

The Social Unadoptability of Eunuchs in South Asia with Reference to Mahesh Dattani's Play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper investigates Dattani's play Seven Steps Around the Fire as de-recognition and unadoptability of the eunuchs in the Asian society. They are the 'unheard voices' of the society who are the victims of social, physical and psychological violence. The reason behind this violence is confusion of the society to confine them in any particular accepted gender. They suffer social exclusion because the society approves only two genders male and female so the society does not privilege the third gender for social adoptability. The present study focuses on the fears and insecurities of hijra which do not allow them to cross the threshold of human community. Eunuchs have a very long history in Asian context but still they have got no respect in society and they are afraid of revealing their identities. The play Seven Steps around the Fire deals with the murder case of a eunuch Kamla who secretly marries a minister's son Subbu Sharma and gets appalling results from the hands of rich family of minister. . The play shows the issues lacking social adoptability of eunuchs in South Asia with the reference to Seven Steps around the Fire. Dattani not only raises this issue on Indian stage drama but also at the world theatre. He has also elevated many question marks on the performance of police, politics and society collectively. The Queer Theory of Kate Bornstein investigates the roles of transgender that are considered outlawed and uncommon people.*

Key words: Eunuchs, Unadoptability, Society, Violence, Castration

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Mahesh Dattani, a famous and well-known Indian writer and dramatist who keeps a prominent place in portraying the lives of South Asians generally and particularly Indians. His plays draw a picture of the social culture, norms and gender problems while showing the particular behaviors of the people. His famous plays include *Final Solutions* (1993), an exquisite example of the difficulties of relationship between Muslims and Hindus friends and the typical violent behavior of the Hindu majority towards the family and the Muslim friends, *Tara* (1990) that illustrates the gender difference by the parents towards a handicapped girl and the preference of boy over a girl, *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), the alienated lives of modern and fashionable women who like to live in suburban areas far away than common human civilization but facing a severe emotional desertedness and barrenness from inside out, *Dance like a Man* (1989), a two act stage play that studies the age gap battle between parents and daughter and laments on the tragedy of mismatch of marriages in present South Asian society, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), showing the gayish tendency of the sophisticated Indian men and their complexities of live of modern society and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998), describing the marginalized gender of human society and the indifferent behavior of people towards their miseries and pains. It has been told about his plays that:

“All his (Dattani) plays address the social issues, not the very obvious ones, but the deep-seated prejudices and problems that society is usually conditioned to turn away from. His plays deal with gender identity, gender discrimination and communal tensions (Madur).

Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* encapsulates the worries of society-stricken eunuchs who are neglected by the social sphere. They are in a tangled situation and find no way round to get their missing identities. There are no laws that provide them protection and social adoptability. This particular study goes through the textual analysis of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by means of *Gender Queer Theory: Gender outlaws by Kate Bornstein*.

This theory stresses upon the equal rights of transgender society who have been excluded from as human beings and a part of the society and are called outlawed people. No one feels sorry for their miserable predicaments and inhumane treatment with them. Even the animals and beasts are being kept at homes and are cared but these eunuchs are not welcomed anywhere and they suffer alienation and abandonment of the families, relatives, friends and most importantly society. Nobody cares

what they feel, express and show through their behavior because people only think about them as dancers and jokers who amuse them through their uncommon facial and physical gestures. This theory tries to provide a voice to eunuchs who have no particular position in societal matters.

They get no political and governmental laws and are being considered as criminals without any such kind of act. This theory focuses on the fact that if the homosexuals can enjoy social rights, why not these eunuchs can get those rights. The objective of this paper is to raise the issue concerning marginalized voice for hijras because they are deprived of their social and matrimonial rights.

