



GENDER ISSUES IN MAHESH DATTANI'S 'SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE'

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Mahesh Dattani is an authentic and realistic voice in the arena of contemporary Indian plays written in English. His play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* was first broadcast by BBC Radio on 9th January 1999 as *Seven Circles Around the Fire*. It was premiered on stage by MTC Production and The Madras Players on 6th August 1999. The play is a living reflection of Dattani's abiding interest in the lives and experiences of a sexually marginalized section of the Indian society -- the eunuchs. The main plot of the play revolves around the central character of Uma Rao, a Ph.D. scholar in Sociology, daughter of a Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of a Superintendent of Police. Uma, using rather unconventional means, uncovers the hushed up truth behind a murder in the city's hijra community. The murder victim, Kamla, a beautiful eunuch had been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister who, in order to avoid scandal, had the young hijra burned to death, and quickly arranged for his son to marry an 'acceptable' girl, befitting his social status. The corrupt police department in order to protect the minister from scandal, arrests Anarkali, an innocent eunuch, on the charge of Kamla's murder. However, Anarkali's imprisonment lays bare a wide range of possibilities that offer scope to the readers of the play to inspect the manner in which hijras are treated in mainstream society.

The play significantly begins with the chanting of Sanskrit marriage mantras. A fire along with its engulfing flames is also introduced--a perfect ritualistic setting for a Hindu marriage. Even the title of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is an apt pointer in the same direction:

Sanskrit mantras fade in, the ones chanted during a Hindu wedding. Fire.

The sound of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras. A scream.

The flames engulf the scream. (7)

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Not surprisingly, the play eventually turns out to be a shocking documentation of the rigidity, conventionality and the notion of 'acceptability' that are associated with Hindu marriage norms and rituals. The play gains further poignancy when couples of so called 'acceptable' matches are juxtaposed with a thoroughly unconventional transsexual marriage. The married couples in the play are found to be anything but happy--whether it is the relation between Uma and Suresh or that between Uma's parents. A stern patriarchal rigidity and inhumanity are shown in the mercilessly crushing of the otherwise happy marriage between Kamla and Subbu and by the burning of Kamla to death in the same fire that functions as a sacred agent of purification in a Hindu marriage ceremony.

Anarkali's imprisonment serves as an effective tool in the hands of the dramatist to probe into the injustices perpetrated on the sexually marginalized section in our society. Uma's research on the hijra community brings her to the police station to interview Anarkali where she also meets the constable, Munswamy. Munswamy is amused at Uma's addressing Anarkali as 'she'. Munswamy immediately goes on to dehumanize the hijra by referring to Anarkali, using the neuter 'it'. Thus, almost from the beginning of his play, Dattani strikes a blow on the insensitivity of our society, which can very easily and contemptuously deny the right to life and identity to the members of this marginalized community, merely on the basis of sexual differentiation. Not only so, it is deemed highly 'improper' for a lady from a respectable family to study a murder case involving the eunuchs. A better option, according to Munswamy, would be to deal with more 'acceptable' cases like "Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother... dowry death cases ..." (7). Thus, marginalized even in crime, the hijra community can never be accepted by mainstream society. With the application of stringent restrictions and harsh violence, they have to be 'tamed' like wild animals and controlled as social and sexual inferiors, though it is not difficult to infer that this need to control and regulate stems from the patriarchal society's deep sense of insecurity and unknown fear surrounding the hijra community. Placing Anarkali in the male section of the prison is another significant pointer to our society's inherent confusion and inability to decide about what to do with the hijras. The prison in the play has, in fact, been portrayed as a microcosmic reflection of mainstream society. Just as there is no place for the hijras in our society, similarly, despite having a female name, Anarkali is given a place in the male section of the prison.

Suresh in the play, however, offers an explanation for placing Anarkali in the male section of the prison. According to him, the hijras "are as strong as horses." (9) Suresh's explanation takes us to the conventional gender stereotyping that traditionally at least, equates strength with masculinity and weakness with femininity. According to Suresh in Dattani's play, the hijras are not only "strong", which would have sounded as an appreciable male attribute, but they are strong "as horses". Suresh is thus, quick enough to negate whatever positive implications had cropped up by the use of the adjective 'strong', by almost immediately comparing it with the strength of an animal. Secondly, just as Kamlas are burnt to death outside the prison, similarly, Anarkalis are violently beaten up by the other prison inmates within the prison.

The patriarchal society's negation and denial of any attribution of individuality and identity to the hijras is blatantly brought out by a number of generalizations that Dattani, perhaps consciously, makes the male characters of the play voice forth:

SURESH. They are all liars. (9)

SURESH. They are strong as horses. (9)

SURESH. Sister? ... There is no such thing for them. (10)

SURESH. They are all just castrated degenerate men. (10)

MUNSWAMY. So much jewellery she [Kamla] was wearing when she died!

