

## *The Creative Launcher*

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### **Expression of Political Agenda of Eunuch's Exploitation in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire***

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#### **Abstract**

Mahesh Dattani is an uncompromising director and playwright. He has used varied lifelike theatrical forms to engage the spectator in identifying the emotions carried by the voiceless, marginalized as well as minority people in India. He stimulates people to understand the real situation, prevailing in society. He makes the most effective use of stage to reveal the angst of voiceless society of India that will push the Indian society into the next level of definition for social civilization. He has created a new world for common people to think by giving vent to the frustration and anger of the long suppressed and unrecognized marginalized sections of society. When his plays are read, a new kind of experience is got altogether. Within the framework of dramatic structure, Dattani tries to look into the identities of those who get no space and recognition in social order and have been dragged in darkness. Some of the problems which the plays of Dattani deal with have rarely been discussed and recognized in India. In his plays he depicts mainly the middle-class Indian life and focuses on modern subjects like homosexuality, gender identity, contemporary social issues like violence and crime, human relationships and communalism. In *Seven Steps around the Fire*, Dattani presents the plight of the Hijras (eunuch) to whom society discards. It is found that they are socially and politically exploited in the Indian society as well as in the whole world. They are supposed to be the abandoned gender of the

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society consequently they face social, political, economic and emotion exploitation and discrimination in every step of their lives.

**Keywords-** Marginalized, Homosexuality, Gender Identity, Hijras (Eunuch), Exploitation

The play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* was first broadcasted as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9th January 1999. The story of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is unusual in the Indian context. Jeremy Mortimer comments on the story of the play and says, “the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. . .” (*Collected Plays*, 03). In this play Dattani reveals the misery of minority people (Hijra) against the resistless forces of social disregard and ventures to point out the physical and sexual abuse, violence, exploitation and other discriminations which they face in the society. In such a cramped social setup, one can imagine how a third gender, Hijra is being treated and pushed to a heightened politics. In order to discuss the play, Dattani takes care to explain 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 hijras, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally 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 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. (*Collected Plays*, 10-11)

The play deals with the transgender people, a marginalized section of our society who are considered as untouchables. They have been deprived of freedom of speech, work, status or

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religion. In *this play* Dattani makes a bold attempt to explore and investigate the human aspect of the eunuch community who are humiliated, exploited, insulted and socially neglected. Dattani represents crime and violence meted out to the transgendered or the *hijras* who are marginalized in Indian society. In this play he brings the plight and suffering of the transgendered to the open platform and points out the dawn of a new social consciousness that surpasses the barriers of sex and gender. Written as a commissioned play for BBC Radio 4 *Seven Steps Around the Fire* "presents the transsexuals as the victims of a society that has its own fixed notions of his/her social status" (George 146) revealing layers of hypocrisy and prejudice. As we call the community of eunuchs, the 'third' gender, they are always pushed to the margin. They occupy the centre stage in this play in the deft hands of Dattani. They are the objects of distrust, derision and contempt beyond speculation and are subject to incrimination in a fractured society that has ostracized them. Dattani has put these miserable creatures at the center of a play and appeal for the social recognition of the transsexuals who are struggling to have their voices heard.

The play involves Uma, a research scholar of sociology and the wife of superintendent of police, who while doing her research on life of eunuchs comes through a murder mystery of Kamla (a beautiful eunuch). Uma works as the mouthpiece of the playwright and throws light on the pitiful condition of transgender. She is inspired to investigate the real conditions of the hijra community in Indian society who are living on the edge. Uma determines to prove the innocence of Anarkali, an accused in Kamla murder case. She has the unbound sympathy and affinity towards the eunuch community that usually occupies no honourable space in society and is often pushed back to the margins of society. Uma gets emotionally attached in the whole affair and identifies herself with their suffering. Though Uma Rao belongs to higher class in social hierarchy as the wife of a superintendent of police, she is basically a woman, another marginalized in Indian society. Like them she feels that she has neither power nor money to help her 'sister' in getting out of this trouble. But her concern for the transsexuals and her investigation in unmasking the mystery of Kamla murder case prompts her to take recourse to bribe and 'human' bondage to get into the lives of the transgendered who are at the 'other' side. Though she knows that she can't do much for them yet she goes on trying to peep into the secluded lives of the hijra community whose voices are unheard in the delirious chaos of society. Her soft heart is broken by the pitiful condition of the hijra community. She sympathizes with them.

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Through the voice of Anarkali, Dattani shows the pathetic tale of the transsexuals who pine for human love, relationship, kinship and space to survive with a fullness of life, with dignity. But it is a matter of sorrow that all they can get is sheer contempt:

ANARKALI. We make our relations with our eyes. With our love. I look at him, he looks at me, and he is my brother. I look at you, you look at me and we are mother and daughter. Oh, brother, give me a cigarette, na.

