

Social Realism in Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a dramatist who deals deal with the exploitation of the human body in society. Dittani depicts the neglected issues prevalent in the social milieu. He tries to present the society as if it is in the reality. Even in his subject matter he says that he writes about what he sees around and what concerns for common people. Dattani takes up the issues of homosexuality, discrimination of eunuchs, and exploitation of women in society. Seven Steps Round the Fire, the most popular radio play, focusses on the theme of eunuchs, their identity, their constitution and their connotation. Social realism has gone beyond from depicting the sufferings of working class men to discussing the sufferings of women and finally has now steered due attention towards the genderless. They are regarded as the invisibilized ones and are relegated to the periphery of the society. His realistic portarayal of human nature evokes both sympathy and empathy in the minds of readers. This paper attempts to give the realistic picture of the predicament of eunuchs and talks about their rights as human beings while analyzing the death of Kamala, a hijra through the protagonist Uma Rao, a research scholar.

Keywords : social realism, neglected issues, identity, women abuse, underrepresented, violence, genderless, discrimination, invisibilized etc.

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Introduction

Mahesh Dattani emerged as the first Indian dramatist to be conferred with the prestigious Sahitya Academi Award and is considered the most intellectually heavy weight playwright celebrated for his language and his depiction of characters. He often emphasizes vernacular language and this is what accounts for his growing reputation. The distinctive hallmark of the successful dramatist is to be able to develop rapport, to address to his/her audience in their mother tongue and to empathize with them.

He has handled such subject matters that were regarded as scandalizingly outrageous in the matrix of Indian culture in olden days. But still he does not hesitate to lift the lid on those touchy issues and even doesn't hold himself back from exhibiting the harrowing picture of the strained relationship and beliefs of antiquated society. Thus Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who is bold enough to work within a comparatively traditional dramatic technique to narrate a tale that is defiant and impactful without having a recourse to being over sentimental. The characters are taken from every walk of life or class-whether it an ordinary man or a high profile personality. His dramas have demolished the barricade that exists between the rich and the poor. In addition to this, he encompasses LGBT people and transgenders who are regarded as undesirable aliens in Indian context. He has effectively exhibited their profound distress, torment, exploitation, violence and inhuman treatment that are inflicted upon them in his plays. The subject matter of his dramas have grown into universal dimensions and he never restricts his themes to any creed, language, color or any particular section of the society.

Seven Steps Round the Fire, the most popular drama, dwells on the theme of eunuchs, their identity, their constitution and their connotation. In Where there is a Will Dattani portrays complicated modern urban family, his Do the Needful exposes the fact that the institute of marriage today has lost its sanctity and is nothing but a compromise to promote personal needs. Dattani's plays are marked by the social and political realities as well as unconventional and explosive themes such as man choosing dance as profession and homosexuality. He is touched to know the sad and pathetic story of child abuse, which reflected in his play 30 days in September. Dattani is Indian's first playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Akadani award. He wanted to use theatre as a powerful medium to bring about the social change. According to him, "Theatre is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre".

Seven Steps Around the Fire is one of the well-known radio plays of Mahesh Dattani. It was first broadcast as Seven Circles Around the Fire by BBC Radio 4 on

9 January, 1999. The play was first performed on stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC production and The Madras Players on 6 August 1999. The play unmasks the truth behind the murder of Kamala, a eunuch through Uma Rao, who is the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of the Chief Superintendent, Suresh Rao. Uma teaches Sociology in Bangalore University. She unearths the reality behind the murder of Kamala during working on her research paper titled "Class- and Gender- Related Violence". She meets the character of Anarkali, a eunuch in the jail and Champa, the head of the eunuch at her home. She also meets Salim, a servant of Mr. Sharma at Champa's house and gets at the bottom of the murder.

SOCIAL REALISM

Central to the Indian English fiction there has always been a dominant concern with social issues. Social realism focusses on capturing and reflecting faithfully the actual way of life. It attempts to portray external and internal reality. Wherever the playwright, Mahesh Dattani got a chance he readily maximized those resources and enriched his vision by focussing on social experiences. The play *Seven Steps Around The Fire*, can be seen as one of the most powerful plays on a definite social problem, that of the oppression of the eunuchs, also touching upon related problems. Dattani succeeds in highlighting the reality of the unacknowledged community through the characters of eunuchs. Their pent-up feelings and forbidden love by the society are observed gingerly and realistically in his plays.

The protagonist Uma Rao is an inspiration for those women who wish to establish their individual identity in the male dominated society. Eunuchs have practically no respectable public identity in India. They are not accepted and protected from prejudice, discrimination and abuse. The discrimination against them is devolves into violence.

In the play, Subbu Sharma, the son of a minister is married surreptitiously to Kamala, a eunuch. Society considers this as unusual especially, when it is connected to a high status person. When Subbu's father comes to know about this relation, he burns Kamala to death. To cover up, Anarkali, a eunuch is apprehended for her death. But a photograph of Kamala and Subbu with marriage garlands is exposed. To get this photograph, Mr. Sharma sends Salim, his bodyguard to Champa, the hijra's head, and Anarkali and threatens them. But he is able to get that photograph only after the death of Subbu on his wedding day. He has to pay such a great price for that photograph. Champa and Anarkali, both of them know the criminal of Kamala but do not tell Uma because they know very well that they have to face more

suffering but nothing would happen to the real criminal. Even the police are not ready to take any action against a reputed man like the minister and are puppets in his hands. After the suicide of Subbu, the police dismisses it as an accident and the photo of Subbu and Kamala is destroyed and nothing happens to the minister. Suresh Rao accepts before Uma that there is no evidence or proof against Anarkali. They arrested her only as a formality to shut the case. And even Anarkali is not treated humanely. Except Uma, all the other characters ill treat eunuchs. Uma calls Anarkali with the pronoun “she” but the constable Munuswamy calls her with the pronoun “it.

