

## Depiction of the Invisibilized in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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### Abstract

The term 'hijras' has no dignified position in our society. They are on the fringes of the society and pale into insignificance. Since they are not welcomed, protected and secured from the prejudices of the people of the Society. They are discriminated right across the world and are objectified by the blinkered society who employ the pronoun 'It' for them. They are welcomed in the society on two occasions: child birth and marriage to sing and dance. They are often victims of violence. In our society, there are only two categories which are approved – male and female, so there is no space for hijras. Those who do not conform to these two classes, have to face societal ostracism, stigma and alienation from the society. The community of eunuchs is socially, legally and politically invisibilized and persecuted in the society. They are not allowed to find their niche beyond the patterns prescribed and accepted by the society. Mahesh Dattani affords chance to hijras community to ventilate their feelings and predicaments in the English theatre through his play *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Mahesh Dattani portrays the grim reality and the position of the hijras community and presents how they are inferiorized, demonized and persecuted. The whole play is built around the mystery of the murder of hijras named Kamla, who surreptitiously married minister's son. Here the role of police and society is impugned.

**Keywords :** depicted, exclusion, hijras(eunuchs), invisibilized

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## Introduction

Mahesh Dattani, a celebrated personality and a Sahitya Academy Award winner needs no introduction in Indian English Drama. In his play *Seven Steps around the Fire*, he has dramatized the plight of the hijras in the Indian society. In our society, there are only two sexes acknowledged male and female. They are the neglected and victimized gender. It is an irony of life that the hijras who are welcomed on two occasions one, at the time of marriage and two, at the time of childbirth – to sing and dance themselves remain bereft of marriage and childbirth. Dattani argues that homosexual relationship is as natural as heterosexual relationship. We have to face the reality of life, however, bitter that might be. People offer them money otherwise they curse them. They are regarded as the 'chosen people of God' and the curse by them cannot be taken back. The author has sardonically highlighted this aspect that would not have otherwise attracted any attention, for any matter linked to the hijras. For many Indians – both upper and middle class – hijras inhabit the periphery of their concern, making themselves visible only on certain occasions. Dattani is presumably the first playwright who has written a full length play about them. For the very first time they are depicted in the theatre as human beings with their individuality who long for space in the society.

*The play Seven Steps around the Fire* was first broadcast as *Seven Circles around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9th January 1999. The play was first performed on stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC Production & the Madras Players on 6th August 1999. It is the play that deals with the socio-psychological crisis of the hijras who are divided between the societal taboos and their personal desires. The story of *Seven Steps around the Fire* is weird in the Indian context. For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. As Jeremy Mortimer puts it, the murder victim Kamla, a beautiful hijras eunuch, had, it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young hijras 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. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijras community (Dattani3).

To discuss the play, Dattani explains the term hijras by giving the Indian myth from *The Ramayana* through Uma's voice-over. 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, literary 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 the 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 (Dattani 10-11).

The plot of Seven Steps around the Fire is based on the murder incident of Kamala, a hijra. Uma Rao, a daughter of a vice chancellor of Bangalore University, wife of the jail superintendent and the daughter in law of the Deputy Commissioner gets curious to solve the mystery of Kamala’s murder. The hijra community generally occupies no significant space in society and is often relegated to the fringes of society. Uma is personally involved in the whole affair and sympathizes with their suffering. The action in the play develops in the form of investigation of the case. Instead of studying any controversial case, she is interested in Kamala’s murder case for which one of the hijras of her community, Anarkali, has been incarcerated. The police had no proof positive against Anarkali. But as Suresh puts it, we only apprehended her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of them. (Dattani 34)

The above statement is evidence of this fact that hijras cannot escape from the harsh reality of the society. They have to languish on the margin created by the society. They are treated as ‘othered’ and no one is there to help except Uma Rao. There is no separate gaoll for the hijras and Anarkali is imprisoned in the male cell. In the society, if this kind of wrong incarceration is done to any male or female, the kiths and kins and the media would protest against the police to arrest him/her. Here, with his distinct technique Dattani highlights how the hijras community is obliterated from the center of the society. It faithfully portrays them as the marginalized in the society.