Eunuchs have always been found in many parts of the world especially in China, Asia and Africa. In Asia, eunuchs have a very long history to serve the ladies of the royal families. It was because they were transgender so they were considered as sexually benign to secure their royal ladies and families. They could keep talking to eunuchs and eunuchs could keep secrets related to women psychology and environment. In English literature such as novels and dramas of South Asian countries, the inclusion of transgender is often found for the depiction of the historical perspective of these eunuchs. In today's world the transgender is shown mostly in Hindi dramas and movies to present a historical view of Indian subcontinent. The Mughal dynasty has huge examples of keeping transgender in their royal courts for the services of their women. This particular topic has been chosen in the standpoint of the eunuch's condition and their non-specific role despite the fact that they have a long history of their services and having a nonthreatening role in the whole human history. This topic points out the illogical and illegal castration of transgender just of binary based laws of the human society. This castration also varies in country, culture and behaviors of the humans. Somewhere the castration is violent and somewhere mild but still castration does exist whether in any form of it. It has been rightly remarked; 'Types of castration vary from one society to another and from one historical period to another (Ringrose).'

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a true representation of non-binary individual identity. The eunuchs are the victims of lack of identity and this theory aims to establish a sense of identity regarding the social position of the eunuchs. Another reason for their social exclusion is the helplessness of parents to accept their children if they born as transgender. The parents and relatives do not let these transgender stay at home and the parents have to abandon their children in order to save themselves from the

denunciation of the society and social relations. The people make fun of the parents who give birth to a eunuch. The mother gets more denigration than father because of illiterate women who do not have proper knowledge about the biological, environmental and physical changes that take place during the pregnancy of the mother. The present work tries to take out some of the influential factors behind the social castration of transgender in the old and present society.

This study also tries to establish a view about the condition of transgender who are driven out of the social sphere as an established gender.

This research places the researcher in a confined view to study and examine the widespread miserable condition of eunuchs in Asia. Though the researcher cannot comprehend the inner tensions of hijra community as being a part of that society in which the transgender also dwell. Gender based theories of psychology, biology and physiology have struggled to define the roles of transgender but still the situation is worse as there is no proper work has been done and still eunuchs are not considered as human beings.

This research study will try to find out the answers of the questions related to the transgender for the societal identity of eunuchs and their status in general and in South Asian society in particular. This study will provide a platform for the future researchers to define a respectable role and standard of living for eunuchs. It will highlight the preset issues of transgender by keeping in close the past role of these eunuchs in South Asian history. Through this research perspective it can be hoped that eunuchs will find a voice for their rights and the learned people will try to secure these rights for them. The future researchers will be able to go in more depth and will analyze the complexities of their lives with some substantial solutions.

The research will be dealt through qualitative method. The approach will be descriptive by analyzing the historical viewpoint in an elaborated manner. The meanings and discussions in the research will be handled in a particular context of the play and the title of the research study. The historical and past angle will elucidate the idea of this study in an accurate way.

This paper revolves around certain questions:

1. How Mahesh Dattani raises a voice for the voiceless transgender?
2. Why does society not show the adoptability for eunuchs?

3. What is the need of the eradication of social castration of eunuchs?

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998) is an echo for the dishonored gender of hijra in South Asian context. The title of the play has a very symbolic meaning as 'seven steps' mean the completion of seven circles of bride and bridegroom around the fire in India in which the couple ties the knot of a new marital relation with each other. But here, in this play, marriage is not between a girl and a boy Subbu, but a boy and a beautiful eunuch, Kamla because '*A hijra's marriage is viewed as an odd and perverted act in Indian society and is not legally approved. As a result, hijras lose their gender and familial identity and led deplorable lives...* (SRINIVAS)' The eunuchs are secluded human beings that have no right to get married and live a normal life in Asian society so the conflict arises in an unlikely way of a boy and a eunuch and consequently it swipes away two lives and raises many questions for the people leaving behind in this play."

Therefore, the Seven Steps of a boy and a eunuch are not accepted by the society and ultimately the love-marriage of a eunuch and a boy not only fails but ends in a worst way with the brutal murder of the beautiful eunuch Kamla. The only character Uma Rao, the wife of a police officer and daughter-in-law of Deputy Commissioner of police who favors these eunuchs and forbids her husband to do injustice with Anarkali, a eunuch who is wrongly accused of the murder of a eunuch Kamla. Mahesh Dattani has presented the image of Uma Rao in the portrayal of modern Indian woman who struggles against the shackles of useless traditions imposed on the women by society through her education. This play does not show a very strong relationship between Uma and her husband Suresh because she hides most of the things from him. She goes to meet Anarkali without his consent and she asks money from her father to give this money to Champa because her husband would not allow her to do this and when he comes to know about this he also slightly resents. He shows his mild anger as; "Suresh: Why did you ask your father for money? /Uma: Oh, no particular reason. I was visiting him and... /Suresh: you should have asked me. Have I ever refused you any money?" (Dattani 32).

