

A Critical Analysis Of The Sufferings Of Hijra Community In Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around The Fire.

Riyaz.Mohammad¹ & K. K. Sunalini²

Assistant Professor, Srkr Engineering College, Chinaamiram, Bhimavaram, A.P, India and Research Scholar in the department of English at KLU, Vaddeswaram, Guntur, A.P, India.

Associate Professor in the Department of English at KL Deemed to be University, Vaddeswaram, Guntur, A.P, India.

Abstract

It is imperative that Hijras (Transgenders/Eunuchs) in India face severe insulence and it is because the society doesn't accept their very existence and treat them like an alien community which doesn't even deserve to live among and along with the other two accepted genders (Male and Female). Mahesh Dattani is the first Indo-English playwright who has won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award and holds the pride as the only Indian dramatist who has increased his repute by venturing to pierce deep into the unexposed and untouched issues. He has been very successful in developing the plots which deal with the sufferings of the alienated and underrated groups of society and making his mark in the hearts of his audience by calling attention to the emotional pathos of the downgraded and undervalued sections of the society. This paper is an attempt to analyze the sufferings of Hijra community who are considered untouchable and treated with least respect. It also depicts the causes for the deprivations, alienation and hostilities which make Hijras feel excluded from the society and Dattani's bold representation of these factors in the play.

Keywords: Hijra, deprivation, social injustice, suppression, untouchable

It is quite discouraging to know that even after reaching to a stage where an electric machine can handle the jobs which a man can do, and achieving advancements in almost all areas ranging from technical to the social domains, we still find issues that are left untouched and unaddressed in the contemporary modern Indian context. Apart from the issues concerning women and their empowerment, one group that has always been treated as untouchable in India is the Eunuch's group. They are considered extremely inferior and very badly looked down upon. They are not given any acceptance or any sort of respect and security. Their lives are always at stake and even if a dead body of an Eunuch is found along the high way roads or at the rail tracks, no one bothers to take care of whose body it is or shows interest in knowing what has caused his death. This is the most insolent treatment given to them which drives them develop the feelings of prejudice which will eventually take the form of violence.

It is imperative that Eunuchs in India face severe insulence and it is because the society doesn't accept their very existence and treat them like an alien community which

doesn't even deserve to live among and along with the other two accepted genders (Male and Female). Only male and female are given social acceptance, privilege and status and Eunuchs who don't belong to either of these, have to face social ostracism and contempt. They are not even allowed to enjoy or claim the basic legal rights. This pathetic underprivileged community are fully suppressed and completely prohibited from being claimed as individuals who are no inferior to either male or female community. Mahesh Dattani, the master of unveiling the untouched and hidden elements of our society, makes an attempt to be the voice of Hijras and unfolds the convoluted intricacies of their lives. This play deals with the life of a hijra who is brutally murdered for being the love of the son of a minister. Dattani has tried to elevate how the strong sections of the society can entangle the weaker by exploiting their innocence and getting them involved in the cases falsely and scapegoat them.

Although humans choose different paths and believe in different philosophies, the basic human tendency strives towards achieving enlightenment and emancipation. There have been many attempts by the greatest philosophers and creative writers to build the healthiest and most conducive society through their works in order to develop compassion, love, affection and empathy among the people for the deprived and weaker sections of the community who have been exploited and deprived of their basic rights to lead a happy, dignified and respectable life. Ever since the dawn of civilization, man has always shown his malicious nature and tried to be superior to those who are low in rank, caste, economic status, religion, gender, grade, region and so on. Hijras have been very badly treated and been victimized for social exclusion. Umair et al in their '*Factors affecting the Social exclusion of Eunuchs (Hijras) in Pakistan*' opine that Socially-excluded people or groups of people are incapable to take part in social mainstream activities. There are some factors involved in social exclusion: poverty; subordination in social identities, e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, and gender; social places (refugees, migrants); demographic features (educational, occupation level); and health conditions, e.g. disability, stigmatized diseases, such as HIV and AIDS. (2278)

To demolish this cruel element in an individual and help the deprived get due respect, many movements have taken place at regular intervals and the efforts of post-colonial poets and critics are quite remarkable as they have tried in all possible ways to assert the fact that every human irrespective of the gender has equal rights to enjoy the freedom and help the vast majority of people get rid of the unbearable oppression and humiliation they have been bearing with since ages.

