

THE PLIGHT OF THE HIJRA COMMUNITY IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE*

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Abstract

The marginalisation of the third gender in a heterosexual society is even more severe than the oppression of “the second sex” in a patriarchal system. Hijras as a community are subjected to systematic exclusion, discrimination and social ostracization. Mahesh Dattani’s Seven Steps around the Fire exposes the identity crisis and struggles of hijras, shedding light on their socio-political and economic marginalisation. The play critiques the rigid gender binary of Indian society, emphasising the suppression of those who do not conform to normative gender roles. This study employs Queer Theory and Gender Performativity (Judith Butler) to analyse the exclusionary structures that deny hijras full citizenship and human rights. The research follows a qualitative methodology, incorporating textual analysis of the play alongside insights from secondary sources, including sociological and legal perspectives on hijra identity in India. Through field-based observations and references to real-life struggles of hijras, the study contextualises Dattani’s portrayal within a broader socio-cultural framework. The hypothesis of this research suggests that Seven Steps around the Fire serves as a powerful commentary on institutionalized gender discrimination, revealing how the hijra community remains trapped in a cycle of marginalization despite legal recognition. The play challenges dominant gender narratives and urges for inclusivity and acceptance.

Keywords: Hijra identity, Gender performativity, Social exclusion, Mahesh Dattani, Queer theory.

Introduction

The hijra community in India has historically occupied a unique yet marginalized position within society. Despite being recognized in ancient scriptures and cultural traditions, hijras continue to face systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violence in modern India. The third gender exists in a liminal space, neither fully integrated into mainstream society nor

entirely accepted within traditional frameworks. Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* brings to light the struggles of hijras, exposing their socio-political and economic marginalisation while challenging the rigid gender norms of Indian society. Through the character of Anarkali, a hijra falsely accused of murder, Dattani unveils the deep-seated prejudices that continue to haunt this community.

In Indian society, gender identity is traditionally perceived within a binary framework, leaving no space for individuals who do not conform to male or female roles. Hijras, who identify as neither exclusively male nor female, have been historically subjected to systemic exclusion. Although they have been granted legal recognition as a third gender by the Supreme Court of India in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014), this legal acknowledgment has not translated into substantial social or economic change. They remain deprived of fundamental rights such as education, employment, healthcare, and housing, forcing many into begging or sex work for survival. Dattani's play portrays these realities by highlighting the challenges faced by hijras in a deeply patriarchal and caste-conscious society. The play's narrative structure, centered around the murder of Kamla, a hijra, reflects the violence and exploitation that the hijra community endures. Anarkali, another hijra, is falsely implicated in Kamla's murder, exposing the law enforcement system's inherent bias. Uma Rao, the protagonist and a research scholar, takes on the role of investigator, attempting to understand the socio-cultural realities of hijras. Through Uma's journey, Dattani forces the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about how hijras are treated in Indian society. The play critiques not just individual prejudices but also the institutions—legal, familial, and religious—that reinforce hijra subjugation.

This study applies Queer Theory and Gender Performativity (Judith Butler) to analyze the representation of hijras in *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Butler's theory suggests that gender is not innate but is performed based on societal expectations. In this context, hijras disrupt the conventional performance of gender, challenging the very foundation of heteronormativity. Their exclusion, therefore, is not merely social but ideological—rooted in the fear of disrupting a binary understanding of gender. Dattani, through his play, critiques this ideological rigidity and calls for a more inclusive society that recognizes gender diversity.

The research follows a qualitative methodology, including textual analysis of the play and secondary sources from sociology, gender studies, and legal perspectives. Through this framework, the study explores how *Seven Steps around the Fire* not only exposes hijra marginalization but also serves as an urgent call for social reform. By critically engaging with the play, this research aims to highlight the plight of the hijra community and advocate for a more inclusive and just society.

Oxford Learner's Dictionaries defines 'plight' as "a difficult and sad situation", Cambridge dictionary's definition of plight is "an unpleasant condition, esp. a serious, sad, or difficult one" therefore going through the definition the life of hijra especially in the context of India is difficult, sad and serious. Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* depicts the sad reality of the life of hijras. The playwright focuses the societal discrimination against the hijras their miserable economic conditions, their helplessness in getting justice under law.

