

Marginalization of the Invisible Minorities in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around The Fire*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani in his remarkable play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* focuses on the pathetic plights of the Hijras (transgender) in India. The play develops as Uma Rao, professor of Sociology proceeds with her thesis on hijra community. The mystery about the murder of Kamla, a transgender gets unfolded then. Anarkali, another hijra is arrested as the murderer of Kamla. As a prisoner, Anarkali is ill-treated by the male prisoners in the jail. Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of police also treats her badly. He addresses her as "it" instead of 'he' or 'she'. Uma Rao only finds who the real murderer of Kamla is. It's none but the father of Subbu, Mr. Sharma, a powerful politician. His only son deeply fell in love with the transgender Kamla and secretly married her without the knowledge of his father. As a powerful politician, Mr. Sharma unable to tolerate this, arranges for the death of Kamla. The society knows who the real murderer is but even then power and money makes law and justice deaf and dumb.

Keywords: Hijras, sad plight, ill-treated, Kamla, Anarkali, Uma Rao, invisible minorities, Injustice, denial of rights

Dattani - A Daring Playwright

India's most daring, creative, inventive and notable playwright is Mahesh Dattani. He never hesitates to highlight the taboo subjects in his plays. Most of his plays have been categorized as problem plays. He was born on August 7, 1958, in Bangalore, Karnataka. In the early 1980s, Dattani joined Bangalore Little Theatre and participated in workshops in acting and directing plays. He founded his own company 'Playpen' for innovation in Indian English plays. His play *Final Solutions* won him the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. *Mango Souffle* won the Best Motion Picture Award at the Barcelona Film Festival in 2002.

Among his contemporary dramatists- Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Girish Karnad, Dattani is different in his concern for the marginalized groups of society, be they women, incest children, homosexuals or eunuchs. Through his plays, Dattani tries to raise those fringe issues which have not been dealt so boldly by other writers earlier in India. His writings are the projection of the 'here' and 'now' of modern contemporary Indian society, of his own life and of others too.

Seven Steps Around the Fire

This paper is a deep analysis of Dattani's play ***Seven Steps Around the Fire***. It is a Radio play. It was

broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on January 9, 1999 with the title *Seven Circles Around the Fire*. This play was first performed on 6 August 1999, at Museum Theatre in Chennai by MTC Production and The Madras Players. The play deals with the socio-psychological crisis of the transgendered people. It highlights the conflicts, anguish, dilemmas, insecurities, fear, and frustrations of the Hijra people in India.

Invisible Minorities

I attempt to show the sad and pathetic plights of the hijras in India. The term 'Hijra' comes from Urdu. The writer tries to bring forth how this section of society remains unheeded in terms of their existence, identity, and their rights. The writer did not confine himself in projecting their pathetic condition only but he provokes the people to think about this burning issue and make them aware of the injustices being done to them in our society.

The hijras are neither men nor women. They hold a different gender. They have defective chromosomes.. The scientific reason behind the birth of a hijra is that there is an abnormal level of sex hormones during foetal development. Thus, they are neither completely male nor female. Most of the eunuchs never exhibit a sexual orientation towards males or females and they label themselves as the third gender. But they have got the

tendency to associate themselves with the female gender only. The society only on the basis of their defectiveness treats them rudely and cruelly. 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 curse them. They are considered as the 'choice of God' and the curse by them cannot be revoked. For many Indians - both upper and middle class - hijras exist at the periphery of their concern, making themselves visible only on certain occasions. And this cruelty does not end only at the physical level; but at all levels.

Mahesh Dattani gives a chance to the hijras community to articulate their feelings and predicaments in the English theatre, through his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Mahesh Dattani presents the harsh reality and the status of the hijras community, presenting how they are marginalised by the society.

Dattani has used ten characters in the play for the first time. Generally there are six or seven characters in his other plays. All the characters - Uma Rao, the protagonist is a professor of Sociology, Suresh Rao the Jail Superintendent, husband of Uma Rao, Munsamy the Constable, Mr.Sharma the Minister, Subbu the son of Minister, Salim, PA to the minister, Kamla, a beautiful hijra, Anarkali her sister, Champa, leader of the hijras contribute to the development of the play. The whole play revolves around the mystery of the murder of a beautiful hijra named Kamla, who secretly married a minister's son. The role of the police, politicians and the society, is questioned by the author.

Marginalised Minorities

The main objective of this play is to explain how variedly the world treats the hijra community, through the characters of Uma Rao and Suresh Rao. Uma Rao is a Ph.D. scholar of Sociology and her thesis was on gender based violence. Uma Rao is very slow in employing quite unconventional means to uncover the truth behind a murder in the city's hijra community and help a hijra, Anarkali to present herself innocent. Uma Rao is extremely kind-hearted and feels for the transsexuals. Through her academic pursuit, she gets emotionally related to the

eunuch community and feels sorry for the condescending attitude of the society towards them. Her sweetness towards the transsexuals is noted when she addresses them as 'she' rather than 'it'. Uma Rao is considerate, kind and honest. She can't act against the call of her conscience. She boldly makes search for truth, as she respects even the rejected transsexuals. She treats them exceptionally well and is more conscious in treating them as humans rather than transgender.

The other major character, Suresh Rao is Uma Rao's husband. He is the chief Superintendent and has high expectation of reaching the position of his father as Police Commissioner. Suresh Rao presents extreme hollowness of Indian patriarchal society. Despite being highly qualified and educated, he disrespects the transgender (hijra community). He treats Anarkali, the transgender prisoner, with insult and strongly believes that all the hijras are mere liars. His rudeness towards transsexuals is noted when he addresses them as 'it rather than 'she'. She is beaten up by all the male prisoners.

SURESH RAO : How do you know?

UMA RAO : She told me....Munuswamy brought her into your office just as you instructed.

SURESH RAO: (Gets up) Good (Goes towards the bathroom) Don't believe a word of anything it says. (5) The attitude of Suresh Rao and Uma Rao towards Anarkali merges from the above mentioned dialogues. Suresh Rao was cruel against Anarkali. Superior education and position do not make him rational or reasonable or compassionate. He even opposes Uma Rao's humanitarian attitude towards Anarkali is evident from the beginning till the end. She is of the view that Anarkali should not be rejected respect and love just because she is a third gender. The contrast between the husband and the wife is quite striking. Suresh's words have no effect on Uma Rao. Uma Rao is an idealist who believed that Anarkali was innocent. She was ready to help her in every possible ways. The hypocrisy of administration is exposed on numerous occasions in the play. Authorities count hijras as neither male nor female and address them with the phrases like 'it' and 'this thing'; they detain them in the male section of the jail. Police arrest Anarkali without having any proof against her in the murder case of Kamla.

They are of the opinion that no one will voice for the invisible minorities.

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