Uma makes up mind to see Anarkali’s friend and the head of hijras, Champa who lives behind Russell Market in Shivajinagar is the only person who can bail

Anarkali out because nobody else would care. She cannot afford to get her released on bail. Uma borrows Fifty Thousand rupees from her father. She lies to her father while borrowing money and gives it to Champa for Anarkali's bail. Her visit to Champa's house shows the remoteness of the hijras from the social stream. Here, Dattani has lifted the lid off the multiple layers of realities that co-exist in the Indian society. The existence of hijras in the society is invisibilized and Dattani through his plays take the bold step to (re)present the invisibilized, the persecuted, and the stigmatized. Uma is worried and bewildered because she is not sure enough of Champa's response. She offers the bail money to Champa for the release of Anarkali. Uma doubts that the rivalry between Kamala and Anarkali was the cause of the murder. Salim's intervention adds a twist to the play because he is looking for one particular photograph. Champa's confession corresponds to Spivak's thesis of silence and speech, We cannot speak ... when we want to speak nobody listens. When we cannot speak ... (Agrawal40) In above statement the predicament that Anarkali goes through in jail is whether to speak the truth that none would trust or to endure everything silently. If she does not open her mouth, she will be declared guilty of Kamla's murder, a crime that she has not perpetrated. But if she discloses the names of the murderers, she will be surely murdered by those powerful people. Having found herself bogged down in such quandry she reconciles herself to fate till Uma stumbles upon her in the jail. There is no one to fight for or tell the truth except Uma Rao. This is how she becomes the mouth piece of Dattani as she leaves no stone unturned to represent the underrepresented, the invisibilized in the society.

In her quest to unfold the mystery of Kamala's murder, Uma exhibits the milk of human kindness through out the play. Her venture now widens in its scope and is not restricted to only academic but she cultivates emotional bond with Champa and Anarkali. Uma says : All I know is that if I win their trust, I might get them to talk to me about themselves (Dattani27) She inquires about the identity of Salim and his relationship with Kamala at Mr. Sharma's place. The appearance of Subbu, the son of Chief Minister who appears almost by the end of the play, brings twist in the play. Subbu is feeble and nervous despite being born in affluent family. Mr. Sharma admonishes his son not to interact with Uma. In midst of the celebration of marriage he is still disconsolate, I hate weddings. I don't want all this. I don't wish to go ahead with this. (Dattani 31) And simultaneously says, Please, don't arrest Salim. He is a good man. (Dattani 31) This dichotomy of his speech sows seeds of doubt in Uma's mind. Subbu's condition baffles and baffles her. The last scene of the play is noteworthy for its touching intensity. Mr. Sharma, the Chief Minister calls into question the

intentions and purposes of Uma. He is nonplussed because he is worried about the horrors implied in disclosure of the truth. Champa appears for dance with her troupe. Mr. Sharma doesn't want them to enter the main building. This again testifies to the fact how they are excluded and marginalized from the society. Uma here puts down her foot and says, No, it is a bad luck to turn away a hijra on a wedding or a birth (Dattani 38) As the hijras begin dancing and singing, Subbu comes forward looking at them. The vision of dead Kamala starts affects Subbu's mind and he is haunted by the dance of Anarkali. Subbu wrests the gun from Suresh in a state of frenzy. He gets listless to acquiesce to the restrictions hoisted upon him from outside. He defies all conventionalized dictates, in which he was compelled to live, I am leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamala. (Dattani 39) Subbu forgets everything and importunes the photograph. Champa gives him the photograph with compassion. As he looks at the photograph, the present gets suspended and the past gets alive. In a state of extreme depression, Subbu points the gun at his father and divulges the secret of Kamala's murder. Mr. Sharma murdered Kamala because of her status, pathetically entreats Champa to persuade his son to forget Kamala. Subbu takes the gun and kills himself. With his death, the real mystery of the murder of Kamala starts surfacing. The end of the play is little pathetic but it exhibits that the 'voice' against and oppression is itself a great challenge of life, They have no voice. The case was silenced and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was dismissed as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people (Dattani 42). Dattani dedicated this radio play to eunuchs and tried to center the decentered. He has bestowed them with an audience who neither care about them nor have concern for the hijras. He is not only espousing their cause but also underscoring the fact that what they need is not pity or sympathy but true understanding and genuine concern. The conventional rules and norms are defied and the holier than thou social setup is exposed. Dattani conscientizes the audience about the issue without being didactic and the audience is galvanized into putting thinking cap on about the plight of the hijras.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, one can say that Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* raises many burning issues regarding hijras identity as the invisibilized, their constitution, connotations and their societal inclusion/acceptance. The prejudice against them is even worse than the class or caste or religious bias. They are not even acknowledged as the members of the society. They are beneath the notice of the

society. Their insecurity, fears and frustrations are underscored in the play. They are considered as undesirable aliens with no voice and probably no hope of social acceptance and exist on the margin of the society.

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