The transgender human rights activists and the scholars have tried to demand a respectable and dignified life of hijras in society by alluding to the sacred scriptures. "Historically transgender persons were not so neglected or alienated as they are now. They were accepted as well as respected persons in Indian culture. In the mythological stories, the status of transgender persons can be found to be of admiration. This is proven by the fact that in many such stories, Hindu gods have appreciated their presence and, in many cases, taken upon themselves the role of the transgender person" (Mishra, 3). The presence of transwomen and transmen were present in scriptures where their existence were never challenged in ancient times, therefore the tradition of respect continued among the local inhabitants and they gave them their due share of respect and held them in high esteem. "There cannot be a better symbolic representation than Indian depiction of Lord Shiva as Ardhanarishvara, which is a fused reflection, a novel depiction of a transgender person. (Lal, 1999)... The concept of confluence of masculine and feminine energies is in the figure of Ardhanarishvara, the merged form of Shiva and his wife Parvati" (Mishra, 5). Bahuchara Mata is considered patroness of the hijra community. According to a mythological story a girl's husband never came to her consummate marriage. So the wife followed her husband in the forest and found him behaving like a hijra. Seeing her husband's condition she transformed herself into goddesses known as Bahuchara. She then curses her husband by saying that persons like him should castrate themselves and dress like women and worship her. During castration 'nirvana' the hijra invoke the goddess Bahuchara because she is the one of the central religious figures among hijras. "There are other stories too about Bahuchara Mata, and all are related to the emasculation, removal of genitalia of the protagonist of the story, dressing like woman and transformation of gender. Hence, she is worshipped by hijra cult (Mehta, 1945; Sheikh, 2010; Abbas & Pir, 2016; Dharmadhikari, 2015)" (Mishra, 7). "There is no recorded evidence of any system of male castration in ancient Vedic India. Castration among servants and slaves was only introduced into medieval northern India with the arrival of foreign Islamic rulers, sometime around the 11th and 12th centuries AD (Sharma, 1993; Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). During the reign of Mughal emperor Jahangir, there was widespread castration of slaves in Bengal. During Bhaktiyar Khilji's conquest of Bengal in 1205 AD a large number of slaves were castrated and supplied as eunuchs, and their presence in Bengal was noticed by Marco Polo during his visit to India in the late 13th century" (Mishra, 9).

“With the onset of British rule in India, things started changing for transgender persons. When the Britishers started having control over provinces (1757–1947), they started making laws and policies which were detrimental towards the transgender persons... As a result, the transgender community was forced to beg and get into prostitution.” In 1860 under the Indian Penal Code the hijras were branded as homosexuals and were always at risk of persecution. In 1871 the hijras were put into criminal castes. Their suffering knew no bounds because in the colonial era an attempt was made to erase the hijras. In 2009 the laws enacted by the British colonisers were revoked after 149 years of torture (Mishra, 11).

Being marginalized and discriminated the transgender persons fought for rights which should be guaranteed under law. The government of India enacted laws in due course of time to safeguard the rights of transgender people. “In 2014, the Supreme Court of India delivered a judgment following a written petition filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA). This judgment, popularly known as the NALSA judgment, was supported by prominent transgender activists like Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi. The judgment included directives for the legal recognition of people with non-binary gender identities and developed social welfare schemes such as reservations in State educational institutions and the public employment sector (Jain and Kartik 2020)”. “A praiseworthy characteristic of this judgment was that it recognized the diversity and fluidity of gender identities unique to India’s regional, cultural practices, and linguistic diversities”. “Right after the pronouncement of the judgement in NALSA v. Union of India the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was passed in both the houses of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha in 2019 and finally received the President’s accent and thus the bill was enacted. The Act allows the transgender persons to have a self perceived gender identity. The central government, under this act is directed to provide certain rights to the transgender people. These rights are as follows:- prohibition against discrimination, right of residence, employment, education, healthcare etc.’ In addition, the Act also allows for the constitution of a National Council for Transgender Persons. The National Council has been tasked with (i) advising the Central Government on the formulation of policies, programmes, legislation and projects with respect to transgender persons; (ii) monitoring and evaluating the impact of policies and programmes designed for achieving equality and full participation of transgender persons; (iii) reviewing and coordinating the activities of all the departments of Government and other Governmental and non-Governmental Organisations which are dealing with matters relating to transgender persons; (iv) redressing the grievances of transgender persons; and (v) performing such other functions as may be prescribed by the Central Government”.

