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**READING MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE AS A  
TRANSGENDER NARRATIVE**

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**Abstract:**

*Mahesh Dattani, the most lauded contemporary Indian playwright in English, has been acknowledged for his 'decolonizing theatre' that sets out to talk effortlessly - within the bounds of the drawing room- about the mind boggling and complex issues of the urban Indian bourgeois in the twentieth century. He is credited for drawing naked truths out of long-shuttered closets, ferreting out themes beyond bedroom farces and historical romances. His theatrical voice is gender-sensitive that tears at the edge of consciousness, blurring social constructs, trying to speak of the wide separation between the third sexual orientation and the 'typical' sex, more specifically, calling out heteronormative sexual orientation which strictly rests on binaries. In his play, Seven Steps around the Fire, Dattani lends a voice to the transgender, viz. the eunuchs, who are pushed to a marginal existence by the dominant classes which define the social order. The paper aims to highlight the miserable plight of the hijras (eunuchs) whose identity remains unacknowledged under the hegemonic and authoritative voice of the so-called 'masters of the society'. It further focuses on the hollowness of the modern society, which despite its claims of 'inclusiveness' and 'acceptance' of all genders, reveals its dark, shallow and menacing visage when confronted with uncomfortable situations. The paper also calls for a classless and egalitarian society, and proposes a radical denaturalization of the dominant understanding of gender identity, where each one of us is expected to belong to 'essential categories'.*

**Keywords:** *Gender identity, gender expression, heteronormative, binary, transgender, essential, dominant, marginal, etc.*

Theatre is not a quiet and mechanical portrayal of social progression. It is an exuberant portrayal of voices reverberating in a social setting of the totality of human experience that influences the current flow of human sensibilities. Sahitya Academy Award winner, Mahesh Dattani, through his 'decolonizing theatre' opens a new channel in contemporary writing, wherein he comes out brazenly and boldly into a field hitherto ignored- the marginal existence of the transsexuals in the Indian society. "He prepared the stage for a specific realism on the lines of Ibsen and Shaw. For him, man is an integral part of society and consciously or unconsciously the creeping influences of societal set up, determine the fabric of relationship around him" (Agarwal, 25). Dattani's plays attempt to shake the society out of its stupor and come face to face with the treacherous reality of the oppression of the marginalized gender.

In his play, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, he brings to fore the plight of the hijras (transgender/eunuchs) who have been prejudiced against, oppressed and hegemonised by the dominant classes. He also talks of a new emergent young generation which is more tolerant and seeks to shed taboos and inhibitions; being in favour of a classless and egalitarian society. Dattani attempts to cultivate a global, universal perspective of the revolving world where each one of us is unique and do



not necessarily fit into essentialist categories. The classification of individuals on the basis of gender is too discrete and such a classification ignores time. The writer calls for an equal and respectable space for this genderless community in the acceptable social order.

The play, *Seven Steps around the Fire* acknowledges the marginality of the transgender/eunuchs. While Dattani does not focus much on their political liberation; he does emphasise the psychological impact of centuries of oppression on them. Dattani, through his 'decolonizing theatre', deviates from conventional morality and reconstructs the spaces for marginalized and colonized groups of the society. The play celebrates the true spirit of humanity. Dattani investigates the human aspect of eunuchs who are socially neglected, even humiliated for being sexually handicapped. The play mocks at the gender oriented social system where the authorial sensibility of Dattani struggles to lend a voice to the *hijra* community so that they may identify their oppressors and find their rightful space and share in the mainstream social circle.

In the Indian society, the community of *hijras* perpetually survives under the cover of shame and silence. They suffer social discrimination, social deprivation, mental torture and physical torment too. Their birth is treated as a curse of the divine and as such they are prohibited to establish personal relationships. They are deprived of the pleasures of family bliss, so much so that they are separated from their natural parents and are compelled to live in the *hijra* community. They are considered to add colour and vibrance to our jubilations and celebrations since times immemorial, but their own human sensibilities have never been the focus of a conscious study. In fact, "every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricately with gender" (Heteronormativity). The compulsory heteronormative culture pushes such genderqueers to the lowest social hierarchy.

