



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue IV April 2017

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ISSN :2455-0108

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**MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE : A TALE
OF OPPRESSION**

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* is primarily a tale of oppression of Hijra community. The playwright brings forth an unnoticed and neglected community in Indian society which doubly suffers, first in the hands of Nature then in the hands of their own fellow human feelings. Ironically, hijras are treated as untouchables but they dance and entertain us on the occasion of our marriages and birth occasions of our sons. They themselves are neither married nor they have children but we view their presence on weddings and birth occasions as good omens and ceremonious. Going by a myth, they followed lord Rama as true followers when he left Ayodhia, but our society gives them a raw deal instead of a preferential treatment. We forget that they too have a human heart. As a result they are leading a life of misery. In this play the playwright tries to establish that the hijras are also human beings like us so they should not be made a victim of sufferings for something for which they are not responsible.

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* is primarily a tale of oppression of the hijra community which suffers immensely at the hands of our society. Mahesh Dattani calls them the “invisible minority” in the introduction to his play perhaps because despite their suffering they remain invisible to the majority of the people. The term hijra is of Urdu origin—a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic—literally meaning neither male nor female. Commenting on their origin and their mythical background as described in the *Ramayana*, Dattani says: "Lord Rama was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people in the city wanted to follow him. He said 'men and women go back.' Some of his male followers did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So they sacrificed their

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masculinity to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Lord Rama was pleased with their emotion and blessed them." (1) According to this legend the hijras who are important part of our society made first rate sacrifice, but the treatment they have been given in the society is of third rate. The inhuman treatment meted out to this class is the major theme of the play.

At the centre of the play is Kamala—a very beautiful hijra woman—who is loved by Subbu—the son of a wealthy minister. The love between them culminates into a secret marriage .Subbu’s father who is a minister, being a man of appearances rejects the bond as he cannot accept a hijra woman to be his daughter-in-law. So he plans to finish the relationship by killing Kamala and removing her from the scene. He conspires to burn her alive and then arrange for the second marriage of his son. But Subbu cannot compromise with all this. Failing to reconcile with the situation he shoots himself dead at the time of his marriage arranged by his father. The play ends here but leaves behind many questions about the sufferings of the hijras and the modern society that claims to be socialistic and democratic in nature.

The hijra community is represented in the play by Kamala, her jailed sister Anarkali—who is falsely implicated as a killer of Kamala—and Champa who is head of the community. Champa, being the head, enjoys respect and authority over other hijras, that is why she is not ready to renounce her headship at any cost. She will "burn this house," says she, if she is forced to leave her position. On the other hand, the minister represents Indian polity and Siresh Rao, the chief Superintendent of Police, represents Indian bureaucracy. Uma Rao who dares to break into the world of hijras is the wife of the police officer and daughter of a Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University. The playwright employs a novel device to peep into the unknown world of hijras by making it a case study of the research scholar Uma who is trying to discover reality about the hijras exposes the hypocrite ruling section of Indian society she belongs to.

The locality of hijras is marked by cramped stinking quarters with screams of little children, rusty tin cases and barking dogs but is ironically named as Shivajinagar. When Uma visits Champa ,the head hijra, to interview her for her research, she is so amazed. She has developed a feeling that her community counts nowhere. On the other hand, the world of their oppressors is marked by luxurious bedrooms, TV sets, wardrobes, phone bells, discussion of precious beautiful saris, diamonds, crackling sound of cups and glasses. It is a

world of sensuous joys far away from hijras' Shivajinagar where clapping and singing for others is the sole purpose of life.

If we go by the myth *In Ramayana* the hijras should have been given preferential treatment over others as they sacrificed their masculinity for their love for lord Rama. But they have no room, physically and metaphorically, in our society. Anarkali, convicted for being a murderer, is lodged with the male prisoners as there is no separate arrangement for hijras in the jail. When Uma enquires from her husband, who is also a police-officer, the reason for that, very casually he remarks that the hijra women are "as strong as horses" (9), so it is not important where they are lodged. When Uma tries to initiate talk with Anarkali, she is too tired to talk to her after "serving all these sons of whores" in her cell. It is of no importance to her whether Uma is the wife of a police officer or "the mother of all the whores in Bangalore," She talks only in terms of "whoring" and "serving" men because this is what she has been doing in the jail. Here her headship of hijra community becomes symbolic. Why she cannot be civilized in her language and behaviour is entirely due to the uncivilized treatment meted out to her. In fact, she has accepted her destiny and has no hope from anyone like Uma.

