

# Identity as Crisis: The Despondency of Being the Other in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps around the Fire* depicts the volitions and frustrations of a socially marginalized group called Hijras (the third gender). Neuter sexuality is the cause of social exclusion in most of the societies but they are very severe in India. Mahesh Dattani depicts this theme deftly in his play. The play raises many questions regarding the identity of eunuchs, their life environments, their social acceptability and tolerability. Their fears and frustrations are underlined in the play. The bias against them is even worse than that against class, caste or religion. In the play Dattani very successfully throws a question mark to the face of the society and makes it re-think on the question of the eunuchs.

Key words: Hijra, Hypocrisy, Isolation, Marginalization, Parochialism, Prejudice, Social Identity, Sub-human

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who delineates every character in his plays with a peculiar identity that cannot cope with the accepted modes and conventions of Indian society. For the same reason they struggle for existence against the multiple forces- natural, social, political and religious, that always try to alienate and crush them. Dattani's characters helplessly wriggle under the weight of these oppressive forces and their wriggling reminds us of the inverted cockroach of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. They exhibit unique identities but whenever they endeavour to assert their courage are often crushed under the weight of these forces. Since, Mahesh Dattani is a playwright of real life problems facing Indian society, each of his plays is a unique case-study of 'identity as crisis' from a variety of angles.

This study of Dattani's play entitled *Seven Steps around the Fire* attempts to look at characters as having unique identity and this very uniqueness is the major source of their existential crisis since they are pitted against multiple conflicting forces that try to subvert their unique identity as human individuals. Their struggle is life long and painful until eventually they are annihilated. In the play Mahesh Dattani deals with the theme of social exclusion in this play not on the basis of caste but of gender, unique identities

and personal idiosyncrasies. However, gender relationship that leads to social exclusion becomes a prime concern for him in most of his plays.

Man is an entity with gregarious instincts. So for him social life is a survival necessity. However, to being an acceptable group member often demands sacrificing many psychic yearning of the individual. But since each individual is a unique psychological construct, whenever there the same tilts towards this unique and the individual demands weigh upon that of the society there arises a conflict between the individual and the society which leads to social exclusion.

Eunuchs are 'invisibles' in the society, the lowest of the low in the social hierarchy. They face a double jeopardy as they are the victims of nature as well as of the society. They are not even recognized as the members of the society. Therefore, there is an atmosphere of disgust and dislike around them. They are human beings with no voice, no sympathy, no love, no consolations, no justice and probably no hope of acceptability in the society. The story of the play centering on the murder of a beautiful *Hijra*, reveals the ugliness of top echelons and apathetic response of society in general.

Instead of dealing with social problems in a traditional way with stereotype sentimentalism, Dattani represents unconventional, radical dynamics of social issues containing the seeds of clash of the 'self' of individual against the pre-determined schemes of society. His latest play *Seven Circles around the Fire* (broadcast on BBC Radio) is written in the style of a murder mystery, but it is, as usual, a sharp comment on hypocrisy and prejudice in society that scorns *hijras* and treats them as less than human.

Social psychologists have traditionally used the term '*social identity*' to refer to the identity that people derive from their membership in social groups, whereas the term '*personal identity*' is usually reserved for an individual's self-definitions as a unique entity with all his idiosyncrasies. Therefore, an in-depth study of this play reveals a typical modern problem in our complex social structure that is identity as crisis. Identity can be defined as an inevitable part of human existence. Its various facets in the modern context of social life have been discussed by anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, and educationalists. The term identity '**id**' was derived from the Latin word 'idem' or 'same'. Oxford Dictionary defines 'identity' as "the condition as the fact of a person, thing or being that specified unique person or thing." The search for personal identity has been understood as 'finding one's way', 'discovering

who I am' or 'deciding what is most important for oneself.' Another important definition of identity from The World English Dictionary is- "The state of having unique identifying characteristics held by no other person or thing."