The extent of dismissing their rights can be gauged from the fact that they are not encouraged to pursue any professional skills. Rather, they are compelled to learn to sing and dance to earn their livelihood. A *hijra* wanting to shun his community is doubly endangered because the society wouldn't have him/her and the *hijra* community wouldn't give him/her up.

Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure, tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order (Aggarwal, 34).

The plot of the play, *Seven Steps around the Fire* revolves around the mysterious murder of Kamla, a beautiful eunuch, and is being investigated in the true sense, not by the police, but by Uma Rao, a student of Sociology, pursuing her thesis on this marginalized section of the society. While the police suspect another eunuch, Anarkali, to be the murderer, Uma delves deep into the psyche of Anarkali, forms a sisterly bond with her and learns that the projected news is a lie. Wife of the DCP, she ventures out from the cozy comforts of her home and voyages to the dark alleys and forbidden lanes of the *hijra* community to extract the truth.

Though eunuchs are a genderless community, yet Uma insists on calling Anarkali 'she'; while her hardened police officer husband Suresh and even the constable Munswamy utter the pronoun 'it' for the *hijras*, in the most detestful and derogatory tones.

Uma: Will she talk to me?



Munswamy: It will only tell you lies (Dattani, *SSAF*, 7).

Again, a concerned Uma wants to know, “Why do they put her in a male prison?” to which Suresh coldly replies, “They are as strong as horses ... They are all just castrated, degenerate men” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 9-10). While the police officials are ruthless, abusive and contemptuous towards Anarkali; it is Uma and the immense human sympathy she displays that wins over Anarkali’s initial defiant attitude and the latter opens up to reveal the subtle truth that Uma seeks. Dattani seems to suggest that the only possible way to lay siege to the heart of the *hijra* community is through love and empathy. The society with its flawed ideologies has ever failed to check the deeper recesses of the hearts of these marginalized souls. Not only are the *hijras* brought up with the notion that they are different from men and women, but are also discouraged to develop emotional ties beyond their community. At one point when Uma remarks: “I don’t have a sister” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 12), Anarkali replies sympathetically, “Oh. If you were a *hijra*, I would have made you my sister” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 13). Not otherwise!

The play is replete with instances where Uma’s genuine concern wins over the eunuchs, who begin to treat her with love and respect. Uma’s persistent coaxing and patient manners transform Anarkali’s hardened attitude and she finally leads Uma to Shivajinagar to meet the head eunuch, Champa. Uma follows the trail and unravels some more truths about Kamla’s murder. She is convinced of Anarkali’s innocence, so much so that she borrows a hefty sum of Rs. Thousand Fifty from her father and passes it on to Champa to get Anarkali released on bail. The meeting with Champa is particularly noteworthy. As Uma introduces herself as a social worker, Champa is surprised: “You see us also as a society, no?” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 23) Champa laments that there is no society for them except the one they build for themselves. It is true that society doesn’t give them the opportunity to feel the zest of life by involvement in personal relationships. As Champa adds, “She [Kamla] was my only daughter! ... You don’t know how much we all loved her” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 28). The pain and anguish with which Champa utters the above statements is evidence enough as to the sensitivity of this class, whom we generally regard as being uncouth and uncivilized. Dattani underlines the fact that these gender neutralities too have a self, a dignity and a voice which are sadly crushed by the established order.

Again, it is ironical that while no celebrations are considered complete without the presence of *hijras*, they themselves are not permitted to enter into sanctimonious relationships themselves.

Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in the mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable- marriage and birth- ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of: May you be the mother of a hundred sons’ (Dattani, *SSAF*, 10-11).

Uma’s love is returned with equal affection by the eunuchs. Champa, the genderless, aging matriarchal head of the *hijra* community is at once sympathetic towards Uma upon learning that she is childless. “Oh! Poor woman” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 23). Towards the end of the play, one is heartened to learn how Champa remembers to pay back Uma for all her kindness and sends her a locket with a special mantra. Anarkali tells Uma, “Champa gave this to me for you. Wear it and you will be blessed with children, sister! May you and your family be happy!” (Dattani, *SSAF*, 41) The warmth and feeling of sisterly love which effaces in the words of Anarkali and the act of Champa is heartwarming.