With wedding mantras and the burning scene of Kamala, a good looking Eunuch who gets brutally murdered in mysterious circumstances the play is begun. Uma Rao, the academician who unravels the mystery of Kamla’s death meets Anarkali, eunuch in the mail

section of the central jail in the office of the central jail of Superintendent of Police. Uma asks Anarkali about the murder of Kamala, Anarkali tells how she could kill Kamal as she is sister to her. Munaswami, a constable beats Anarkali to accept Kamala's murder. Anarkali tells Uma that the murders of Kamala are very powerful not even her husband, who is he superintendent of police cannot do anything. She asks for twenty thousand to get her bailed out as she would die of police torture. Uma leaves the jail to meet Champa, a leader of all Eunuch community. Uma wanted to know the whole story of murder from Champa in exchange of the money which could be used to bail Anarkali. Meanwhile Salim comes and shouts at Champa to get some secret photographs. But Champa refuses to tell all the truths about Salim so Uma goes to Mr Sharma's house who is the chief minister and father of Sabbu to know more about Salim. Mr Sharma tells Uma that Champa and Anarkali might have given money to Salim to get killed Kamala. But Sabbu the minister's son denied his father's allegation and instead tells Salim is a good person. Mr Sharma invites her on his son's wedding. Sabbu is not happy with the marriage. Afterward Uma invites Anarkali and Champa to the minister's son's wedding for blessings. On the wedding day Sabbu sees a photograph of Kamala. He snatches the pistol of Uma's husband. After seeing the photograph he tells how she loved Kamala and reveals that his father is the murderer of Kamala. Finally, Sabbu's gather admits his guilt of murder and Sabbu kills himself. After the death police does not arrests anyone. The photograph which served as evidence was destroyed.

“Mahesh Dattani, a writer of fine intellect, does not hesitate to highlight the tabooed subjects. His plays have been categorized as the problem plays. The problems are related to the society and its functions that sometimes clash with the individual and create havoc in the lives of the concerned person. His plays basically focus on the plight of the marginalised class of the society. He follows the path of Ibsen and Shaw. Their writings inspired him a lot and he started writing for the masses...There is no doubt that Dattani's plays are an appeal to the readers to amend their attitude towards these unfortunate people. There are characters from the weaker sections who show some grit in facing age-old tyranny of the powerful, but they too submit to the reality of power and wealth in the end. Uma also bends before this social reality. The plays depict this human psyche that is very difficult to change.” “I wondered where I could go. Society looks down on us. We don't get jobs. We are treated badly. To add to all this there is the nuisance caused by policemen and goondas” (Revathi 228). And, “This society does not look on me favourably. The legal system refuses to provide either facilities or assistance” (Revathi 230). And, “I desire to see our society and its legal system accept us as women, to accept all of us” (Revathi 230). “*Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a play devoted to the theme of the plight of hijras in our society. Uma the researcher, ruminates about the origin of hijras and their plight in the society in her ‘thought’ in the following words.”

The plight of hijras is multidimensional. It is no denying the fact that hijras are humans. They also fall ill. They have the right to visit doctors for treatment. But most of the time they are denied proper treatment. In this play it is well highlighted that at any cost they must not get treatment. There is a well established opinion that they do not fall ill. To justify this some people says that they clap when asking for alms and this activity helps them remain well physically with no illness. Anarkali is beaten in jail. She was wounded. She was not given any treatment in the jail. The hijras know that they might be rejected by doctors for treatment. Therefore, she treats herself with brandy. How could brandy heal wound. She suffers from wound.

There are notions in the society that hijras forcefully abduct or kidnap children from family of heterosexuals. In the play Champa tells Uma that “we did not kidnap your son. Ramu came to us of his own free will. If you want you can take your son away”. (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 254) Champa asserts on free will and defends the allegation that hijras do not abduct children.

Discussing a topic again again in the society makes the topic relevant and attracts attention. Therefore, the heterosexuals always try to shut all the doors of discussion about hijras. This is well evident in the play where constable Munswamy pleads Uma, “Madam, once again I request you to take up some other cases...Why do you want to bring this shame on your family madam?...I beg of you go home” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 235) Suresh the Superintendent of Police shows his admonitions regarding visiting hijras and pursuing research. He says, “Look, it is one thing I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don’t feel any compassion for them. They will take advantage”. (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 238)

One the other hand, the hijras fear to talk freely. They cannot tell the truth fearing telling truth might disrupt the environment of the heterosexuals. When Uma enquires about Anarkali and the murder of Kamala, Champa was reserved to utter the truth. Champa knew telling truth against the powerful persons in the society would land them in serious trouble. So, the hijras are bound either not to tell or tell lies only for their survival. The heterosexuals to a greater extent possess the right to not tell truth to hijras, they lie to hijras whenever they have to fulfill their own selfish desire. Hijras tell lies are stamped upon by Munswamy when he tells Uma that, “It will only tell you lies” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 234). And exactly in the same tune Suresh says, “Don’t believe a word or anything it says. They are all liars” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 237).

