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## A whimper of being in-between: A study of Mahesh Dattani's seven steps around the fire

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### Abstract

Every dramatist has his own style of expression. Some prefer imagination while some stick to folklore; some love philosophy whereas some follow the realism. Many of them write plays with the primary motif of amusement but few believe in writing for reformation. Mahesh Dattani is considered as the highly sensible playwright melding imagination with reality to initiate the discourse on social-political, cultural-moral, religious, and philosophical aspects of human life. His dramatic world is full of plethora of issues addressing the chaos, taboos, and relegated existence of human society. Mahesh Dattani's plays showcase the sufferings of the most neglected people of the society that consist of women, eunuchs, homosexuals, minorities, children and unfortunates. Dattani wishes to aware society, that these marginalized people are also human beings, and they have equal rights on happy and prosperous life like other people in society. Each of his play is a demand for justice for

these subjugated segments of the society.

In Seven Steps around the Fire, he deals with the most neglected part of society i.e., eunuchs. Eunuchs are the most unnoticed part of the society. They are known by different titles - Hijra, Chhukka, and Transgender. They are reckoned neither as man nor as women. Men do not consider them as males due to their dressings and behaviour like women whereas women do not accept them as females because of their appearance and men like voice. Hence their existence lies in the third gender. It brings insolence for them as human beings.

Present paper is an attempt to throw light on the appalling conditions of eunuchs and issues of queer marriages in India as reflected in Mahesh Dattani's realistic play Seven Steps around the Fire. The Methodology implemented for this research work is of descriptive type.

**Keywords:** Eunuch, Transgender, Homosexual, Minorities, Unfortunates, subjugate, Marginalized

### Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is considered as one of the most talked and discussed playwright in the great tradition of India's modern dramatists. He is a versatile person who is involved into many spheres of creative artistic expression such as a prolific theatre artist, popular dancer, and productive director. But his fame lies in his extraordinary contribution to the literature as a dramatist. He is the first Indian Dramatist to win the most prestigious 'Sahitya Akadami Award' for his play 'Final Solution' in 1998. With the touch of rich quality and thematic presentation, he has given new dimensions to the Indian English Drama in the world literature as well as performing arts. His works have been staged to critical acclaim all over India and abroad too. His publicity lies in his realistic and bold treatment to the taboo concepts in Indian society. He has not only intellectual quality and artistry to create a play in text but also has a power to get it staged and strike to the minds of spectators. Each of his play works as an eye opener. Therefore, he is highly appreciated craftsmen of dramaturgy. John Mc Rae calls him as "the voice of India" (Reddy, K. Venkata 110). He observes about his plays as:

*"They are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concern for world drama."* (Ibid).

The close look of Dattani's plays reveal the fact that most of his plays are rooted in urban life of India. Mainly he concentrates on issues of the modernized urban India in his dramatic works. He has always discussed about the efforts of marginalized groups to get respect and space in society. The portrayal of society and surrounding in which one lives, make his dramas more trustworthy and genuine. He justifies his devotion to interpret the reality of India in following words:

*"I think the old cliché... about writing what you know best holds good for any work or for any art (drama or literature). I think one has to be true to one's own environment. Even if I attempted writing a play about the angst of rural Indian society, it wouldn't ring true, it would be an outsider's view-I could only hope to evoke sympathy, but never to really be a part of that unless I spend a lot of time there. I think there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society (the milieu I am a part of) and these automatically from the content of my work."* (Multani A. 156-157).

Seven Steps around the Fire is a revelation of hypocrisy and double standards of white collared society. In another words it shows hideous side of goody-goody image of human society. It was broadcasted on BBC Radio 4 on 9th January 1999 with title 'Seven Circles around the Fire'. It was first performed on stage on August 6th, 1999 at Museum Theatre, Chennai. The play particularly probes into the lives of transgender group in the society. Dattani was pivotal figure in voicing the problems of marginal group which is considered as pious for certain occasions but curse if such members are found in the family. He provided stage to the Eunuchs of India to articulate their feelings and predicaments in the English Theatre through this play. The Hijra Community is not only marginalized but also an invisible minority of the society. They are deprived of their rights due to lack of specific identity as a human being. Their in-betweenness caused them life full of dilemmas and suppression. Even Indian laws have not provided them any recognition because they recognize only two categories of sexes- Male and Female. Nobody thinks of them as human being. But their existence is welcomed as good omen only at the wedding or at childbirth because their blessings are sought to be true. They are pleased with money and are not hurt at that time as it is also assumed that they have ability to give curses.

