



Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Round the Fire* : Exploring the Plight of the Hijra Community in Indian Society



Adhav Sunil Parasram

Late Abasaheb Kakade Arts College

Bodhegaon, Tal. Shevgaon;

Dist. Ahmednagar, India

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's choice of themes related to sexuality and gender issues, especially homosexuals brought about a paradigm shift in the presentation of Indian English Drama. His characters represent people of contemporary society who are usually set aside or subverted as subaltern in Indian society. His exploration of homosexuals challenges the heterosexual normatively considered to our culture. *Seven Steps Round the Fire*, a radio play foregrounds the so-called perverse 'Hijra' and displays the cultural instruments responsible for the loss of their identity. The play depicts a minority of 'Hijra' and the specific subversion of the community from the mainstream Indian society. The play also exposes the conservative mindset of high, middle and lower class Indian society towards the homosexuals. Homosexuals are always marginalized on several cultural and social occasions. Dattani's attempt to choose this unconventional area is to offer different kind of stuff to the English and Hindi knowing audience in India.

Keywords

Dattani, Hijra, plight, Indian society, isolation, exploitation, homosexuals, subversion etc.

Research Paper

Mahesh Dattani is a versatile personality such as a playwright, director, actor, screenplay writer, filmmaker and teacher. A Gujrati, but grew up in Bangalore, he did his education in India. Unlike other playwrights whose plays are written in regional languages and translated into English, Dattani writes his plays directly in English. His primary focus is on different social burning issues such as plights of homosexuals in India, exploitation of women under patriarchal pressure, childsexual abuse, poverty, disease, natural disasters, etc. His every play is a successful endeavor in exposing these burning issues, which have trapped the post-Independence Indian Society. Mahesh Dattani is the first playwright who has received the prestigious Sahitya Akadamy Award for his *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998.

The Plays *Seven Steps Round the Fire* was broadcast as *Seven Circles Round the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January 1999. The story of the play is highly unusual in the Indian context. Jeremy Mortimer puts it:

For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. The murder victim Kamla, a beautiful Hijra (eunuch), had, turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young Hijra burned to death and hastily arranged for his son to marry an acceptable girl. But at the wedding attended of course by the hijras whose sing and dance at weddings and births-Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijras community (*Collected Plays 3*).

The play opens with Uma a Ph.D. scholar in Sociology and her husband Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of police. Uma tries to inquire about Anarkali who is rather contemptuously referred to as 'She' or 'It' from the constable Munnaswamy. The conversation of the play between Uma and Suresh reveals that Suresh does not trust the hijras and calls them liars. In this play, Dattani takes recourse to the Indian myth from the Ramayana for explaining the term 'Hijra' which Uma reveals:

A brief note on the origin of the hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications. The term Hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literary meaning 'neither male nor female'. Another legend traces their ancestry to *The Ramayana*. The legend has it that god Rama was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. So they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. There are trans-sexuals all

over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society.

Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable-marriage and birth – ironically are the very same privilege denied to them by man and nature.

(Collected Plays 10-11)

Uma demands Rs.50, 000 from her father for the minute study on the Hijra community. She goes to Russell Market meets Champa who is also unwilling for the investigation. However, Champa reveals the fact that neither Anarkali nor she herself was a killer. The existence of the hijras community is revealed through their conversation. The head hijras keeps other hijras and uses them for the financial income. It becomes clear that Kamala was married to a Young man and shown murder. Uma's curiosity arouses to know that powerful person who has committed the heinous crime and went scot-free. She is serious about the truth of Kamala's murder. Her frequent visits to Anarkali and Champa make her acknowledge the fact that the hijras feel nobody cares for them in the society and are treated as unwanted. The conversation between Anarkali and Uma reveals the plight of Hijra:

Anarkali: Then what will you do knowing who killed kamala?

Uma: Tell my husband to make an arrest.

Anarkali: One Hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband

(Collected Plays 35)

Both Anarkali and Champa are afraid of some impending danger tell Uma not to put herself in danger and advise her to go home to her husband. When Uma attends Minister Sharma's son's wedding along with his husband, Mr. Sharma tries to humour Uma with flattery. Comically he asks Uma what she searches for and tells her he sees a spiritual quest in her eyes.

Thus, Dattani has presented a problem before readers and is expecting a possible solution for the upliftment of the Hijra community in India. Likewise he exposes any lacuna in the judiciary system in India. He also criticizes the conservative mindset of Indian people. Dattani's plays are problem plays and the present plays has efficiently presented the lingering problem of homosexuals in India even though the apex court has given node for the marriage of gay people in India. That is why, now the time has come to certify them as human beings. They should be treated normally in all spheres of society.

REFERENCES

- Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Me and My Plays* . New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2014.
- Rusth, Vanith. *Queering India, Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society ed.* New Delhi: Routhledge, 2001.