The writer not only narrates the problems of women but most importantly, the problems of eunuchs or third gender that are completely forsaken by the people. Dattani discusses all this through Uma Rao's character. Jaspal Singh attributes Uma Rao's character as:

Dattani credits her with intelligence, sensitivity and determination

enabling her to fulfill the tasks. 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. (Singh)

Mahesh Dattani writes about such matters which common writers do not see and think. Dattani wants to say a lot though this play about the marginality of transgender but he himself remarks that he cannot say each and everything so he makes his characters a mouthpiece of his thoughts and views and lets them speak and perform through dialogues and expressions. In the preface of his *Collected Plays* he acknowledges this statement in these words: "I also know that I have a lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too, and they seem to be doing rather well at having their say" (Dattani 11).

Dattani's chosen subjects are interwoven with the social issues, and therefore, they have universality in the contemporary society. Dattani brings realistic approach in his writings that provide food for thought to understand the hidden problems of the society. A very short knowledge and interest is found in the writers who think so much deeply for the pathetic plight of eunuchs as Dattani takes into his account in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Gender biasness is the key point of the most of his writings. The two Indian researchers Vikas and Poonam share their views on Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* about transgender as; "*Seven Steps Around the Fire* throws light on the poor condition of eunuchs in the society and how they are deprived of the basic rights like justice" (Vikas Jaoolkar).

The hijra community is a non-conformed gender that is not considered as human beings and even they don't deserve the kind and affectionate behavior of the common people. They become a laughing stock of every child, man and woman for nothing. The transgender is taken as a plaything for the enjoyment and entertainment of people at different ceremonies, parties and social gatherings. The murder of their self-respect is an entertaining thing for so-called civilized society that raises slogans for the protection of human freedom and protection. These so-called slogans are a huge slap on the faces of those human activists who run and establish human organizations to support such kind of helpless and shelter less people just ironically to boast and showing off their benevolent appearance to receive accolades and popularity by the people. In fact the society does not show any kind of adoptability to transgender because they cannot share the social and matrimonial rights with other normal human

beings. Therefore their existence becomes a question mark for their survival in the social sphere of binary division. The unacceptability of the existence of uncommon things creates disturbances and frustrations and so the eunuchs are categorized in that unacceptable category. As the authors Syed Wali Peran and Kartikeyan observe and narrate the plight of transgender in these words: "Eunuchs are largely marginalized... They are abused regularly and form the lower socio-economic strata of the general population" (Syed Wali Peran).

Mahesh Dattani keeps an observant eye on these deep rooted social issues and therefore does not select sensational issues. He recounts the common problems of common people in everyday mundane life. The people have interest in the social issues because these issues are very much related to the real lives of these people especially the people of South Asia. He himself says about his writing:

I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally. (Dattani xv)

The play scrutinizes the underline truths behind the murder of Kamla who is killed by a minister for no reason. In our society the cases of such murders by the aristocratic families are mostly snubbed and bribed in order to save the honor and family name of the rich people but Dattani aggravates this murder issue of an innocent eunuch to prove the fact that human life of any gender is not valueless as it is understood valueless by the stone hearted money owners. So, this play has a universal significance regarding the problems and difficulties of eunuchs since the old times to the present. Dr. Beena Agarwal comments about this play as:

Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences has tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices... Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order. (Agarwal)

In this play the eunuchs like Anarkali, Champa and Kamla are all in pathetic condition because no one is ready to give them their place which they deserve. People laugh at them and show unkind behavior. The society

does not want to face reality and hides behind the mocking attitudes that reveal the unethical and decadent living style of modern human beings. . It is said by Bijay Kumar Das that: “Dattani has done a good job by introducing a new theme to Indian English drama. Conservatives and social activists should not turn a blind eye to reality... We have to accept the reality of life, however painful that might be (Chapter-IV A Critical Analysis in Mahesh Dattani's Plays.).” Thus, Dattani in his play *Seven Steps around the Fire* presents a bleak view of the conditions of eunuchs whose problems are kept hidden and neglected.

