



Mahesh Dattani as a Social Realist with Reference to his *Seven Steps around the Fire*

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is a dramatist from the new drama movement, whose plays deal with the exploitation of the human body in society. Dattani depicts the alienated issues prevalent in the social atmosphere for which he owes much to Karnad. Dattani is haunted by the issues of homosexuality, discrimination of eunuchs, and exploitation of women in society. *Seven Steps Round the Fire*, the most popular drama, dwells on the theme of eunuchs, their identity, their constitution and their connotation. Social realism has transcended from portraying the sufferings of working class men to discussing the sufferings of women and finally has now taken serious attention towards the genderless. They are considered to be the marginalized ones and are far away removed from the society. They do not claim any rights and concerning about those unexplored people is the main idea of some of Dattani's plays. This paper presents the plight of 'hijras' or eunuchs and discusses their rights as a human while analyzing the death of Kamala, a hijra through the protagonist Uma Rao, a research scholar.

Key words: social realism, alienated issues, identity, women abuse, underprivileged, violence, genderless, discrimination, marginalized etc.

INTRODUCTION

Indian philosophy and 'Puras' have initiated much contribution towards Drama and the post independent era saw some great dramatists like Nissim Ezekiel and Girish Karnad. The New Theatre Movement was started by Badal Sircar. His dramas focused on the concept of 'real homes' and new society. Recently the country sees some brilliant dramatists like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani on realism. Dattani started to depict the alienated issues prevalent in the social atmosphere for which he owes much to Karnad. He had the privilege of his own drama company so he could produce his own plays. His theatre group called 'Playpen' was formed in 1984.

Dattani can be told as the true successor of Girish Karnad and is responsible for the revolutionary progression of English drama, as a drama teacher, as a stage director, as a sociologist explaining various complexities of society. He keeps women at the centre of his dramatic world. He was greatly influenced by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. His play *Tara* gives us a glimpse into the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced into thought and action. In *Bravely fought the Queen* Dattani highlights the absurdity of the situation in which woman is trapped by birth. The questions that haunt Dattani are whether homosexuality has any assertion of individuality and is it guided by some conviction and does it lead to some meaningful goal.

Seven Steps Round the Fire, the most popular drama, dwells on the theme of eunuchs, their identity, their constitution and their connotation. In *Where there is a Will* Dattani portrays complicated modern urban family, his *Do the Needful* exposes the fact that the institute of marriage today has lost its sanctity and is nothing but a compromise to promote personal needs. Dattani's plays are marked by the social and political realities as well as unconventional and explosive themes such as man choosing dance as profession and homosexuality. He is touched to know the sad and pathetic story of child abuse, which reflected in his play *30 days in September*. Dattani is Indian's first playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Akadani award. He wanted to use theatre as a powerful medium to bring about the social change. According to him, "Theatre is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre" (<http://www.anitanarinetpayes/profils-md>).

Seven Steps Around the Fire is one of the famous radio plays of Mahesh Dattani. It was first broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January, 1999. The play

was first performed on stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC production and The Madras Players on 6 August 1999. The play uncovers the truth behind the murder of Kamala, a eunuch through Uma Rao, who is the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of the Chief Superintendent, Suresh Rao. Uma teaches Sociology in Bangalore University. She uncovers the reality behind the murder of Kamala during working on her research paper titled "Class- and Gender- Related Violence". She meets the character of Anarkali, a eunuch in the jail and Champa, the head of the eunuch at her home. She also meets Salim, a servant of Mr. Sharma at Champa's house and gets at the bottom of the murder.

SOCIAL REALISM

Social realism concentrates on recording and reflecting faithfully the actual way of life. It began in the 19th and 20th century British theatre with Ibsen and Shaw. It attempted to picture external and internal reality. While Ibsen's followers dealt with external, Henry James and other psychological novelists and playwrights penetrated the internal psyche of their characters. Their realism focused on the complex working of the minds of characters in the given social milieu. The play *Seven Steps Around The Fire*, Dattani succeeds in portraying the reality of the unrecognized community through the characters of eunuchs. Their suppressed feelings and forbidden love by the society are observed carefully and realistically in his plays.

The protagonist Uma Rao is a model for those women who wish to establish their individual identity in the male dominated society. 'Hijras' or Eunuchs in India have practically no respectable public identity. They have no acceptance and no protection from prejudice and abuse. The discrimination against them is often translated into violence.

In the play, Subbu Sharma, the son of a minister is married secretly to Kamala, a eunuch. Society considers this as untoward especially, when it is linked to a high status person. When Subbu's father comes to know about this relation, he burns Kamala to death. To cover up, Anarkali, a eunuch is arrested for her death. But a photograph of Kamala and Subbu with marriage garlands is exposed. To get this photograph, Mr. Sharma sends Salim, his bodyguard to Champa, the hijra's head, and Anarkali and threatens them. But he is able to get that photograph only after the death of Subbu on his wedding day. He has to pay such a great price for that photograph. Champa and Anarkali, both of them know the criminal of Kamala but don't tell to Uma because they know very well that they have to face more suffering but

nothing would happen to the real criminal. Even the police are not ready to take any action against a reputed man like the minister and are puppets in his hands. After the suicide of Subbu, the police considers it an accident and the photo of Subbu and Kamala is destroyed and nothing has happened to the minister. Suresh Rao accepts before Uma that there is no evidence or proof against Anarkali. They arrested her only as a formality to close the case. And even Anarkali is not treated humanely. Except Uma, all the other characters ill treat eunuchs. Uma calls Anarkali with the pronoun 'she' but the constable Munuswamy calls her with the pronoun 'it'.