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indo-English playwright who has won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award and holds the pride as the only Indian dramatist who has increased his repute by venturing to pierce deep into the unexposed and untouched issues. He has been very successful in developing the plots which deal with the sufferings of the alienated and underrated groups of society and making his mark in the hearts of his audience by calling attention to the emotional pathos of the downgraded and undervalued sections of the society.

His plays have focused on many burning issues such as woman suppression and identity crisis in *Tara*, Agony of cancer patients in *Brief Candle*, problems of homosexuals in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Psychological struggle of a woman who is a victim of incestuous relation in *30 days in September* and so on. The most striking feature of his plays is the variegated range of themes that he deals with in his writings. Through his play *Seven Steps around the Fire*, he has again made another bold attempt to turn the spotlight on the plight of the hijra community in the Indian society where these people are completely looked down upon.

In order to understand the play well, it is significant to have some basic knowledge about who Hijras are and what their plight is. The term 'hijra' has been originated from the urdu language, which is a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic and this has a meaning 'Neither male nor female'. There are many age old stories about their origin. One of them is when Lord Rama had to leave his place and to cross river to go on exile in the forest, all of his disciples of his town followed him. Touched greatly by their affection for him, Rama requested them to go back to their place by saying 'men and women, turn back. This request from Rama puzzled many of his followers and some of them did not understand what to do. They could neither disobey nor leave him. So they have decided to sacrifice their masculinity and become neither men nor women, and followed Lord Rama to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them.

The Hijras have a long history of more than 4000 years. They held important positions at courts and various facets of administration during Mughal-era India. The custom of inviting the Hijras to marriage and birth day functions where they sing and dance is prevalent in various parts of India. Their presence and their blessings are considered holy and their anger and causing trouble to them is treated as the most unholy deed as, it is believed, the curse of Hijras is very powerful and cannot be revoked. The meaning of the word 'Eunuch' is 'castrated man' and they used to be kept as in-charge of a harem and also for the chambers of women for the smooth management. Although Hijras are sexually not potent and are unfit for the same, they are physically very strong and have more strength than both male and female genders.

History gives sufficient evidences that Hijras are used by kings and have been directed to do prostitution. The traditional and well-established conventions don't allow Hijras to have respectable position in the society. These social norms don't even allow them to attend schools and permit them to gain professional skills to make a living for them. Also, they are not even treated well by the doctors which causes them to die without proper medical care since doctors consider it as their misfortune to attend them.

The play *Seven Steps around the Fire* is another bold attempt by Mahesh Dattani which holds the pride of first authentic representation of Eunuchs in the Indian theatre context. This play makes use of the Detective Genre and it is all about finding the murderers of a Eunuch called Kamala who secretly marries the son of a minister. The drama begins with

the character of Uma Rao , an enthusiastic scholar, and the wife of Suresh, the Jail Superintendent. Uma is pursuing her Ph.D in the field of sociology and strongly determined to produce highly qualitative research work. It is this penchant that drives Uma to develop great interest in the case of Kamala. She becomes successful in unveiling the secrets behind the murder of Kamala. Uma is highly resolute and chooses a very complex case of Kamala's murder for her research instead of moderate issues such as dowry deaths or domestic violence which are easier to deal with. Uma notices that Anarkali, one of the members of Eunuchs, is falsely involved in the murder of Kamala and she decides to raise the voice of the suppressed and most insulted group of our society by elevating the wicked nature of the superior sections. The strongest part of this play is the bold narration of the insisting nature of the societal norms which define how the interpersonal relations be and the consequences one needs to face if he/she goes beyond these set rules.