Anarkali and Champa do not believe Uma when Uma came to meet both of them and asked them the truth of the murder of Kamala. They fear that Uma is a journalist; she came to them disguised to get revealed the truth. Since they do not fit into the male and female binary, there is no separate jail for hijras. Anarkali was kept in jail with male prisoners. When asked

by Uma why Anarkali was kept with the male prisoners Suresh replies that the hijras are “as strong as horses” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 237).

We come to know from Uma about the origin of the term ‘hijra’. She says, “The term hijra, of course, is of a Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning ‘neither male nor female’ (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 239). “God Rama was in the forest to pass the river and go into exile. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, ‘Men and Women turn back’. Some of his men followers...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” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 229) Uma questioned about the hijras, “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 obsessed with wedding and ceremonies of childbirth?... Are they just extortionist? And why do they not take singing lessons?... (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 246). There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exceptions. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they esrn for family and love” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 239).

Thus, the playwright is well concerned with the plight of the hijras. He chose a story revolving around the life of hijras. How academic research can help spread knowledge and information in the society. The researcher comes to know the life and struggle of hijras in the play Uma also acts as a catalyst to rescue Anarkali the hijra from the serious charge of murder of a fellow hijra. The murderer is exposed at the end of the play though punishment under law is not meted out to the culprit. This shows how helpless the hijra community is.

The hijras trauma is that they do not endorse any place for themselves in society other than their own. Champa says, “There is no world for a hijra other than the one we make for ourselves” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 261). The hijras knows well that they are not called by people to do anything except in child birth and marriage and in few other occasions to see their performances. When Uma wanted to meet Anarkali she enquired, “Shall I come to sing and dance when you pass examination?” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 241). It was below Uma’s comprehension that she might be asked that way by Anarkali.

The consciousnesses of hijras are well aware of the subjugation that they are subordinate to men and women. Uma wanted to make Anarkali sister but she refused by saying, “If you were a hijra I would have made you sister...Where are you, and where am I?” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 242). Unequal treatment is meted out to the hijras in jail in comparison with the male and female. The police constable Munswamy thinks torturing hijras is his birthright. Munswamy hitting the bar orders, “Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 236). Then only other inmates begin to beat uo Anarkali. Apart from beating he uses slang for Anarkali. Munswamy says, “I will come inside and beat

you up, you worthless pig!” The playwright hints that in a prison Anarkali is tortured to give a blow job to one of the jailed male inmates. The prison is not safe for Anarkali as she says, “Please, sister! I will die here. Help me get out, then I will run away...(Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 243). They will kill me also if I tell the truth .If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 244).Whether a hijra should live or die is not a concern for the heterosexuals. Anarkali says, “One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 272).

Hijras are raising their voice to get a legal sanction on their marriage. Marriage is a choice. But the heterosexuals are obnoxious to the marriage of hijras. Thus, the hatred of Munswamy is reflected when he says, “Marry? Who would want to marry...? Tehee! What kind of people are there in this world?” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 263) Salim’s concern for his social status is evident when he appeals, “Madam, I beg of you! Do not bring so much shame to me and my family. I have two sisters to marry, and - and my parents” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 265). “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. ... All I want is - what they want.... To move on. To love. To live” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 282).

Hijras are denied human identity. This is well illustrated in the remark of Munswamy when he says, “She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't...If you don't mind me saying, what is the use of talking with it?” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 233). Suresh, the Superintendent of Police is reluctant enough to designate hijras as he or she instead he retorts by addressing them as being by saying, “I hope this being didn't give you any trouble” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 245). The time setting of the play is independent India where the constitution is supreme law and the Article 15 clearly states that no one should be discriminated on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. In the police custody Anarkali is denied human existence not only by the police constable but also by the Superintendent of Police. Again Suresh's words highlight how the heterosexuals get advantage over hijras when he tells Uma about the arrest of Anarkali “... we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. There hijras ... they cut off their balls ... they kill. It could be anyone of them” (Dattani, Collected Plays Vol. II 270).

Conclusion

The textual analysis of Mahesh Dattani’s *Seven Steps Around the Fire* backed by sociological understanding, gender studies, and legal perspectives can safely be inferred that the condition of hijras in the Indian context is really pathetic. Their marginalization is well portrayed in the play. The playwright highlighted that even after repeated legislation laws fails trebly to give the hijras a respectable position in the society. The civil society and the hijras have to go a

long way in their demand to be acknowledged as a fellow human being. Lack of education in the academic sphere and stigmatisation prevailing in the society needed to be addressed. Plays like *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a milestone in the academic field to open the eyes of academicians. The physiological structure and the psychological bending of hijras is to be understood by the vast majority of the binary of male and female.

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