Eunuchs have a very respectful past in Indian social and cultural history. The origin of Hijra community is traced from/in 'Tretayuga' during Ramavatar. According to the traditional narratives, Rama was asked to leave his empire and was sent off in exile to forest by his stepmother Kaikayee for fourteen years. At this juncture, all the people of his kingdom felt hapless. They fell sick due to the thought of departure from Rama. They could not imagine their lives without Rama. Thus, they decided to follow him in the forest. But Rama did not want his people to be the part of his punishment. So, he asked them "Neither men nor women should follow him; all the men and women must go back". Some of them followed Rama's order but some could not follow as they were unable to get separated from him. Thus, they transformed themselves into 'neither man nor woman community of Eunuchs' and followed him. Their devotion made Rama appreciative of them. They were renowned as sacred souls.

Mahabharata also has some examples of Eunuchs. The most remarkable example is of 'Prince Shikhandi'. During the war of Mahabharata, Pitamaha Bhishma was fighting on the side of Kaurava against Pandava. Bhishma killed thousands of soldiers of Pandavas every day. It was the prime necessity of Pandava to stop him. But they all were well known to the fact that it was not easy to defeat Bhishma in the battlefield as he has boon of 'self-willed death'. Finally, Krishna found out the way to stop Bhishma. Krishna knew that Bhishma could

not fight against a woman, but the problem was that women were not allowed at the battlefield therefore Shikhandi, a half woman- half man, was asked to come in front of Bhishma so Arjuna could easily trap him. After seeing Shikhandi, an eunuch, on Arjuna's chariot, Bhishma put down his weapons and victory lies to Pandavas. According to another story, Arjuna was bereaved of his manliness for his denial of love from celestial Urvashi. He was cursed to be a eunuch. The curse turned to be a boon later during their exile. He lived the life of an eunuch for one year in Matsya Pradesh as Brihannalla.

It can be said that they are known as the 'Chosen by God', but their condition is more pitiable than beggars and paupers. They are isolated and segregated from society. Their existence is unimportant for society.

Though they are considered as sacred souls or chosen by God, marital union with them is sacrilegious. Society does not permit the marriages of common man with transgenders. Sodomy is considered as a sin. As union of man and woman through marriage is considered pious and religious. It is a socially sanctioned method to enlarge the family. Same sex relations would not help to procreate, so it is thought to be unnatural and immoral. It would be transgressing the societal norms to get involved into such relationships. The feelings or commitments for such relations is blasphemous. It becomes duty of society to perish such social and religious evils. While doing so, the human aspects is relegated on the margin. It becomes impossible to address such issues. Such issues are silenced under the garb of prestige, morality and social sanctity.

He has written the full-length play on Hijra community and their problems. He personally met them, studied them, and finally portrayed their pathos in his work. In his play he deals with the murder mystery of Kamala, an Eunuch. By unveiling the mystery of murder at the end, Dattani unveiled the brutal attitude of society towards eunuch community.

The play begins with Uma Rao. She is wife of Jail Superintendent, daughter-in-law of Deputy Commissioner and daughter of Vice-Chancellor. She is a leading figure in the play. She belongs to the reputed high class and well-educated society. Being a teacher, she is aware of the contemporary social issues. She chooses the Class- Gender-Caste based power implications as a subject for her research writing under the guidance of a Professor from Bangalore University.

She comes to know that a Hijra is murdered, and police has a custody of another Hijra as a slayer. Instead of many burning issues of dowry deaths, female infanticide, child abuse, domestic violence, she is interested in the murder case of Eunuch named 'Kamala' and culprit 'Anarkali'. Anarkali is arrested on the charge to be with the murderer. Though police have not found any proof against her, they justified their action because there was no one else to be arrested. Another dimension to this is more pathetic as they thought that why should a common man need to kill Hijra as they are not so important. Therefore, by blaming Anarkali police tries to give an excuse to solve the case of Hijra as they have many other important cases to deal with. She is kept in male's cell and beaten hard and abused as an animal. She cries and tries to defend herself, but nobody believes in her. Journalists come to her with false sympathies to make her news item.

There is a chain of injustice with Hijra Anarkali. First, the nature has made her different from the common people. Then the society in which she lives, has inborn bias against her, she

is not accepted as a social part. Then she is blamed for Kamala's death without any proof, thereafter no one pays attention towards her case. There is no proper investigation. She is kept in the cell of men though she is not considered as one of them. She is physically, mentally, and verbally abused in the custody. But nobody bothers about her. Journalists meet her for the sake of news item and false sympathies. Hence, she refuses to meet Uma Rao for the first time by assuming her as a journalist.

