

ARE TRANSGENDER ACCURSED LOT: A STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani has been one of the Indian playwrights who have been quite instrumental in enabling Indian drama to reach greater heights. He is quite different from other Indian playwrights as he wrote all his dramas only in English focusing on socio-political issues of India. He was daring in his approach while writing about the homosexuals, lesbians, transgender and downtrodden persons of the present world. An effort has been made in this paper to identify the effectiveness in portraying the lifestyles of the transgender in his drama titled *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Transgenders have been denied of normal life and have not been permitted to enter into wedlock with a normal person and be a part of a family. The transgender have been treated as the accursed lot leading a lonely life till death. The prejudice prevailing in the society is unable to understand that it was it which offered the transgender the low life. Disregarding this fact, the society exploits them in all possible means. *Mahesh Dattani* discusses such characters in his plays so as to bring them to the mainstream.

KEY WORDS: TRANSGENDER DENIAL LONELY ACCURSED

PAPER

For centuries, India has been popular for its culture and moral values. The glorious aspect of Indian culture had been carried to various parts of the world by the traders and the voyagers. Drama has been an effective tool and it has been effectively read and appreciated all over the globe. It is evident from the history of India that it has three different epochs. The first stage encompasses dramas written in Sanskrit to popularize religion. The next stage is where it was employed for pleasure and for freedom struggle. The last stage included modern plays focusing on several themes and motifs. Indian drama attained its zenith of excellence through the plays of Mahesh Dattani as he wrote all his dramas in English delving in to all sorts of socio- political issues existing in the modern world.

Among the Indian playwrights in English, he was the very first recipient of Sahitya Academy award in 1988 for his play titled *Final Solution and Bravely Fought the Queen*. Dattani's dramas delve deep into Indian mythology, Indian dance, Indian tradition, Indian social complications and Indian English. He deals with these themes in such a way that they impress any kind of audience. His dramas focus on pursuit of individual identity within and outside the family, the necessity for love, happiness, security, sexual fulfillment, hollowness of surface level successful lives, belonging and not belonging; loneliness, sorrows and pathos of maintaining appearance. Dattani happens to be the only writer to focus on Indian taboos connected to homosexuality and transgender. To be very precise, his play titled *Seven Steps Around the Fire* gives a vivid description of the hardships experienced by the transgender.

This article is a have a subaltern point of view on identity and observes the manner in which the transgender is portrayed in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Hijra is the common name for a transgender in Southern Asia and more so in India. All countries accept the existence of a third gender, yet the transgender faces humiliation everywhere. When their origin is analyzed, it is understood that they are so by their accidental birth whereas a good number of them who are homosexuals undergo illegal surgeries to transform them. Though this transformation is very minimum, the homosexuals who are unable to be heterosexuals both in the society and the family undergo different social attitude prevailing in the society regarding their existence.

It is a common practice among Hijras to sing, dance and clap for earning money. They do it very often during festival times. The public give them money, food and clothing not with the intention of helping them for the but fear of incurring their curse. But for this superstition existing for centuries, it would not be possible for the transgender to make a livelihood and move freely outside. In theatre, in the early history, the transgender were employed in theaters to make the people laugh. There used to be several characters on the stage that resembled eunuchs in their performance and action to make the viewers laugh at them. For decades, they were shown as laughing stocks to the drama goers. Only later on, the playwrights started showing them in a different perspective. They started focusing on their pain, suffocation of suppression, zest for life and many other things. They are placed in newer perspectives which prompt humane attention them.

It is a popular practice in India to find Hijras in two popular occasions where they are invited and appreciated. These two occasions are marriage and child birth. On both these occasions, the Hijras come and bless the newly married couple and the new born baby; it is quite an irony that they are denied of those privileges by men and nature. Nature has disabled them to give birth to a child. Our society forbids them from taking seven steps around the holy fire raised during a wedding ceremony. In the words of Dattani

“not for them the seven rounds
witnessed by fire god, eternally
binding man and woman in
matrimony as the blessings and may be
the mother of a hundred sons” (SSAF Act I)

The play titled *Seven Steps Around the Fire* carries Anarkali, a transgender as the protagonist. The play shows how she was mistreated and charged of a false crime. She is believed to have killed a fellow transgender. Uma is the name of a character through which Dattani champions for the welfare of all transgenders. The play opens beautifully in showing the culture and manners of Hijras. All are seen in a group in front of a house in colorful clothing. They wear lot of jewels and clap their hands widely in the special manner of Hijras, with hollow palms, creating much noise with their high pitched voices. What is evident is their language which is distinct and different from an ordinary person. They are mostly vulgar mouthed in their expression. Dattani brings out this quality of them when Uma first gets introduced to Anarkali as a journalist and states that she has come to help them. She is immediately retarded by saying, “I don’t care if you are the mother of all whores” (SSAF ACT 143). Even Munuswamy is rebuked by Anarkali by calling him “a sister fucker” (SSAF ACT I 11)