Dattani introduces Uma as the sensitive female protagonist who is bent upon exposing the corruption and dubiousness of the elite class. She discerns some discrete relation between Salim's visit to Champa's place and his demand to know about a particular photograph, and the murder of Kamla. She closely follows this connection which leads her to Minister Sharma's house, where she also chances upon Subbu, Mr. Sharma's son, whose behavior appears largely depressed and blue. The fact that Mr. Sharma tries his best to persuade Subbu to leave the room and take rest appears questionable to Uma, who is quick to sense the gaps, thereby, filling in the murder mystery of Kamla.

Dattani credits her [Uma] with intelligence, sensitivity and determination enabling her to fulfil the task. Thus, she becomes the agent of change. This social agent is cauterized by an open mind, a consciousness that dares to think differently, reacting against social conditioning, questioning the existing social norms and their rationality and merit (Miruna, 147)

The jigsaw puzzle is solved as all pieces fall into place soon. Subbu's secret wedding with Kamla was a hideous shame for Mr. Sharma who got Kamla eliminated. A photograph of the wedding was all that remained and Mr. Sharma could not digest the fact that the photograph could be a potential damage for him and his family. But "he did get the picture eventually ... after losing his son. What a price to pay!" (Dattani, *SSAF*, 41) Subbu in a hysterical fit shoots himself. Subbu and Kamla die, and so does their bold step towards a new direction. The inevitable end happens. Facts lie buried in the sheaves of papers written by Uma for her thesis, but the case is closed. "They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers ... Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people..." (Dattani, *SSAF*, 42).

From an overview of the play, it becomes obvious that the psychic subjugation of the marginalized communities has far reaching consequences. The quest for love of these marginal others, their need to have their own recognised space- from the margins to the centre- has been deftly dealt with. Dattani organizes the events in the play to establish that the innate natural deficiency should not be exploited as the mechanism of subjugation. The unbridled passion for survival and personal relationship of Champa and Anarkali (my daughter, my sister) suggests that eunuchs are not marginalized by nature, but by the conventions of a man-made society. Dattani's vision needs to be saluted as he takes up cudgels on behalf of the transgenders and lends them a voice. His vision that this community can be redeemed from their pain and angst simply by allowing them an entry into the centre of an average society deserves commendable appreciation.

The play also presents the idea that just as eunuchs are not allowed to love one who is not one of them, similarly, they have no right to receive love outside their community. People like Subbu who loved Kamla, the eunuch, too have to suffer. Subbu and Kamla's secret marriage is a thorn for Mr. Sharma, the minister and father of Subbu. He gets Kamla burnt to death and Anarkali is arrested for the murder. But for the photograph of Subbu and Kamla exchanging garlands, there is no proof of the liaison between the two. And it is this photograph which makes skeletons tumble out of the cupboard. Champa and Anarkali, though they know the truth behind Kamla's murder, opt to remain silent for fear of meeting the same end at the hands of the powerful minister. Towards the end of the play, Subbu's suicide is projected as an accident and the matter hushed up- the police and the minister cannot afford to make the truth open. The message rings out clear. Neither can the eunuchs be inducted into the mainstream 'respectable society', nor can one move out to mingle in the ranks of eunuchs.



Also, 'man', 'manliness' and 'masculinism' as recognized by the society and its flawed meanings, understandings and comprehensions is brought to the fore. The sub-plot of the personal lives of Uma and Suresh, a childless couple, strengthens the main plot of awry social ideologies. While Uma has been found to be fit for motherhood and her husband is required to see a doctor; yet, Suresh refuses point blank to do so. He is clear about his decision, "I don't think so ... I don't have to go ..." (Dattani, 32). It isn't easy for a man to accept that he is not man enough to father a child. The importance and the ego attached to the status of a man is overdone in the society. While the woman can be made to live with the tag of being barren, a man doesn't dare to own up his own shortcomings-physical, in this sense.