Uma addresses Anarkali as a 'She' whereas constable Munswamy emphasizes on calling her 'It'. When Uma asks Munswamy whether she will talk to her, then Munswamy replies, "*She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up, if it does not.*" (Dattani 7). He advises Uma to leave the case as it is a waste of time to investigate the case of a Hijra. But Uma's zeal and efforts compel Munswamy to help her in her research. Even Anarkali who is reluctant to Uma at the beginning, finds a ray of hope in her. She confesses the truth to Uma, "*I didn't kill her, she was my Sister*" (Dattani 9). The emphasis on the word 'sister', makes Uma introvert. She thinks about their emotional and interpersonal needs as human beings. While seeing her in male's cell, Uma asks her husband about the reason behind her presence in male's cell. But her husband Suresh, reluctantly replies to Uma not to believe them as they all are "*Castrated Men*" (Dattani 10). Suresh's pathetic remark enrages Uma. She believes that being human is far above than male and female sexes. Through Uma, Dattani expresses his anguish about society's negative response towards minorities. Purposefully he designed his protagonist as a student of social studies. She becomes his mouthpiece. She expresses his motto, "*the purpose of this case study is to show their position in society.*" (Dattani 10)

Anarkali's reply to her questions inspires Uma to work tirelessly to find out the truth behind Kamala's death. The work she has undertaken for her research now becomes her prime obligation. With full enthusiasm and determination, she starts working on the case. On Anarkali's insistence, Uma makes up her mind to meet Champa, a head of the group of Hijras and friend to Anarkali. Anarkali tells Uma that, Champa will help her in the case, and she may know the story behind murder and real culprit. First, Uma becomes nervous as she fears whether Champa will help her or not, or how will she behave with her. But her quest for justice and devotion for research work, compels her to set up her mind to visit her. She positively thinks that that may be conversation with Champa would help her in her research. She has storming questions in her mind as:

*"Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists? And why do they not take singing lessons?"* (Dattani 16-17).

With lots of questions in the mind she forwards to meet Champa. She lives behind Russell Market in Shivaji Nagar. Anarkali's words, 'only Champa could help her to get bail', echo in her mind. For Anarkali's bail, Uma needs a bulky amount. She knows that her husband is of no help in this matter. Therefore, she arranged fifty thousand rupees by

convincing her father. After arranging money, she rushes to Champa's destination. Munswamy, who is driving Uma to the different locations as per her demand, suddenly denies driving towards Champa's whereabouts. He is afraid of the wrath of his superior, Jail Superintendent, Suresh. Munswamy again tries to convince Uma about the uselessness of the case. But she prefers to go by rickshaw without shifting focus from her goal. After visiting Champa's house, she comes across many difficulties of Eunuchs, their struggle for life and their relentless pain. Their isolated and humiliated life is revealed to Uma once she enters hijra locality. She gives money to Champa for Anarkali's bail. She enquires into the narrative of Kamla's death. Champa replies that none of the hijras have killed Kamala. They are a family unit. They love each other as general people love. Kamala was like a daughter to her, and she might have been the next head of their group. Champa and Anarkali's words compelled Uma to get involved into their life emotionally. She develops an emotional bond with them. Uma feels as if the case, she is dealing with, is one of her own keen's. Her talk reveals that eunuchs are not different from other human beings.

While their discussion proceeds, a man named Saleem comes and threatens Champa to give him the photograph which Kamala had. After seeing Uma over there, he manages to flee from the place. But his demand for photo makes Uma restless. She is unable to connect the demand for photo with Kamala's death. The incident makes her curious to find out the truth.

Her quest to reveal Kamala's murder mystery takes her to Chief Minister, Mr. Sharma. Mr. Sharma visits Uma as she belongs to reputed family. She hopes to get information about Saleem and his relationship with Kamala. While discussing with Mr. Sharma about Saleem, she comes across a youngster, Subbu, Mr. Sharma's son. Even he accepts Uma's plan of arresting Saleem; but he denies his son to interact with her. Despite being born and brought up in luxury Subbu looks very feeble and pale. Uma with her husband were invited for his wedding ceremony. During the wedding she noticed that despite enjoying the moment, Subbu looked unhappy. She remembered his comments haunted Uma, "*I hate wedding! I don't want all this! I don't wish to go ahead with this*" (Dattani 31) Subbu requested Uma not to arrest Saleem, "*Please don't arrest Saleem! He is a good man*" (Dattani 31)

The events at Mr. Sharma's residence gave different direction to the entire case. It created doubts in Uma's mind. Her condition was no better than Anarkali and Champa. Now, the case has become more complicated. Even her family member tried to keep her away from the wedding place.