Munswamy, the body guard of the chief superintendent, is reminiscent of a Daroga of British days because of his behaviour. Leading Uma to Anarkali's cell he pounces at her, "I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig" (8), and orders the other inmates to thrash her. Even Suresh Rao's attitude towards Anarkali is devoid of humanism. He warns his wife, "Don't believe even a word of anything she says. They are liars" (13). To him the hijras are "castrated degenerate men" (10). So she should not feel any compassion for them as they will "take advantage of it." But when asked about the evidence against her he evades the question and tries to divert Uma's attention by making love to her, Anarkali is not wrong when she calls Uma the wife of "big Munswamy," though innocently. Suresh Rao asks her why she is so inquisitive about the murder of Kamala when there are so many other such cases: "man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother" (7). Uma acts as the mouthpiece of the playwright when she says, "this particular one is of interest to me at this time" (7) and she likes to meet Anarkali "only." Soon she draws the conclusion, as she mentions in her research paper, that the hijras are doubly sinned against:

The two events in Hindu culture—marriage and birth—where their presence is acceptable are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Nor

for them are the seven rounds witnessed by the god of fire, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of 'may you be the mother of hundred sons.' (11)

It is evident from Anarkali's words that the eunuchs may not be treated as human beings but they have a human heart which yearns to belong to someone, "we make our relations with love. I look at him, he looks at me and he is my brother. I look at you and you look at me and we are mother and daughter" (11). Anarkali feels moved when Uma says she has no sister. .how a hizra feels at heart is evident from the following dialogue :

Anarkali: (Sympathetically) oh (smokes) If you were a hijra I would have made you my sister.

Uma : Oh, thank you.

Anarkali: But you are not a hijra, no?

Uma: No.

Uma: So you will not be my sister. Where are you and where am I.

(13)

With an unfulfilled desire to be addressed as a sister by Uma, Anarkali makes a fervent appeal to Uma to "save" her somehow. The moment she is permitted to address her as a sister, she opens up her heart to her. Ridiculing the idea of nabbing the real killer and punishing him, she calls Uma "an innocent fool" trying to do the impossible. "They will kill me if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth I will die in jail," is her tragedy. That is why she bequeaths Uma to arrange money from somewhere and bail her out of the hell in which she is living. On getting just a hundred rupee note she confesses to have scarred Kamala's face with a butcher's knife. Asked why she did that, she frankly admits that she will do so even to Uma if she can save her life thus. .It bringh forth s sheer helplessness and sufferings of hijras.

The other side of the issue is that the hijras have accepted their slavery as their destiny and they have given up all hopes whatsoever regarding their escape from it. Champa, like Anarkali, has no mind to make the murder story public. She hides from Uma why the minister's bodyguard comes to her and what he demands from her. When she feels that Uma is zeroing in on the truth, she screams at her, "Take your money. Get out of my house." It is only when she is threatened of the consequences of her arrogant behaviour that she unties a

few knots about the murder of Kamala. How difficult it is to enter their world becomes clear when we see Uma feeling helpless on phone to her guide, "I am wondering whether I could leave out the case study on the hijras.... Well, it all seems a little too sordid and I find it more and more difficult to do thorough research.... There is no way I can win their trust" (28).

