dislike related to them. Their fears and frustrations are underlined in the play. They are human beings with no voice, no sympathies, no love, no consolations, no justice and probably no hope of acceptability in the society.

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