The love life of Uma and Suresh is also under a scanner. Suresh has his say regarding the choice of night wear that Uma would wear.

Suresh: Wear the purple one.

Uma: I wore that last night.

Suresh: Again.

*Silence*

Suresh: Good. (Dattani, *SSAF*, 9)

However, Uma's suggestion that Suresh needs to get a test for sperm count done, falls on deaf ears. Thus, while a man can have his decisions and choices imposed on a woman, a woman cannot even dream her man to obey to her entreaty even when it concerns both of them. All is not well between Uma and Suresh as becomes obvious when she makes a call to her father.

Uma: I wish I could come back and live here with you ... I just might ... well, you taught me to do exactly what I want to do, and one day, I just might ... He is doing well ... I did go. There is nothing wrong with me. He needs to go for a checkup. In many ways, I am quite glad. I-I don't think I want any ... I don't know ... (Dattani, *SSAF*, 19).

The marital angst is clearly stated. Uma drops hints what she might do- walk out on Suresh, confront him on the issue or maybe let things lie dormant. Her statement that she is glad it is not she who is barren speaks volumes about how bad the situation would have been had Uma been failing as a woman. It is easy for a man to accuse a woman, while he himself may never look within or may simply choose to look the other way when he is in the dock.

Thus, not only is the institution of marriage shaken in the contemporary scenario, gender and sex, too, become confused concepts as far as society is concerned. While Foucault suggests that sex is biological and gender is a mere available cultural category; yet, the genderless eunuchs are treated as 'this/that thing' (Dattani, *SSAF*, 16) and as such no respect is accorded to them.

The title, *Seven Steps around the Fire* is very apt as it revolves around the issue of the sanctimonious fire around which seven sacred rounds are taken and ironically, it is this fire that burns Kamla to death for the offence of loving a man. Also, the same ritual of marriage which is denied to the transgender, is also incomplete without their dancing, singing and blessings. How cruel is the double edged nature of our society that denies the instinct to love and become one with our soul mate on the flimsy ground of gender. It is imperative to cross these narrow parochial walls of sex and gender and acquire a more humanitarian approach.

Master theatre craftsman, Dattani has structured the play with a bold theme and has employed various techniques to achieve pin pointed results. Be it the rough language straight out of the *hijras* vocabulary or the voice-over technique, he has lent a realistic touch to the story. The brazen world of



the *hijras* is depicted to be as rough and as harsh as their loud, coarse and unpleasant music. In the final run, Dattani can be credited with lending a voice to the marginalized ‘others’- the *hijras*. The sympathetic sensibility that he lends to the treatment of the eunuchs essayed in the play by Anarkali, Champa and Kamla goes a long way in sensitizing the society towards the need to be humanitarian and according equal space to the transgender, who have practically no dignified identity in the social order. They are ostracized as they do not conform to the acceptable gender divisions made by the society. The play poses serious questions to the urbane society regarding the lack of tolerance towards the *hijra* community. While there is immense hue and cry about social justice, space, equality, banishing of prejudice and bringing the marginalized to the centre, a lot still remains to be done in essence. The play, then, in a sense, is a plea for empathy and sensitivity to India’s queer culture.

While the world moves on, arguing for the “erosion of binary gender” (Postgenderism), it is imperative to understand that the presence of gender roots in social stratification is detrimental to the individuals as well as the society. Given the “radical potential for advanced assistive reproductive options”, postgenderists believe that it would have the “effect of eliminating the need for definite genders in the society” (Postgenderism).

Finally, coming to the centuries old question- How fundamental are sex categories? For at least one percent of people born with intersex genitals, it would mean ostracism or undergoing medically unnecessary surgeries for them to belong to the two available categories of men and women. It’s certainly time to get rid of the gender binary that forces us to fit into the binary straitjacket. It’s time to start treating people according to their unique mosaics of characteristics. It’s time for a world that demands exploring gender expression along a continuum beyond the confines of traditional binary definitions of either male or female.

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