Language employed is a specific identity of transgender. This identity stands both for the languages used by them and used on them. The transgender are addressed as ‘it’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’. This is due to the society’s constructs which treats them as non humans with feelings unlike all human beings. But for a few educated ones, almost all transgender are treated with utmost contempt by the society. They are at the receiving end of several sexual harassments and choicest abuses are showered on them. In the longer run, they are acclimatized to this vulgar language spoken in a casual manner.

It is believed that only the accursed people are born as transgenders. They are forbidden from maintaining any sort of personal relationship, yet their presence is very much sought where a common person celebrates his/her own personal relationships. That’s why Uma calls Anarkali as ‘sister’ in an occasion; she becomes excited, but very soon gets apprehensive and says “oh! You are only being kind – don’t hurt my heart.” (SSAF ACT 153). Anarkali is caught between devil and deep sea as she apprehends the social code and legal provisions, yet she finds some kind of relief and strength due to love and affection of Uma. The unique feature of Dattani is that he does not permit the subaltern to suffer and instead strengthens them to be aware of the taboos prevailing in the society by maintaining a strong bond of relationship for them like Uma.

Due to the existing laws of Indian Government, both male and female accused are kept in separate prisons. But no word or law is mentioned on the treatment of transgender. Anarkali is kept in the same cell of a man accused and she undergoes all sort of harassment. Finally, she comes out of the prison with injuries all over her body. She seeks the help of her friend Champa to go to hospital, but Champa refuses by saying that no hospital will allow transgender to get treated. Uma, personally, tries to contact some doctors. But they refuse her by giving flimsy excuse. Champa finally comforts her.

“Champa: I tried

Anarkali: If we gave him more money?

Champa: Stupid woman. As if they want our money.

Anarkali: What about the other doctor? Gulab’s customer?

Champa: It will go away. Let me give you some brandy” (SSAF ACT II 51)

There are exclusive hospitals for animals where they could seek medical aid, but no hospitals for treating a transgender. There are organizations such as Blue Cross to take care of an injured dog or cat, but no such organization for rendering assistance to a transgender. This apparently exhibits the mindset of Indians who show scant respect and care for the transgender.

The playwright says that whatever good or bad things happen to them, it is their head (Champa) who looks after them and is revered as God, Champa offers comfort and solace to Anarkali by tightly embracing her and resting her on her lap. By telling about the favourite things of Anarkali and she is able to divert the mind of Anarkali.

Later on Uma is able to identify the murderer of Kamala (for which Anarkali is accused) and the reason behind it. Salim, the child of Mr.Sharma belonged to the upper class , but he was in love with Kamala. This incurs the wrath of his father who puts an end to it by murdering Kamala with the help of his servant Subbu. In the Indian society, no parent will entertain the thought of his son getting married to Hijra and they will leave no stone unturned in ruining such relationships. Through Mr. Sharma, Dattani is able to portray the current socio-political issues. He brings to light the fact that these Hijras are denied of their right to marriage and falling in love with an individual of their choice. In the event of they doing it, they will have to face the consequences like Kamala. Though their love may be pure and true, they will have to suffer from the rules prevailing in the hypo critic society. Dattani gives a telling account of the double standards existing in the society where the innocent individuals

like Anarkali brought under the custody of the law on more suspicious grounds whereas no case is filed against Mr.Sharma who publicly admits his crime.

This play that the transgender overwhelmingly depicts are not entertained in any family and they are a cursed to lead a life. The lonely transgenders are abused by the society to become sexual workers and after some time, they would be called prostitutes by the same society. No individual understands that transgenders are forced to sexual work due to several reasons and their present pathetic status is given by the society itself. Transgender have been misemployed, illtreated and accused as there is hardly any individual to protect them. Even their own families fail to offer them any sort of comfort. By reading or viewing Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, an individual realises the plight of a transgender. The author's objective in writing this play is to open the eyes of the public towards the miserable life lead by transgender and have to be treated like all human beings. They need to be educated seriously so as to enable them to lead a life on par with all individuals. In fact, through the play, Dattani has highlighted the importance of treating transgender on equal terms.

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