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Subjugation of Eunuchs in Dattani's Seven Steps around the Fire

Abstract: The present paper examines the pathetic position of Hijras (Eunuchs) in the Indian society and the efforts made by the renowned playwright Mahesh Dattani to sensitize the people across the world towards the existential anguish experienced by them due to discrimination in their day to day lives. This paper also intends to measure the relationship between the Hijra community and the so called sophisticated and biologically authorized community i.e. the normal male & female in the society. Dattani's play Seven Steps around the Fire, humbly ventures to expose the additional efforts and extra adjustments the Hijras are required to make in order to sustain themselves in the prevailing rigid social structure, where their existence is neither recognized nor valued. Compelled by such conditions, they are compelled to live an insignificant life deprived of status and recognition, which the so called normal males and females get effortlessly by virtue of nature. The play unravels the pathetic living conditions of the eunuchs evoking sympathy in the readers' hearts and also generates a strong desire to eradicate this malady of social injustice and discrimination from the society. The well-knit plots and the supportive structure of the play sensitize the common people to a realization that as human beings, the Hijras too are entitled to enjoy all the fundamental rights like the normal beings.

The paper also aims to depict the miserable condition of the eunuchs whose lives are made worthless by the dominating class (males/females) of the society. They take all liberties to impose upon this deprived class by dictating them to fulfill the orthodox cultural regulations set by them, thus forcing the eunuchs to live in a virtual world of humans devoid of equality, cultural space, respect and recognition.

Keywords: Compelled, Cultural space, Hijra, Orthodox, Relationship

Mahesh Dattani is one of the prominent playwrights in modern Indian drama. He being an effective craftsman explores deeply the sufferings of the oppressed individuals who do not possess enough gumption to take a call on autonomy and rights

for their minimal needs to lead a common man's life. He is the first dramatist in the history of Indian English writings to win the Sahitya Academy award for his collection of plays *Final Solutions* and other Plays in 1998. He is regarded for his excellent themes, subjects and the issues taken up for the upliftment of the suppressed and marginalized sects of the society.

Dattani is a multitalented person known for his contributions in the world of art as an actor, writer, director and a significant social employee. He founded a theater named Playpen to showcase the talent of new rising generation where the emphasis is laid on enhancing the skills of acting, directing and writing for the stage performances. His efforts are incontestable and path breaking. Indisputably, in him, we find an idealistic and a committed person who has devoted his life for the welfare of the society. Through his artistic expressions he intends to bring a positive and remarkable change in the world.

Dattani, through his writings exposes the social evils prevailing in the society such as sexual identity, patriarchy, discrimination on the basis of gender and religion, child abuse etc. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, he arouses in his readers, feelings of sympathy and compassion towards the most undiscussed community in India, i.e. the Hijra (Eunuch) community. In the earlier days the eunuchs were mainly used to provide security to the royal women as they were less threatening to the chastity of women they guarded. Though they were addressed by the names commonly used for the males and the females but they had a very demeaning status.

In our society, an acceptable human being is either a man or a woman. Only these two genders have the right to lead life as they wish but unfortunately, a third gender also exists in the world, who is not considered in terms of basic rights and needs. Rather, they become the laughing stock for the society. Dattani empathizes with the Hijra's distress and pain and portrays the same in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* in a pragmatic and profound mode to create sympathy in the heart of his readers/audiences. He shows the biased and prejudiced behavior of the society towards them thereby making their lives miserable. The so called care takers of law and order of the society such as the police men who are expected to maintain harmony, sometimes themselves get involved in demeaning and discriminating by taking the hijras for granted.

Following is an instance when the character Anarkali is ill-treated in jail and without giving her any opportunity to offer any justification in her defence.

Anarkali. I didn't kill her. She was my sister!

Munuswamy (hitting the bars). Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!

The other inmates begin to beat Anarkali up.

Anarkali (hitting back at first). Ai! Don't touch me!

The other inmates scream with pleasure as they beat up Anarkali.

Aaagh! Aaaagh! (Collected Plays 236)

In the play, Suresh holds a prestigious designation in the department of Police which is supposed to serve the common people and help the needy but throughout the play it is observed that Suresh does not utter a single pleasant statement for the third gender. We as readers develop a bad impression and overtly condemn Suresh but we cannot negate the fact that covertly most of us think alike. The hypocritical human nature is effectively exposed by Dattani.

Through the character Suresh, the playwright portrays view and attitude of the common man towards the third gender. Suresh never pays heed and ignores the words of Uma who informs about a eunuch named Anarkali being exploited by male prisoners. This shows his disrespect and disregard for the third gender. The disgust for eunuchs is very candidly displayed in the following lines in the conversation between Suresh and Uma:

Suresh: What's that you said? Sister? There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerated men.
(Collected Plays 238)

This relegated division of society similarly has an individuality as human that is brought forward by the playwright noticing, their disgraceful predicament. Seven

Steps around the Fire handles the subject of hijra community and their subsistence on the outer edge of the Indian society.