In order to meet the requirements of her thesis, Uma tries to meet the jail inmates in the office of the superintendent of police where she gets to know about a Hijra called 'Anarkali'. When Munuswami, an assistant of Suresh, who accompanies and escorts Uma, tries to warn Anarkali by using highly abusive and insulting language, Uma gets fascinated about the case of Anarkali and starts showing interest. Jeremy Mortimer firmly believes, "Mahesh Dattani's plays often project characters who are questioning their identity, and who feel isolated in some way.(Mehdi 405). Uma certainly feels isolated in her marriage, and this sense of isolation makes her empathize with Anarkali, the hijra she befriends. Uma is truly concerned about the pathetic life of Anarkali who is addressed with a pronoun 'it' which signifies the fact that Eunuchs have no gender identity unlike Male and Female who are represented by the pronouns 'He' and 'She'. As against to this basic societal taboo, Uma calls the Eunuch with the pronoun 'She' and through this expression Dattani has raised his voice against the traditional and orthodox taboos of society.

The tone and dominating body language of Munuswami clearly indicates that these Eunuchs are not even considered as human and are treated brutally. He doesn't hesitate to use profanities and warn Anarkali in the presence of Uma. His language is highly abusive which makes Anarkali behave stubbornly and obstinately with Uma since Anarkali mistakes Uma for a journalist. But, Uma who is very much concerned about the plight of Anarkali succeeds in enticing her to believe that she is not like others and has a true concern for her. The dialogue between Uma and Anarkali marks the end of Anarkali's fury hidden in the deepest clutches at the abyss of her heart. Anarkali feels relieved and confesses the fact that she has not murdered her sister and indeed she loves her the most. This confrontation of Anarkali intrigues the interest of Uma to probe into the murder of Kamala.

Dattani's elegance in presenting the unconventional ideas in the most convincing style can be noticed through the concerns of Uma, including her effort to help Anarkali get bail, have intended to prove the point that Eunuchs are no inferior to anybody and should be treated on a par with the other two genders. On the other hand, the tendency of Hijras to accept the ill-treatment and humiliation which they got accustomed to aggravates their pain

as this causes severe psychological stress. Their interaction with people and even with other Hijras of their community does not give them any happiness or content. Anarkali during her discussion with Uma, says that she has always tried to restrict Kamala from making love with others since she knows that their life is not meant like others and they are not supposed to make a family. If there are any of such attempts that will eventually result in pain and failure.

Dattani has shown strong determination and presented boldly the cruel side of the powerful people of our society through the character of Suresh, the Jail Superintendent. Dattani questions the dominating and haughty nature of the powerful people of society like Suresh who takes the decision of keeping Kamala in a male prison and even responds disdainfully when questioned by Uma about the same. The contemptuous response from Suresh makes it conspicuous that Hijras hold no value and nobody really bothers about what is happening in their life.

There are many reasons for the ill treatment of Hijras in the society. The primary factor is their sexual inability which makes them different from the other two major genders. Another important factor is their behavior. Most of them prefer to become sex workers and also demand money on the trains, foot paths and at railway and bus-stops. This is an indicative of despicable behavior which drives the people develop detest and hatred towards them. It further makes people not to be concerned about them. Although it is not known whether the usual behavior and life style of Hijras is a natural phenomenon or they are forced to lead such a life due to the inimical nature, the image that they hold in society is crucial for their being looked down upon.

The third factor is the financial status of these unfortunate downtrodden creatures. In a society, where individual respect and family stature is given utmost priority over the satisfaction and happiness of a person, Hijras are thrown out of their homes. Their parents find it extremely difficult and they, in order to avoid the sarcastic comments of others, do not hesitate to victimize their own blood which could not have taken a form without their force of action. When parents themselves don't want Hijras to be a part of their family, who else will allow them and offer work. Hence, they become and remain poor and poor in the world are not considered as humans at all and also deprived of all basic requirements.