Though she a wife of a police officer, Uma finds it very difficult to enter into the life of hijras and discover the reality about them. They have become so much used to their oppression and suppression that they feel their existence is threatened when someone tries to come close to them. The Champas and Anarkalis feel rather safe in their respective cells, that is why they don't want to disclose anything about themselves and risk their existence. They have taken their lot for granted and know it well that nothing can happen to improve their condition. The conversation between Uma and Champa exposes the gravity of the situation:

Uma: Who are you scared of? Salim?
Champa: No, Not Salim There are others more dangerous than him.
Uma: Who?
Champa: I don't know,
Uma: You do. But you don't trust me.
Champa: Not even your father-in-law can put them in jail. (34)

The same apprehension is of Anarkali when Uma meets her after she comes out of the jail. She is writhing with pain as her nose was broken when she was released from jail. Being sure of her plight, very sarcastically she laments:

Anarkali: Then what will you do knowing who killed Kamala?
Uma: Tell my husband to make an arrest.
Anarkali: One hijra less in the world does not matter to your husband. (35)

Uma advises her not to put her own position in "danger" and Champa further endorses her saying, "Madam, do as she says. Go home. To your—husband." Indirectly she hints at the source from where their series of woes begin. Rightly so, Mr. Sharma's view leaves nothing to imagination: "You know of the saying about the musk deer? He searches everywhere the source of the heavenly fragrance not realizing that it is contained in his own body." (31)

The climax of the play is the wedding ceremony of Subbu where the colonizer and the colonized are seen together. Ironically, Champa and Anarkali have come to dance on this occasion of joy. Uma and her husband are present as the honoured guests. Shutting eyes to the reality, Mr. Sharma and Suresh are enjoying the scene unperturbed. But Subbu gets disturbed at the queries of Uma regarding Kamala. Failing to stand the situation, he picks up a gun to shoot himself. Anarkali implores him not to do so. She offers to give him a unique present i.e. a photograph of Kamala. The gift turns Subbu all the more sentimental and he cries out, "Stay away.... You killed her," and he shoots himself. Now when the responsibility of the murder is fixed on the duo— the politician and the police officer—the playwright seems to pose a significant question i.e. why our society finds the hijras fit to grace the important occasions like birth and marriage but does not find them fit to be our relations.

Ultimately, Uma facilitates to dissolve the mystery of Kamala's murder but it is of "no use," as stated by Anarkali. If the hijras cannot bear children, it should not be the criterion of their isolation and oppression to an inhuman level, is another idea suggested by Mahesh Dattani.

Even Ramesh and Uma are issueless. When Uma suggests her husband to consult some doctor and get his sperm count tested, but he answers, "I don't have to go." This response can be interpreted in more than one ways. At the end of the play we see Anarkali giving Uma a special locket with a mantra in it. If Uma starts wearing it she will give birth to a child. Uma accepts the locket remembering her mother's words that she is childless, maybe because hijras were not allowed to dance on her wedding. With this locket in hand, Uma returns home warned by Anarkali not to come to her again. If hijras are given third-rate treatment by the society simply because they are not biologically fit to bear children, what about the police-chief and his wife, is the question posed by the playwright.

Despite her best efforts Uma fails to do anything in the interest of the hijra community. Uma's confession at the end of the play is of sheer helplessness:

They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijras knew who was behind the killing of Kamala. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrest. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people. (42)

Thus the tragic drama of hijra community comes to an end posing many questions to the audience. What to talk of awarding the eunuchs some special rights, they are deprived of their fundamental rights as human beings on the land of Rama for whom, according to the *Ramayana*, they made a supreme sacrifice. We have reservation in educational institutions and in jobs on the basis of caste, but no such consideration for hijras who are the third gender not due to their personal choice. If they are neither male nor female, it is not their individual fault. Ironically, they figure nowhere in our perception of human beings, rather, they are discriminated against despite being the victim of injustice by nature. Dattani seems to point at the political leadership and bureaucracy that is hand and glove with each other to suppress this minority. The playwright doesn't spare even the academicians who tend to appease the politicians for their vested interests. The father of Uma who is a Vice Chancellor of a university votes in favour of giving some precious gift to the politician on the wedding of his son. The play ends with a big question, that is, for how long the hijras, that constitutes a considerable section of our society, will be deprived of their rights to live like human beings.

References:

1. Mahesh Dattani, *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000), p.1. All the subsequent textual references are from this book .Only page number is given after the quoted text.
2. *Flowering of Indian Drama* , ed. K.Venkatta Ready, R.K.Dhawan {New Delhi: Prestige , 2004), p.2