Even a bride does not wear so much. That too gold. All stolen, I am sure. How will hijras get so much gold if they can only beg for a few rupees? (17)

UMA. There are no hijras. Children! Just children.

MUNSWAMY. Same thing. Beggars only, no? (18)

The later significant meeting between Uma and Champa, the head hijra, is another essential tool in the hands of the dramatist which is used to offer scope to the readers, along with Uma, to re-assess and re-analyse our preconceived notions and generalizations about the hijras, which our patriarchal society has helped to formulate. Uma's research on the hijra community brings her closer to Anarkali and Champa which in turn enables her to delve deep into their daily lives and living.

Uma plays a very significant role in the play. It is through her that Dattani strikes his blow on the sterility and decadence of the patriarchal society. Uma and Suresh are childless after many years of their marriage. It is through a telephonic conversation between Uma and her father that we come to know that while Uma has been tested medically fit to bear a child, it is Suresh who needs to go for a check-up. From this we see that the couple did not go together for the infertility check-up. It was Suresh's mother who had insisted that Uma should first undergo the humiliation of submitting to an infertility check-up. But, despite being certified medically fit, it is she who had to go again and again for the check-up. This is reflective of the fact that it is difficult for society to accept that the husband can also be one of the prime factors for the infertility of a couple and that it is easy and convenient to shift the onus of infertility onto a female.

Throughout history, the childless woman has been regarded as somehow failed. Traditionally, she was labelled as 'barren' and even the more neutral term 'childless' still defines her in terms of something lacking (Phoenix et al 102). Both Uma and the hijras are made to suffer from such a feeling of a lack -- Uma due to the lack of a child, and the hijras due to their lack of 'masculinity', after their castration.

Dattani wants his audience to feel that if the hijras are abused as "castrated degenerate men" (10) for their ambiguous genitalia and their incapacity to contribute to the process of procreation that our society esteems so highly, the same term of abuse should be equally applicable to the infertile and sterile men like Suresh, even though it is not.

Shifting the onus from one to the other in order to conceal one's inadequacy is something that goes on quite effortlessly in the course of Seven Steps Around the Fire. This is what Suresh does to Uma, and significantly it had also been done by Uma's parents to the hijras many years back:

UMA. ... (Pause.) Is it true? Could it be true what my mother used to say about them? Did they really put a curse on her because they did not allow them to sing and dance at their wedding? Or was that their explanation for not being able to have children of their own? Or ... a reason to give to people for wanting to adopt me? (17)

One of the prime reasons for the empathetic communion between Uma and Anarkali can be traced to a deep sense of identification based on their shared marginalized space in society. Just as Anarkali is treated contemptuously both inside and outside the prison, similarly, Uma is denied all

personal autonomy, so much so that even her personal choice of nightwear is dictated by her husband's preference. This episode in Dattani's play shows how patriarchy objectifies the female and treats her merely as a sexual object to satisfy the male sexual fantasy. In the play we see that, just as women, the hijras are also subjected to a demeaning objectification. The patriarchal society prefers to address the hijras only using a neuter denominator, while during nights they are exploited to cater to the men's homosexual urges:

ANARKALI. ... First I thought Salim was taking her for his own pleasure. When she told me about Subbu, madam, ... I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her. He wanted to marry her ... (41)

The hypocrisy and the double standard inherent in patriarchal society become clear from its surreptitiously using the eunuchs as prostitutes to cater to men's homosexual needs, yet vehemently denying them the privilege and sanctification of marriage, which is viewed as the sole prerogative of mainstream society:

UMA(voice-over). Perceived as the lowest of the low, they [the hijras] 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. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons' (10-11).

Yet, though women and the eunuchs are thus marginalized in our society, in Dattani's plays we see that they eventually fight back, though in their own limited ways. Living in a narrow, constricted world formulated by rigid patriarchal norms and dictates, Uma transgresses its boundaries by befriending Anarkali and Champa, and eventually solving the murder mystery in the hijra community all by herself. Availing all the resources and connections at her disposal, she does not hesitate to utilize the official positions and status of her husband, her father-in-law, and her father to achieve her objective. Anarkali, too, by using her own manipulative wiles and strategies, ultimately succeeds in convincing Uma to use her influential connections to bail her out of prison. However, at the end, despite Uma's arduous attempts in the play to uncover the veiled truth behind the murder of Kamla, the muffled voice of the hijras are silenced and the case is hushed up by the iron hands of patriarchy:

Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers ... 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 ... (42)

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