There are many who have fought, wrote and raised their voice against the evils of society like untouchability, poverty, racism and women emancipation etc., but it is Dattani who, in India, has presented the pains of the third gender of the society in the most open eye-opening and thought provoking manner. And this forms the fulcrum of his writing style through which he, in this play, depicted a human's struggle for identity and a respectable place in the society and the highly unbearable pain that it causes. Commenting 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. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure, tires to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order. “ (Agarwal 34)

The main theme of the play is exclusion and the resulting consequences. Dattani has been rebellious in his tone and questions the conservative norms set by the elitists of the society. Dattani has always preferred to choose the hidden concepts and made an attempt to prove that apart from the social customs and bindings, every member of the society is equal as far as his rights are concerned. He concentrated his energies on the delineation of the lives of gays, lesbians, or eunuchs who in revolt against the central laws of the society and striving hard to get dignity and to get rid of the customs which curb their freedom. Dattani has made this play in such a way that once read can't be easily forgotten. Bijay kumar Das opined “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.” (Kumar Das 17).

This is perhaps known as one of the best plays of Dattani where the delicacies of socio-psychological crisis of Hijras have been eloquently expatiated by using the exquisite dramatic dialogues. Dattani has shown great skill and a deep understanding of the struggle of Hijras who are bifurcated between the social norms and their personal interests. When Uma shows sisterly concern towards Anarkali, the words of Uma deeply pierces into the deepest clutches of Anarkali and starts showing indelible influence. Anarkali really likes and responds “If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister”. She expresses her doubts, “They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail”. This indicates the weak and helpless condition of Hijras and their suffering, insecurities and fears. Anarkali is deeply touched by the sympathetic and sisterly concern shown by Uma and reveals her about their neglected dwelling place and asks her to meet Champa, the head care taker of Hijras.

The play gets pace when Uma meets Champa. Initially, Uma is not comfortable and nervous about meeting Champa but her interest to investigate the real murderer of Kamala makes her resolute and confident. When Uma asks Champa regarding the sisters “Anarkali and Kamala”, the reply from Champa “We cannot speak .. when we want to speak nobody listens when we cannot speak” (Dattani 2005, 53) shows the intense perception of Dattani and also the sublimity of selection of words which express the fervent passion to explain the agonies of Hijras, the flickering of hope extinguished in the smoke of self-abandonment. Champa's words “There is no world for hijra other than the one we make for ourselves” signify the fact that they are always in dire need of our concern, they do want to lead a happy and comfortable life although they are marginalized.

In order to help Anarkali get bail, Uma borrows money from her father and she believes that only Champa can do that. When she goes to Champa's place to hand over the money to her, she gets to know about the abyss of loneliness, the result of the social

exclusion, that these Hijras experience. The abode of Champa and its ambience, which is quite different from the normal home, symbolizes the chaotic conditions and unkempt life style of this unsophisticated community. This makes her understand, although they are living next to our streets, they are far away from the reach of enjoying true freedom since they are not fully accepted by the society. It is imperative that if Hijras try to gain the freedom and dare to lead a life like others, they will have to face severe repercussions. This is what happened in the case of Kamala, who made love with Subbu, the son of Mr. Sharma, who is an influential politician and married him. But Kamala's happiness didn't long last since her relationship with Subbu was not accepted by Subbu's family and Kamala was burnt to death. This shows how easily one can take liberty with the lives of Hijras. There is no one who bothers about their life and they don't have a family or a care taker. The craft This agony and anguish of Hijras Their lives are always at stake and no one feels concerned even if they are beaten brutally in the public streets.

Dattani strongly condemns the irresponsible attitude of people who can easily ignore the incidents where Hijras are beaten brutally and ill treated. The society, which strongly advocates equality, freedom and righteousness for all individuals, fails to accept Hijra community and give them equal importance as given to male and female sections. This hypocritical society doesn't allow Hijras to enjoy family life but want their presence in their family marriage and birthday functions. Dattani is adept in elevating the double standards of society and in this drama; it is Uma who endeavors to expose the other side of rich and ruling class. When Uma understands that Salim is involved in the murder case of Kamala, she tries to meet Salim, who is a worker of Subbu's father. When she reaches to Mr.Sharma's place, she finds Subbu there and he is restricted by his father from having any discussion with Uma. This action of Mr.Sharma makes Uma understand that there are big hands involved in this case.