Dattani through this play displays how eunuch community are deprived of even their essential needs which are easily available to other males and females just by virtue of nature. They face rejection and disgust and live a life of isolation due to which they crave for sense of belongingness and loving associations. This gives rise to a diminished self-esteem in them leading to inferiority complex and personality disorders. The trauma generated by the frustration lead them to get involved in criminal activities. As rightly said by Emily Bronte in one of her famous quotes Terror made me cruel. The terror within them of being rejected and isolated forces them to indulge in anti- social activities. In a way it could be claimed that the society is responsible for ingraining the criminal tendencies in them. Quite often the readers come across painful and touching situations encountered by the hijras revealing the depression and trauma faced by them while reading the play. In an interview, a famous and educated eunuch, Laxmi, acknowledges that though several measures for the benefit of the third gender have been introduced by the government, yet equal treatment of hijras still remains a far cry in India. Like mainstream society, the hijra community too has its share of criminals. Unfair and disproportionate punishment is meted out to them by the police and the public.

Dattani is a master in portraying and defining characters according to the demand of the theme but for developing the natural instinct into the characters requires a lot of practical and emotional reinforcement and undoubtedly, he always does justice in this art. He depicts Uma's character as a sensitive woman and through her womanly qualities such as compassion and beneficence shows his sympathy towards the eunuch society. He handles her character as a perfect blend of intellect and emotion.

Unless we have concerns for the stifled community of hijras, we can't feel the social liability towards them. Uma works to bring justice to Anarkali, a hijra, who is taken to jail being alleged as a murderer of Kamla (who is also a hijra). When she is introduced as her sister by Anarkali Suresh mocks such a relationship. Moreover, nobody feels empathy for them including Suresh as many a times Anarkali is being referred by the pronoun it showing the insensitivity towards this underprivileged community. Uma realizes that getting Anarkali released and bringing justice for her

would be a harder nut to crack. Even the Hijra community has this consciousness about their limitations and hence cocoon themselves in a reserved shell and strive for dignified life. They limit their relationships which can be observed in a conversation between Anarkali and Uma:

Anarkali (Offering sympathy). Oh. (Smoking.) If you were a hijra I would have made you my sister.

Uma. No. Thank you.

Anarkali. But you are not a hijra, no?

Uma. No.

Anarkali. So you will not be my sister. (Collected Plays 242)

Dattani is a key player at handling words. His command over the language is marvelous and his blend of language with the expression of the characters create a magic in the theatre. Dattani through his plays tries to bring out to the forefront the issues which are otherwise concealed. In the following excerpt of an interview with Dhvani he acknowledges the same:

Question: You've often been known to bring issues which have remained on the backburner and bring them center stage. I personally feel this is your uniqueness as a dramatist. What exactly goes on before you actually ideate on a play?

Answer: A subject has to be inspiring enough for me to want to write a play about. I do believe the purpose of the theatre is to bring to the forefront issues that society would rather keep in the background. (Word weavers)

Seven Steps around the Fire is not about Uma's research on class, gender and related violence or to find the killer of Kamla, it is all about how this third gender lives in this male-controlled society. The subject contributes an example in front of the superior genders that they all have received the same rights from the Almighty to share the lands, water and air in this beautiful world but because of man-made social structures and theories they are forced to detach and are bound to spend secluded lives. Through the plots of the play Dattani exposes how the hijra community fall an easy prey in the

hands of the so-called male and female population. Dattani devotes the entire play in a way for the upliftment of the victimized eunuch community. Through the present play Dattani also exposes the identity crisis and subjugation experienced by another suppressed class i.e. Indian women who are being controlled by patriarchal system through the character Uma. The play, Seven Steps around the Fire challenges male-dominance on female feebleness through her, the central character of the play. Dattani patrols their unacceptable state in society through this protagonist.

Dattani warns us through this play that anything which crosses its summit can only generate soreness and destruction to culture and civilization. Culture and civilization develop a system for all its people to live a sophisticated, structured and refined life, but what happens if the system followed has loopholes? No doubt, this generates chaos and disarray. Therefore, there is a strong requirement of the revision of the prevailing inhuman attitude towards the eunuchs which is detrimental for the society. This sensitive issue has to be dealt with compassion and flexibility so as to accommodate everyone without being biased or gender specific in the system. Dattani passes a strong message through this play to the society that we are conceded as human beings only when we behave like one and that comes with specific traits like compassion, brotherhood, empathy, equality towards all sects of the society.

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