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munuswamy: (Chuckling). She! Of course it will talk to you.

We will beat it up if it doesn't (230 Dattani)

In jail Anarkali gets beaten up and ill-treated sexually by the fellow men in the cell. At first the concern of Anarkali towards Uma was not proper. But later it begins to flourish.

Suresh is an old fashioned patriarchal cultured man. In Indian society man is not ready to accept his own weakness. Uma, the wife of Suresh Rao has no children. The title of the play gives significant symbols regarding the lives of the characters. The whole play revolves round the enquiry about the murder of Kamala by Uma. A eunuch is denied to marry or tread the seven steps around the sacred fire by the society and these seven steps around the fire results in Kamala's murder. She is murdered because of her secret marriage to Subbu. The fire which is the evidence of their marriage turns to be her destruction. In this way, the title of the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* is relevant in the tragedy, the ritual has to offer. The play begins with wedding mantras and the burning scene of Kamala and ends in the office of Superintendent Police. Munuswamy is the embodiment of the society, through him society mocks the eunuchs but through Uma the dramatist tries to defend eunuchs through Anarkali's care for her companion very much as such:

Anarkali: I didn't kill her. She was my sister! (236)

Thus they are longing for human relationships. The word 'sister' indicates the real sense of the eunuchs and their treatment towards others. In jail, Uma encounters the beating of fellow men on Anarkali and was deeply affected of it. So, she asks her husband why she has been with those men. "She" Suresh smiles ironically towards Uma. And he also asks her not to believe a single word the things spoken by a eunuch.

Suresh: That is just the sort of name a hijra would fancy.

(chuckling.) Anarkali!

Uma: Suresh, why is she in a cell with men?

Suresh: They are as strong as horses(220).

He has no sympathy over Anarkali and says:

Suresh: Look, it is one thing that I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel any compassion for them.

Suresh: They are all castrated men (220)

Uma starts to inquire herself s to why all the rituals, freedom, marriage, all have been prohibited for them. They are the degenerated society. The Hindu culture has a space for eunuchs but the treatment of that community in reality is completely in contrast from those sayings. None understand their feelings and emotions; even the media is obsessed with the attitude of mockery towards them.

At the investigation, Anarkali, calls Uma as sister and asks her to help her to bail out. The word sister, she used for Kamala and Uma has a force that they are in desperation of cultivating a good relationship with others. But they were rewarded with mockery. Munuswamy, the constable, appointed by her husband for her protection was not interested in all these activities of his Madam. Because for him, investigating and helping a hijra was a waste of time. They were not to be considered as a being but an animal, to be beaten up and discarded from the society. In order to bail out Anarkali, Uma plans to get some money and decides to go to the place where the hijras head lives. Uma was in some kind of fear because of the hijras. Some of them were too fearful. Uma too had some bad opinion about hijras which reveals when, she holds her hand bag very tightly towards her body and enters into the room where the hijras guru stays.

The words of Champa also exemplify the views of Dattani on the space for the eunuchs that there is no world for a hijra other than the one they make for themselves. Dattani ends the play with a note that the eunuchs have love for each of their community and they worry for them. In this drama it is observed that a minister's son related with a hijra in a humanistic and loving manner. But a relationship between two hearts has been abhorred and victimized by society. Human culture is framed to live in an understanding bond.

Hooliganism and butchering of another soul's peace love and care whether it is a discriminated female or transgender is cannibalism by the human community. True education is still in want for mankind.

CONCLUSION

Dattani by dedicating the whole play to the hijra cause has brought the margin to the centre, the underprivileged to the forefront. Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* raises many questions regarding hijra identity, their constitution, connotations, their social acceptability and tolerability. They are the invisibles in the society, the lowest of the low on the steps of social hierarchy. They face a double jeopardy as they are the victims of nature as well as of the society. The bias against them is even worse than the class or caste or religious bias. They are not even recognized as the members of the society. There is an aura of disgust and dislike related to them. Their fears and frustrations are underlined in the play. They are human beings with no voice, no sympathies, no love, no consolations, no justice and probably no hope of acceptability in the society.

Mahesh Dattani gives the hijras of India a voice to articulate their feelings and predicaments in the English theatre through his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The case of a hijra is focused in the play who secretly marries the son of a minister and has to bear dire consequences. The role of the police, politicians and the society as a whole is questioned. Uma, the protagonist, was in search of some details for her research thesis. Her research ends in revealing the murderer of Kamala, a 'hijra'. The story argues many controversies which haunts the society today.

Dattani seeks a peaceful, lawful, educated, tolerable and amiable life on earth for hijras through this play. He has a world perspective with his humanism, naturalism, feminism, and pragmatism in the twenty-first century. This paper is an attempt to bring forth the realities discussed in the play with a keen aim of reformation to hijras. This attempt will further induce the scope of future research endeavors to enlighten and to some extent, make a reformation in the upcoming livelihood of eunuchs.

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