In every human society there are vulnerable sections of marginalized population who are deprived of socio-economic opportunities and choices for their minimum sustenance, and are victims of the artificial structure of hierarchy and social, cultural and political exclusion. Even the developmental strategies, which were implemented within the pre-existing structural arrangements of society, have not been able to bring an end to the deprivation of such groups; rather they have largely contributed to the social reproduction of it. According to the biased sociological sense a human being can be a part of the society only when he imitates it but if he wants to do something in his life according to his own whims and fancies he is discarded. This attitude presents the real picture of our society, its role in the life of an individual and its consequences in distorting and deforming the individual.

In *Seven Steps around the Fire*, Dattani intends to discover the human aspects of the community of eunuchs against the social stigma attached to their existence. On the social front, they are addressed or ridiculed by various names like Eunuch, Transgender, Third gender in English, Aravani, Ali, Nine, Keerai vadai, Thirunankai in Tamil, Hijras in Hindi, Six in Dzongkha (the official language of Bhutan) and many more in various languages. But mythologies and histories speak differently about them. They have their own history; they frequently appear even in mythological stories, but only used for the benefit of the main stream and ignored after the purpose was fulfilled. Such was the story of Shikhandi, such was the story of Aravan.

In the play, Dattani tries to show that even eunuchs are ready to accept us as their brothers and sisters if only we show them real affection and love as in the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* one of the eunuchs says to Uma, "I will tell you because you are my sister" (243). This shows their longing for love and acceptance from society. Even the society is confused whether to address them as males or females. But this confusion leads to ridicule and embarrass them. Though they themselves wanted to be recognized as third genders the society is not ready to change the age old custom of two genders i. e. male and female. In the play Munswamy, the constable addresses them as he addresses animals.

UMA. Will she talk to me?

MUNSWAMY. (*chucking*). She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it does not (CP II 233).

Similar mentality is exposed in Suresh during a conversation with his wife Uma. He also addresses them as animals:

UMA. Why is she in cell with men?

SURESH. They are as strong as horses.

UMA. She is being beaten by all the male persons.

SURESH. ...Did that creature upset you? (237).

The overall approach of the society towards transgender is reflected here with these words of the dramatic personae. The society does not consider them as human beings. The reason is society's traditional mindset where one has to be the male or female alone. There is no room for the new genders or there is no room for the conversion (from one gender to other).

In a multilingual and multicultural country like in India, marginalization of certain groups like homosexuals, third gender etc. is a major problem that threatens the fabric of our society. The suppression of them is the result of its fixed norms. Factors like caste, religion, community and gender give rise to marginalization of people. The Indian society has witnessed this marginalization or social exclusion from time immemorial when it was divided on the basis of caste. But now the discrimination against people in our society is on the basis of gender and sexuality. From a philosophical point of view, every individual has a definite personality, path and goal that are determined by his own psychic nature.

#### **Dimensions of denials and deprivations:**

The process of marginalization of eunuchs economically denies a large section of society equal access to productive resources, avenues for the realization of their productive human potential, and opportunities for their full capacity utilization. These denials ultimately push them to the state of rampant poverty owing to devaluation of their work resulting in low wage and wage discrimination, casualization in

the workforce, and livelihood insecurity. Thus, they are provided with very limited space for upward occupational and social mobility, and are excluded from the range of economic opportunities and choices. In the continuous process of this relegation, they emerge to be culturally excluded from the mainstream of society thus becoming “alienated and disintegrated”. They eventually get a stigmatised cultural existence, an ascribed low social status and become the victims of cultural segregation. As a consequence of the economic, political and cultural deprivation, a vast chunk of the population of the country has emerged to be socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent. Devoid of the basic necessities of life they are relegated to live on the margins of society with a subhuman existence.

Their tragedy lies not in belonging to male or female world only but doomed to live in dark, dusty, brutal world. They are subjected to social parochialism, sexual abuse and power drives. As the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* starts with a Sanskrit *sloka* which is drowned by the sound of fire. It symbolizes the pathetic and of the beautiful transgender Kamla who was loved and married by Subbu, the son of minister Sharma. When Sharma comes to know about his son’s marriage with a transgender, he conspires against Kamla and makes plans to burn Kamla alive. When Subbu went for the recognition of his love by marrying her his father, who is a member of the high echelons of the society, could not tolerate it. Here what the playwright wants to say aloud is the irony of the social mind. The society accepts *hijras* for gracing the ceremonies of marriage and birth but would not tolerate if they involve themselves in love and marriage.

