

**GENDER EQUALITY AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright, who is one of the most celebrated Indian English dramatists. In his plays, Dattani tries to raise fringe issues which have not been dealt so boldly by other writers so easily. Dattani also focuses on the plight of the marginalised class of the society. One of the most thought-provoking drama of Mahesh Dattani is *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Through this drama, Dattani has tried to break the stereotypes regarding the Hijaras in our society and make people think about burning issues and pathetic conditions of hermaphrodites. It also brings out a gendered perspective to the social and cultural history of North India in the medieval period and an attempt is made to look into gender equality and the position of women. How people in authority take advantage of common people, especially transgender. Influence of Police Superintendent and Minister towards women and transgender is shown in the drama *Seven Steps around the Fire*. The axiom is too aware of the injustices being done to transgender in our society which is an aphorism. This paper focuses on demolishing the foundation of inequality which lies deep in the hearts of people. This paper also deals with the reflection of advanced abuse of position by sovereignties.

**Keywords:**

*Stereotypes, Patriarchy, Gender discrimination, Social ills, Predator, Sovereignty and etc.*

Mahesh Dattani is India's first Sahitya Academy award winning dramatist. He is an actor, dancer, play writer, director, screenplay writer and a teacher. Mahesh Dattani is one of the daring, creative, remarkable, and innovative playwrights in Indian English Literature. Most of Dattani's works are what others wish to ignore. His works are a request made in an urgent and emotional manner for human treatment of homo sexualities, equality towards women and equal rights for every small section of society including hijras.

Dattani's plays bring out an exposition of what happens as a consequence of a trap or the state of being caught, which do not provide for an individual's one alternative over another and an act of choosing between two or more possibilities. This play deals with themes concerning middle class people and upper class people, their hopes and fears, desire and disappointment, superstitious and an affective feeling towards a person based on their perceived group membership.

His plays question all kinds of discrimination, be it religious, political, gender discrimination, or even homosexuality. His plays not only bring out gender issues, position of women in a patriarchal society, but also with gender biases and prejudices which affect girl children even in educated, urban families. He has an ability to blend traditional beliefs with modern disposition and persuasion. Most of his plays focus on socio-political, emotional, physiological and psychological issues. Many of his plays are heavily charged with family issues where the family members are trapped in social restrictions and struggle to come out of social pressure. His works convey his political beliefs without being informative or causing intense disgust to the subject of recognition and power struggles.

Mahesh Dattani dares to speak for the Hijaras which has hardly been voiced by other dramatists. Male and female sex are in the mainstream of life but the transgender have still to attain the existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political issues. Transgender have to bear social exclusion from the society. The isolation and the feeling of transgender being worthless or beneath consideration. Through this drama, the dramatist has given voice to the pain and struggles of the third gender.

In the drama, one of the Hijaras named Kamala is not allowed to be united in the marriage bond with Subbu, who is the son of an influential political minister Mr Sharma. Kamala was a beautiful hijra girl. Kamala and Subbu were so much in love with each other. They decided to elope and marry in secret. The fire which was once the evidence of their marriage now turned out to be the main factor of Kamla's death. She was burned to death. On act of getting married Kamala was killed by the peoples of Mr. Sharma, under his influence.

Subbu's marriage was arranged with a wealthy beautiful girl. In the marriage ceremony, hijra made their inevitable presence for blessings the new couple. After knowing the presence of Anarkali – friend of Kamala, Subbu was reminded of his love for Kamla and found he in frustration. Anarkali gave Subbu, the photo which they have taken soon after their marriage to console him. He was completely devastated and he shot himself with a gun.

It is evident on words of Beena Agarwal "As soon as Subbu looks at the photograph, the living paraphernalia suspends and the dead Kamla assumes the role and significance of living identity governing and guiding the entire scene" (Agrawal 2008 9). The ritual of marriage is allowed only for male and female sex it is unacceptable and evens an utterly odious crime for the Hijaras.

Marriage is the only sin which Kamala committed, her desire for involving in *Seven Steps around the Fire*. This unacceptable desire for marriage by a hijra caused her cruel murder. Uma notices the irony in our Indian society that hijras are treated as the worrying impression that something bad is going to happen or threatening inauspicious on the occasion of marriage. Hijras want to sing songs and give blessings on the occasion of birth and marriage but they themselves are denied these rituals. A Hijara cannot become a wife, mother, father or husband.