MUNSWAMY. Shut up. And don't call me a brother (*Collected Plays* 11).

The longing for relationship in Anarkali is so strong that she feels sympathy with Uma for not having a sister and says, "If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister" (*Collected Plays* 13). When Anarkali realises the noble cause of Uma in trying to connect with the likes of her, she feels comfort and makes a strong demand of getting her out of the jail as she has not murdered Kamla. She knows what her position in the society is. So, she fears, "They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail" (*Collected Plays* 14). But at the same time she is very much unrepentant of what she had done to Kamla - scarring her face with a butcher's knife to deface her. When it is revealed later, it is fully justified on her part to do so only in order to save the beautiful eunuch Kamla from being an object of deadly allurements to Subbu. He is the son of a minister who importunes upon marrying her against the norms of society and eventually does so. The dire attempt to save Kamla is spoiled but the deep concern that Anarkali shows here towards the cause of friendship, fellow feeling and kinship in the hijra community is certainly praiseworthy. The group of relationship that she talks about and maintains is so strong in its bond that it transcends the stratagems of fractured relationships in the mainstream society.

Throughout the conversation Anarkali is unconvincing to reveal the truth of Kamla's murder. But when Uma shows affection towards her and offers to help her and take her out on bail, Anarkali tells her to visit Russel market in Shivajinagar and meet the head hijra Champa. Uma asks her father to give her fifty thousand rupees so that she may help Anarkali. She goes to Russel market with Munswamy, the constable. As Uma walks to the narrow lanes of Russel market, we are given a clear picture of the hidden dark settlements of the hijras community. It highlights the low social status of hijras. Here, Dattani has revealed the various layers of realities that coexist in the Indian society. The *hijras* in the society are marginalized and Dattani through

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his play takes the initiative to present the suffering of the marginalized. When Uma meets Champa, the head of 'the invisible minority', she is both defiant and uncooperative. She makes an ironic comment on the status of the transsexuals in Indian society, "Please excuse me, madam. I did not know that . . . You see us also a society, no?" (*Collected Plays* 23) But during further conversation Champa gradually submits and says, "If I had the money I would throw it on the superintendent's face and get her back. Sons of whores, all of them I know I said they would die in jail. But after all, I am the head hijra and she is my daughter" (*Collected Plays* 24).

Through the dialogue of Champa Dattani unveils the rampant corruption in the police department. Thus, the woe and suffering of the transsexuals finds a true manifestation in the words of Champa. In her quest to expose the mystery of Kamala's murder, Uma holds the grace of a good human being. Being the head hijra Champa is the father and mother for all hijras and all of them are her daughters. She has the feeling of answerability for all whereas the mainstream society has no accountability for the eunuchs who keep on waiting with impatient eyes to get that humane touch which is still a dream for them.

When Uma is doing enquires to Champa related to Kamla's murder and giving her money for the bails of Anarkali, Salim comes there and asks Kamla's belongings. But Salim hurriedly leaves the place knowing that Uma is the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner of Police. Champa extinguishes Uma's curiosity by telling her that Salim is Minister Mr. Sharma's bodyguard who was searching for a photograph. Suspense and complexity are at its extreme during this juncture. Uma decides to meet Salim and enquires about his identity and his relationship with Kamala at Mr. Sharma's place. While she is enquiring about Salim's wife, Mr. Sharma comes and starts cross questioning Uma. While they are immersed in this discussion, Subbu, the minister's son, comes in. Subbu seems weak and nervous in spite of being born and brought up in a rich and luxury family. Mr. Sharma does not allow his son to interact with Uma. Subbu insists that the police should not arrest Salim as he is a good man. He says, "Please, don't arrest Salim. He is a good man" (*Collected Plays* 31).

Thus, Subbu's presence adds more complication to the play. Subbu's marriage is fixed but in spite of the celebration of marriage he appears to be unhappy and nervous. He says, "I hate weddings. I don't want all this. I don't wish to go ahead with this" (*Collected Plays* 31).

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The contradictory statements and condition of Subbu fill Uma's mind with doubts. His condition becomes a mystery to her. However the mystery gets solved on the day of Subbu's marriage ceremony. The last scene of the play is noteworthy for its touching intensity. Mr. Sharma, the Minister, was filled with fear because of his own guilt and insecurities of what would happen if Uma discloses the truth. The news of the marriage ceremony of the minister's son fills Champa's heart with bountiful excitement and she arrives there uninvited with her 'daughters' to dance and sing as usual. Mr. Sharma doesn't want them to enter the main building. Thus, Dattani again shows how they are marginalized in the society. Uma here intervenes and says, "No, it is a bad luck to turn away the hijras from a wedding or a birth" (*Collected Plays* 38).