It is a play in which Dattani takes up an issue that is beyond the visible zones of social behaviour. Deviating from the current of sentimentalism, the author ventures into exploring the dark recesses of the agonized psyche of this marginalized group struggling against the formidable forces of social apathy. For the unfortunate curse of nature, they have to bear the tyranny of social stigma. He explores the community of eunuchs and their existence on the fringes of Indian milieu. In Indian society eunuch-community is distinctively be identified with their specific pattern of behavior involving their mode of speaking, clapping and singing. Dattani tries to represents the emotional crisis of this community whose suffering is not confined to social neglect but it also includes the multiple layers of power domination. Hence, the bias and discrimination towards the neuter gender makes Dattani to explore the emotional crisis and human aspects of them. The murder of Kamla, and her absence becomes a presence and controls the action in the play.

Uma, wife of Superintendent of Police Suresh, is the daughter of a vice-chancellor and is a Ph.D. Scholar in Sociology. She is motivated to investigate the real condition of *hijra* community in Indian society. With this mission, she becomes curious to unveil the mystery of the murder of Kamla. Uma Rao, swayed by human sympathy gets emotionally involved in the whole affair and identifies herself with their suffering.

The last scene of this play is praiseworthy for the emotional intensity expressed in the texture of the play. Anarkali is bruised but even she doubts if the doctor would attend her. After the release, she was ordered to wear special ghangra on the occasion of the marriage of Chief Minister's son Mr. Sharma who doubts about the intentions and purposes of Uma. She has her own anxiety to investigate the truth and Mr. Sharma is all the time apprehensive about the horrors implied in the revelation of truth. The atmosphere is auspicious but Mr. Sharma is in panic and Subbu is nervous. Champa appears for dance with her trail. Mr. Sharma does not want their entry in his house and he calls the security guards to stop their access to the main building. Uma intervenes, "No, it is a bad luck to turn away a hijra on a wedding or a birth" (277). Champa blessed Uma, "May you have a hundred sons" (277). As soon as hijras begin dancing and singing, Subbu comes forward looking at them. With the dancing Anarkali, the vision of dead Kamla starts haunting his mind. In a state of frenzy, he snatches the gun of Suresh. With the shift of consciousness into past, he becomes restless to compromise with the restrictions imposed upon him from outside. Self pity and self justice renders him blind to all myths and conventions in which he was forced to live, 'I'm leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamla (279). He forgets everything and becomes highly excited. He demands the photograph, the last memory of his union with Kamla. Champa gives him the photograph with the sympathy, "Give it to him, take it my son" (279). As soon as Subbu looks at the photograph, the living paraphernalia suspends and the dead Kamla assumes the role and significance of living entity as governing and guiding the entire scene:

SUBBU. They killed you Kamla!

KAMLA. (*echoing*) They killed me!

SUBBU. Why?

KAMLA. because you loved me!

SUBBU. I still love you Kamla!

KAMLA. I love you Subbu! (279-280).

In a state of extreme depression, Subbu takes the gun, aims at his father, reveals the secret of the murder of Kamla. He cries out “you killed her?” (280). Mr. Sharma who pathetically implores Champa to persuade his son to forget Kamla. Subbu takes the gun and shoots himself. With his death, the real mystery of the murder of Kamla start echoing. The death of Subbu reveals the mystery of murder but makes Uma silent. The reality was so bitter that it was difficult to be exposed in public. The end is a bit depressing but it shows that the ‘voice’ against oppression is in itself a great challenge of life.

It is the agony of *hijras*, who are welcome on two occasions—at the time of marriage, and at the time of childbirth to sing and dance, who are themselves deprived of marriage and childbirth, that the playwright presents in the play. Uma’s investigation for the tragic death of Kamla, a beautiful Hijra, is the kernel of the play laying bare the condition of subalternity. At the end of the drama Uma wins her victory of getting at the truth that the cause of Kamla’s death is the result of her uncalled for love affairs with Subbu.