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munuswamy: (Chuckling). She! Of course it will talk to you.

We will beat it up if it doesn't (230 Dattani)

In prison Anarkali gets thrashed and ill-treated sexually by the fellow men in the cell. At first the concern of Anarkali towards Uma was not proper. But later it begins to flourish.

In Indian society man is not ready to accept his own weakness. Uma, the wife of Suresh Rao is childless. The title of the play gives significant symbols regarding the lives of the characters. The whole play revolves round the enquiry about the murder of Kamala by Uma. A eunuch is denied to marry or tread the seven steps around the sacred fire by the society and these seven steps around the fire leads to Kamala's murder. She is killed because of her clandestine marriage to Subbu. The fire which is the evidence of their marriage turns to be her destruction. In this way, the title of the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* is relevant in the tragedy, the ritual has to offer. The play begins with wedding mantras and the burning scene of Kamala and ends in the office of Superintendent Police. Munuswamy is the embodiment of the society, through him society mocks the eunuchs but through Uma the dramatist tries to defend eunuchs through Anarkali's care for her companion very much as such: Anarkali: I didn't kill her. She was my sister! (236)

Thus they are craving for human relationships. The word “sister” indicates the real sense of the eunuchs and their treatment towards others. In jail, Uma encounters the beating of fellow men on Anarkali and was deeply affected by it. So, she asks her husband why she has been with those men. Suresh smiles ironically towards Uma. And he also asks her not to believe a single word the things spoken by a eunuch.

Suresh: That is just the sort of name a hijra would fancy.

(chuckling.) Anarkal

Uma: Suresh, why is she in a cell with men?

Suresh: They are as strong as horses (220).

He has no sympathy over Anarkali and says:

Suresh: Look, it is one thing that I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel any compassion for them.

Suresh: They are all castrated men (22denn

Uma starts to investigate as to why all the rituals, freedom, marriage, all have been dennied to them. They are the dehumanized society. The Hindu culture has always afgorded them space but the treatment of that community in reality is completely opposite this. No one cares for their feelings and emotions; even the media is biased towards them. Being snubbed and ostracized by the society, they live as invisbilized aliens. They are stripped of all human traits and wind up being trampled by cold and lifeless society. As Uma introduces herself as a social worker and wants an interview of Champa, another eunuch who used to live with Anarkali and Kamala, Champa is almost astounded that they also belong to society. 'Please excuse me madam. I did not know that – you see us also as society, no?' (23)

At the investigation, Anarkali, calls Uma as sister and asks her to help her to bail out. The word sister, she used for Kamala and Uma has a force that they are in desperation of fostering a good relationship with others. But they were rewarded with mockery. Munuswamy, the constable, appointed by her husband for her protection was not interested in all these activities of his Madam. Because for him, investigating and helping a hijra was beneath his dignity. They were not to be looked upon as a being but an animal, to be beaten up and excluded from the society. In order to bail out Anarkali, Uma plans to get some money and decides to go to the place where the hijras head lives. Uma was in some kind of fear because of the hijras. Some of them were too fearful. Uma too had some bad opinion about hijras which reveals when, she holds her hand bag very tightly towards her body and enters the room where the hijras guru stays.

The words of Champa also exemplify the views of Dattani on the space for the eunuchs that there is no world for a hijra other than the one they make for themselves. Dattani ends the play with a note that the eunuchs have love for each of their community and they care for them. In this play it is observed that a minister's son related with a hijra in a humanistic and loving manner. But a relationship between two hearts has been derided and persecuted by society.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani endeavoured to bring his dramas closer to the bitter experiences of life with a view to becoming the voice of the voiceless whose identity

and personhood are enveloped under the garb of conventions and gender prejudices. They have been thrown headlong into darkness and obscurity, condemned to suffer in eternal silence, experiencing the brunt of the repressive dead weight of hegemony of the big guns of the society. Dattani foregrounds the fact that other than societal mores and ethos the eunuchs possess a 'self' that desires dignity and when this self is deprived of the same it tries to cut the chains of such entrenched norms. When they ventilate their voice, it is stifled by the unreconstructed, conservative, demoralized system which is prevalent in the society. Mahesh Dattani has bestowed a novel dimension upon the theatrical world by focusing on such subject matters in his plays like in the *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.

Mahesh Dattani gives the hijras of India a voice to express their feelings and plight in the English theatre through his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The role of the police, politicians and the society as a whole is questioned. Uma, the protagonist, was in search of some details for her research thesis. Her research ends in revealing the murderer of Kamala, a hijra. The play brings up many controversies which haunt the society today. Dattani seeks a peaceful, lawful, educated, tolerable and amiable life on earth for hijras through this play. He has a world perspective with his humanism, naturalism, feminism, and pragmatism in the twenty-first century. The contribution made by Dattani in taking up the cudgels on behalf of transgenders deserves serious attention and the play '*Seven Steps Around The Fire*' attained path breaking results by bringing transgender atrocities, exploitation, violence and prejudice into the limelight.

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