Champa blesses Uma, "Thank you, my daughter. May you have hundred sons!" (*Collected Plays* 38). The eunuchs were then allowed to come in. As the hijras start dancing and singing, Subbu comes forward looking at them. The vision of dead Kamala begins to haunt Subbu's mind with the dance of Anarkali. Subbu snatches the gun from Suresh in a state of delirium. He becomes restless to compromise with the restrictions imposed upon him from outside. He becomes blind to all myths and conventions, in which he was forced to live. He says, "I am leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamala" (*Collected Plays* 39).

Now, Subbu forgets everything and asks for the photograph of his union with Kamala. Champa gives him the photograph with sympathy, "Give it to him. Take it my son" (*Collected Plays* 40). As he looks at the photograph, the present gets suspended and the past gets alive. In a state of utmost disappointment, Subbu targets the gun at his father and exposes the secret of Kamala's murder. He cries out, "You killed her?" (*Collected Plays* 40) Mr. Sharma who killed Kamala because of her status, pitifully requests Champa to persuade his son to forget Kamala. Subbu takes the gun and shoots himself. With his death, the real mystery of the murder of Kamala starts echoing. Now it is disclosed that Mr. Sharma's snobbery led to the murder of Kamla. The death of Subbu discloses the mystery of Kamla's murder. The person who suffers most in the play is the eunuch Kamla. She has to pay a heavy price for being beautiful. The beauty of Kamla fills an abnormal passion in Subbu to possess her. Though he marries her privately in some faraway temple yet it is not acceptable to the mainstream society represented as a powerful and political force in Mr Sharma, the father of Subbu. Mr Sharma manages to have

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Kamla burned to death. After death her body was thrown into a nearby pond. Kamla has tried to create a vast bond of human relationship but she invited the doom for herself and her voice as a marginalized is crushed with a diabolic force, not to rise again. Though she remains an invisible character throughout the play yet she precipitates great action leading to the unraveling of the mystery of her death and the real culprit behind her murder.

If the case of Kamla is compared to that of Subbu, another marginalized, it is found that he is pushed to the boundary and is presented struggling for acceptance. Subbu's love and strong emotion for Kamla is so powerful that after taking seven steps around the fire and having the vows of marriage he can't invalidate the age old convention of marriage even if it is not assumed on the ground of being unnatural. The homosexuality that is tied with the pitiable condition of the transsexuals in this play makes a strong combination to terrify us with a passionate force to rethink and restructure the social mechanism in favour of the sidelined communities. Subbu's suicide, resulting out of his dauntless love towards Kamla and the killing of a human relationship works as a catalyst to the cause of the transsexuals. His violent determination "I'm leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamla" (*Collected Plays* 39), amounts to the unfolding of a powerful love story that has always a tragic end. How long will the society be ready to accept its marginalized communities? - Dattani seems to raise the question on the public platform for a patient obviation.

Thus, the reality of Kamla's murder was so bitter that it was difficult to be revealed in public. The case was hushed up giving it the appearance of an accident. The photo was also destroyed. If we see *Seven Steps Around the Fire* as a play of social protest, it puts before us a series of questions on the transsexuals and the marginalized communities. The accurate answers of which are hardly possible. Uma's beneficent mind is perturbed with the misfortunes of the transsexuals and she shows her deep concern for them but is not able to deliver justice to them at the end. Her potent sympathy and passionate bonding with them certainly stimulates confidence in the transsexuals to raise voice against the injustice done to them, probably without any result. She might not have got success in her attempt to raise the status of the transsexuals in the traditional society but she has actually produced much consciousness on the need to understand the pathetic condition of the transsexuals whose voices have been silenced in the name of

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conventions. In the end, the play unfolds the real condition of the transsexuals and the derision of justice that falls upon them.

The end of the play is little bit depressing but it shows that the “voice” against oppression is itself a great challenge of life. Through the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* Dattani presents the exploitation, derision and discrimination against the hijras in the society. The play portrays the circumstances and contexts in which they are looked with suspicion stressing their outcaste status. The pathetic conditions of their existence and the humiliation of sexual abuse even within the prison premises point out how the guardians of law become the perpetrator of crime against the hijras. Dattani questions the age old belief of marriage that is based on heterosexual relationship. He seems to say that homosexual and lesbian relationships are as natural as heterosexual relationship. So, the same-sex marriage should be permitted in India. Dattani affirms that as in real life there are left-handers, homosexual relationship is as natural as heterosexual relationship. We have to accept the reality of life, however, painful that might be.

Thus, the play depicts that the hijra community also longs for reinstatement of self-respect, understanding, identity and justice. Dattani has attempted to present a positive society of Hijras exploring various aspects such as parenthood, love, friendship. In “Queering the Canon: Defying Voices in Mahesh Dattani’s Plays”, Dr. T. Marx also approves the above statement, “*Seven Steps Around the Fire* caricatures mainstream community life as ugly and hypocritical, while idealizing eunuch’s life as enlightened and singularly healthy” (Marx 79).

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