The murder was accused on the head of Anarkali; friend of Kamala who is also belongs to hijra, because of her evil envious thoughts. Anarkali is treated cruelly because of being a Hijara. She is arrested for the murder of Kamala only on suspicious state. Everybody knows the murderer, but the police traps Anarkali to protect the actual criminal because he is the powerful person, an influenced Minister. Innocent Anarkali is arrested though she did not murder. She was beaten by other prisoners and even abused by policemen but no one gave their voice for such cruelty, which is absolutely disgusting. Uma concludes, "*They have no voice.*" (Dattani, 42)

The whole plot of the drama revolves round the murder mystery of the victimized hijara, Kamla. The truth about Kamala's murder and the drastic pity of hijra community is brought to the world by Uma. She is a research scholar of Sociology. She is also daughter of Vice chancellor of Bangalore University and wife of Chief Superintendent Suresh Roa. She informs Anarkali about her research paper on class and gender related violence. The main purpose of her research was to show the position of Hijaras in our society. She explores the Indian popular myths and history about the origin of hijara and gender based power implications. She says,

*"The term hijara, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male Nor female. Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayana'" (Dattani, 10)*

The predominating stereotypes and a conception of or belief of Indian society about the transgender is not acceptable. The hijras are called "dogs", "castrated degenerate men". They are addressed using the pronoun 'it', this thing, that thing so on. Nobody has concern for the sufferings or misfortune for them. Suresh Rao advises Uma not to have sympathy with the hijara community.

*"Interior: The male section of Central Jail, Bangalore.*

*Uma- Will she (Anarkali) talks to me?*

*Munswamy (chuckling)- She! Of course, it will talk to you... (Dattani 2000 7)*

*Suresh – I think this thing (Anarkali) didn't give you any trouble." (16)*

Most of the hijras are from a lower middle- class which makes them exposed to the possibility of being harmed physically and emotionally by other prisoners and by police. Even after we knowing everything our society denies providing them their fact of having a rights they require. Hijras are

inferior and subordinate. They can't speak for themselves. The voice can be raised for them only through literature like this play *Seven Steps around the Fire* which has the potentiality to change the mind of the people and might help them to get a better life.

Hijaras live in their own world. They have sisters, daughters in their own gender. They seek and give love to each other in the form of a guru, lover, mother, brother, daughter, sister, etc. Champa, the head of the hijra community, she adores Kamla as her daughter. Champa shows a photo to Uma, and says that the people in the photo were Kamla's first father and mother. Then, I am her father and mother now. Anarkali becomes very much intimate with Uma, calling her as her own sister. They are people who is longing for love and acceptance.

*"Anarkali- If you were a hijra, I would have made u my sister...*

*But you are not hijra, No?*

*Uma- No*

*Anarkali- So you will not be my sister?*

*Uma- of course, we can be sisters...I would love to be your sister if you will be Mine." (13)*

Through these hearting words of Uma, it is clear that she wants to help hijras and she can completely accept them as one of them. Social discrimination is broken by her even she is from a family who disrespect hijras. But for money, she is dependent upon her husband and father. If she arranged the money of the bail for Anarkali through the lie she told her father. Uma explained to Anarkali her helplessness thus, "Here. That is all the money I have. Even if, I wanted to, I couldn't explain to my husband why I am paying for your bail" (Dattani 2000 15).

They lead their lives by earning through singing and dancing from door to door, in function and blessing. But now most of them have been exploited as sex workers. Even rich people take advantage of them and streetwalker will utilize them for their sexual pleasure. When men not able to find prostitutes, they go for eunuchs. They give hundred or two hundred rupees and after mid-night throw them on the road. Then they fell in hands of police. They beat hijra for indulging in prostitutions. Sometimes they make arrests also. In jail, they abuse them, beat them, and raped them.

This is act of cruelty on dominance. People with power take advantage of others. The people in authority take advantage of common people, especially transgender. Through the play *Seven Steps around Fire* Dattani shows the influence of higher authorities to common people, which is more evidently shown through the characters of Police Superintendent and Minister towards transgender. This play has a major role to change people's democratic, inequality lies deep in the hearts.

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