Anarkali, the another hijra, knows the truth behind Kamla’s murder but is afraid to tell it to Uma. She says, “They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don’t tell the truth, I will die in jail” (244). Uma as a social worker and scholar views the *hijras* as belonging to society whereas the *Hijra* like Champa is surprised: “You see us also as society, no?” (254). Uma’s monologue through telephonic conversation with her professor bears the testimony of the gravity of the divide and a reminder for the society to bridge the gap: “Well, it seems a little too sordid and I find it more and more difficult to do a thorough research ...I know there is very little written about them, and now I understand why...” (262).

Dattani narrates the plight of this community through the lens of Uma’s eyes. Perhaps, Dattani, in this context, makes a pun on our social system and its power relationship in order to unearth the secret of murder of a *hijra* that could be investigated only by a person of power, or by someone, who is socio-

economically superior. Further, one relief is given to her endeavour that she herself is a lonely woman being not so happy in her own marriage and this motive force has driven her to empathize with the *hijra* community. Her research is the dramatist's thesis statement that atrocities against women and marginalized are rampant with the active nexus of police and politicians. Kamla had her wedding photograph what Mr. Sharma was on hunt to destroy: "A picture of kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him....of course Mr. Sharma could not have it ...totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have Kamla burned to death" (281).

Uma visits the central jail to interview Anarkali, the chief accused in the case. Her intentions are good but Anarkali pleads her to leave them alone. There can be no interaction between the two worlds. *hijra*'s life goes on unnoticed by the other world. Uma explains: 'The invisible minority. Behind Russel Market....They only come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand clap' (CP I, 21-22).

The only instance when the group is accorded permission to be present is at marriage and birth, when the majority group sanctions the power of the minority group to bless through their singing and dancing and clapping. Uma comments on the irony: '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 (CP II, 239).

Uma is serious about getting at the truth of Kamla's murder. But the *hijras* feel that nobody cares for them in the society and they are treated as unwanted. The following conversation between Anarkali and Uma reveals the agony of being a *hijra*:

ANARKALI. Then what will you do knowing who killed Kamla?

UMA. Tell my husband to make an arrest.

ANARKALI. One *hijra* less in this world does not matter to your husband (272).

The play ends with a note of pathos in the agonizing tone of Uma in the following words:

They know. 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. 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 (282).

Thus, Dattani unveils through this play the emotional life of the trans-genders, whom the world does not know or does not want to know. Probably he declares that conservatives and social activists should not turn a blind eye to the reality. In the Indian social scenario the plight of the transgender is almost that of animals or even non-entities. They are feared or mocked at by the society and are treated as repulsive, and something to be abhorred. As Suresh abuses them 'They are all just castrated generated men. They fought like dogs'(238). He deals with this third gender with compassion, he considers them as social beings irrespective of their biological state which our so called educated society denies. The *hijra* community is not allowed a place of recognition in our society. The play presents them as the victims of the society that exist only on the margins. In this way they are objects of mistrust, ridicule and contempt. Thus, they are socially, economically, culturally and sexually exploited. The dramatic representation of eunuch community is not confined to social dynamics but also includes deeper emotional and psychological suggestions. The distinction of the play lies in strong emotional content and uncompromising yearning for human relationship. Subbu's passion for Kamla is a justification of the fact that 'blood' represents the passion and it is the only authentic realization of human sensibility. It is not a conventional love story but a realization of life beyond the hold of social rituals. It signifies that the subterranean current of sublime realization is beyond the surface of rational control of man. The last confession of Uma, "All I want is that they want .....to move on. To love. To live" (281). The quest 'to love and live' is the voice of each subaltern. Uma appears as a defender to articulate the voice of weak. The articulation of the voice of subalterns like Champa, Kamla and Anarkali, is made possible through the confidence born out of the bonding of human relationship. Finally, the society tends to forget that they are only incapable of reproductive activity but are equipped with all other functions of human beings with flesh and blood. It is against this attitude that Dattani loudly protests through this play.

## References

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