The last part of play changes the entire situation. With noteworthy emotional touch, Dattani expresses the emotional intensity of different characters. Mr. Sharma, now afraid off Uma's intention. He becomes panic because he feels that Uma will uncover the reality and that brings shame to his reputation and family. At the climax, Champa appears with her dancing troop as if she is harbinger of revelation of truth. Mr. Sharma doesn't wish to allow them to come in, but Uma interferes, "*No, it is a bad luck to turn away a hijra on a wedding or a birth*" (Dattani 38). Champa blesses Uma with their particular words, "*May you have hundred sons*" (Dattani 38). As the Hijras start dancing and singing, Subbu comes forward. Presence of Hijras starts hunting Subbu's mind with the vision of deceased Kamala. Subbu snatches the gun from Suresh in the hysteric state of mind. He denies

compromising with the external regulations imposed upon him from outside.

He dares to avert conventions in which he was living, *"I, I'm leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamala"* (Dattani 39). Subbu's last wish is to get the photograph, in which his last beautiful memory of his marriage with Kamala is captured. Champa with sympathy, hands over that photograph to Subbu. The photograph gives him satisfaction of meeting Kamala again as if the past turns into present.

Soon memory of Kamala's murder takes him in the state of extreme depression, and he heads his gun towards his father. *"You killed her"* (Dattani 40), Subbu's words echoed in the surrounding shedding light on the mystery. The secret of murder is revealed that Mr. Sharma killed Kamala to keep his reputation. Mr. Sharma burnt Kamala when he came to know about his son Subbu Sharma and Kamla's marriage. The photo is an evidence of their marriage ceremony. So, Mr. Sharma did not want to keep the traces and evidence of their forbidden marriage. The union between man and a eunuch is immoral for them. To they don't have any right to walk Seven Steps around the Fire.

Mahesh Dattani also underscores the fact that though marriage between man and woman are socially sanctioned, what if it does not result into any progeny. Uma and Suresh are married but did not have any children. Suresh avoids getting tested for his virility as it would question his manhood. Considering the fact, that Kamla-Subbu, Uma-Suresh would be inefficient to procure any child, both the marriages are great failure in keeping the promises of continuation of family clan. But Kamla being a eunuch is beyond imagination to get united with whereas Suresh being born as a complete man biologically, though impotent, is beyond doubt to be rejected.

But at the end he pitiably requests Champa to save his child by consoling him to forget Kamala. Subbu prefers to shoot himself than forgetting Kamala. Subbu's death exposed the bitter reality of murder mystery but it makes Uma speechless.

At the end of the play the truth is revealed but as usual the voice of justice is suppressed under the power politics and façade of familial reputation. It is always difficult to give voiceless the voice because they are always pressurized by so called superiors. Kamala's murder case is closed and is not even reported in newspapers.

Though Suresh admits that they don't have evidence against Anarkali, she is roped into it for official procedure. They needed someone to frame in the crime. It would be impossible to arrest the minister. Champa's words come true that police don't take any action against such people. The photograph is crushed. Even Subbu's suicide is justified with accident. The inability of Suresh to arrest the minister as well as procure a child with Uma is symptomatic of his being eunuch on many levels.

Mahesh Dattani attempted to bring about a positive attitudinal change in society towards eunuchs. As Bijay Kumar Das says,

*"The play can be interpreted as a protest play against the injustice meted out to the downtrodden in the society"* (Bijay Kumar Das 17).

His writing is a retort against the so-called sophisticated society that creates barriers between people based upon class, caste, gender, and colour. Mahesh Dattani very dexterously

throws light on the heinous act of such sophisticated people. With the help of Uma, he tries to solve many doubts and myths regarding eunuchs. He convinces people to think upon the concept of family, humanity, and relationship. People are still carrying the old belief system of unworthiness of homosexual or heterosexual relationship. They still believe that lesbian or gay are heinous relationship. Though government secures their rights to have such relations. Love has no caste, category, gender, and class it has only two persons who wish to live with each other. But society beliefs stop them from getting united. Dattani through his play stimulates the innermost recesses of human psyche. He makes the audience to peep into the humiliation and disgrace that these marginal groups face daily. His use of very bold language compels readers to contemplate on the situation. The dialogues and words of the play are sharp, tender, and functional. He yearns for the strong human bonding to meaningless social rituals. Subbu and Kamala are portrayal of two souls rather than two persons. Dattani appeals the union of souls and human sensibility.

To sum up, it can be said that Dattani allegorically portrays the multiple layers of 'eunuch-ness' of society being unable, inefficient to address, act upon or resolve the issues that can be sorted out. The eunuch-ness of the system is also highlighted as it does not procure any proper flow and working. It is dire need of the hour to think efficiently and openly to redress such issues from the multiple perspectives of human existence.

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