The climax of the play is a marriage ceremony of Subbu who is engaged to a girl of equal stature which the society accepts and Mr.Sharma feels proud of. Unfortunately, Champa and Anarkali attend the function and their appearance disturbs Mr.Sharma who is extremely concerned about his reputation. The dancing of Champa and Anarkali with the image of Kamala disturbs Subbu as this brings back all the beautiful memories that he had with Kamala. As he is haunted by the memories of Kamala, he starts identifying Kamala with Anarkali and he reveals about his secret marriage with Kamala and her murder. Unable to get over the loss of Kamala, he picks up a gun to shoot himself. In order to appease his pain, Anarkali offers him a gift i.e. the photograph of Kamala and him. This, instead of pacifying, aggravates his anger and makes him go besmirch. He screams "Stay away, you killed her" and shoots himself. His death reveals the murder mystery of Kamala that both the politician and the police officer are responsible for it. Dattani mentions that the real cause of Subbu is not just his separation from Kamala and her death but his inability to speak against the restrictions of his father. Gill in his *Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps around the Fire : A Tale of Oppression* writes "the playwright seems to pose a significant question i.e. why our society

finds the Hijras fit to grace the important occasions like birth and marriage but does not find them fit to be our relations.” (139)

Dattani has showed that suppression of underprivileged communities will have highly devastating consequences. The struggle of Champa, Kamala and Anarkali in the drama is to get a respectable position and lead a comfortable life like others in the society by enjoying the family life. Dattani raises a question why Eunuchs be treated as underprivileged and advises that the natural deficiency should not be treated as their weakness and use it as a weapon to exploit them. Although there are many social scientists and reforming writers, Dattani is unique as his style of presentation is not just bold but thought provoking. He looks at all invisible elements of society from a very positive perspective and suggests healthy solutions to the sufferings. He strongly recommends that sincere concern, caring hand and human touch could reduce the pains and sufferings of deprived and downtrodden sections of society. Asha Kuthari Chaudhary writes: “The preoccupation with fringe issues forms an important element in Dattani’s work-issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage- quite literally”. With Dattani, this becomes the only way to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence” (Chaudhary 47)

It could be concluded that Dattani has made use of the medium of literature to raise questions regarding the invisible elements of society and in *Seven Steps around the fire* he has represented the voice of the most undertreated community of our society. It is not just a play that presents the pains of Hijras but brings forth the cruel, double standard and hypocritical nature of society that doesn’t allow Hijras to have equal role. This play shows the strong penchant of Dattani to bring about the radical changes and his sincere efforts to see transformation in the society from conservative to non conservative beliefs.

References

Aggarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani’s Plays : A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2011: 34. Print

Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Contemporary Indian writers in English. Mahesh Dattani*. New Delhi: Cambridge university press, 2008. print.

Das, Binay Kumar. *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2008: Print

Dattani, Mahesh. Preface. *Collected Plays*. New 2.Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays II*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. Print

Gandhi, Leela. *Post Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Mortimer, Jeremy, BBC. *Literary Review*. “Unmasking Our Worlds”, Quoted from *The Hindu*: Sunday, August 7, 2005, p. 3.

Spivak, Gayatri. *Subaltern Studies*. (ed.) R.Guha, Vol.I.Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Lakhwinder Singh Gill. "Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps around the fire : A tale of oppression" *International Journal of English Language and Literature in Humanities*, Vol V issue IV, pp 134-141, https://www.academia.edu/34272252/MAHESH_DATTANIS_SEVEN_STEPS_AROUND_THE_FIRE_A_TALE_OF_OPPRESSION, Accessed on 21/10/2019.

Umair Ahmed et all. "Factors Affecting the Social Exclusion of Eunuchs (Hijras) in Pakistan" *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 5 Issue 23, pp 2270-2284, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/14dd/39939c4c59ae334bf14c681e63bb8755dac5.pdf>, Accessed on 10/11/2019.