The play begins with the research of Uma Rao on a topic “Class and Gender: Related Violence.” Although her research area is gender, but she unintentionally gets involved in the Kamla’s murder case and tries to find out the motives behind this murder. She feels sympathy for eunuchs and considers them through their own individual identities that yearn for the proper place in society. Society is not willing to give a place to the unwanted and uninviting gender that exists in society. The people have views that eunuchs do not keep any worth and therefore take them as lifeless objects.

As it is obvious through this conversation between Munswamy and Uma Rao: “Uma: Will she (Kamla) talk to me? Munswamy (chuckling): She! Of course it will talk to you.

We will beat it up if it does not” (Dattani 07).

It shows that in the eyes of Munswamy the eunuch Anarkali is not a human being but a thing. Uma’s husband calls the eunuch by the use of word “It” which makes the situation more clear that Kamla is not a human being in his eyes. In another conversation when Uma asks Munswamy about the case registration of Kamla’s murder the gesture and answer of Munswamy is quite indifferent and he speaks in a mocking way:

Uma: Didn’t the hijras report Kamla missing to the police?

Munswamy: Hah! As if they care! After we found out the body was a man’s without... that the body was a hijra’s, we called them. They were more interested in jewellery. (Dattani 17)

Munswamy’s comment clearly shows the worth of jewellery more than a hijra’s life. The police reaches late at the murder spot because that was not a matter of the murder of a man but a hijra. Kamla was wearing heavy jewellery when the murder took place so people and police were more interested in jewellery rather than the death of a eunuch. The existence and

absence of Kamla has no significance in people's lives so no one heeds towards Kamla's brutal and innocent murder. Everybody except Uma is against the existence of eunuchs and although she tries to discover the problems of eunuchs but gets exhausted and does not reach at a single conclusion and wants to quit her research project. She talks to her supervisor: "I am wondering whether I could leave out the case study on the hijras... well, it all seems a little too sordid and I find it more and more difficult to go through research... (Dattani 28)"

Mahesh Dattani is a myth believer. He takes his subject of eunuchs from the history when these eunuchs were considered as very close to God and therefore, it was considered a sin to scold them. In this play Dattani's mouthpiece Uma Rao also considers eunuchs as chosen people by the God. They are deprived of two blessed occasions of wedding and childbirth by nature and society. But ironically, their presence in these two occasions is also considered a blessing. They dance and sing and earn their livelihood. Uma Rao does not want to refuse a hijra at the event of wedding of a minister's son. The eunuchs Champa and Anarkali come to the wedding to sing and to receive some charity in return but Mr. Sharma (Subbu's father) rebukes them because he thinks them disgraced people. Uma Rao stops him for doing this because she has a soft corner in her heart for them as they are gentle and innocent people. She says to Mr. Sharma who rebukes Champa from singing on the occasion:

Uma: No, wait! You can't do that.

Mr. Sharma: Are you taking their side?

Uma: No, "It is bad luck to turn away a hijra on a wedding or a birth.

While in return Champa feels happy at this remark of Uma Rao and blesses her by saying: "Champa: Thank you my daughter. May you have hundred sons! (Dattani 38)."

The eunuchs are so pitiful that without having any evidence Anarkali is arrested by the police in the accusation of Kamla's murder only because no one else was available to be arrested. As Suresh, Uma's husband says; "We only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no proof against her. It could be any one of them (Dattani 33)." The writer discusses the fact that the eunuchs also know that they have no existence in the world outside of their own surroundings where they live. Uma Rao goes to meet Champa (another eunuch) to ask her about Kamla's death and gets angry on Champa for being responsible of the murder of Kamla because they did

not send her away with Salim who wanted to save her life. She accuses Champa that she was afraid of her stoppage of earning from Kamla that's why she did not send her away. Champa replies in a witty way; "Champa: That is true but only because she will not be happy in the outside world (Dattani 28)." Similarly at another place Champa asks Uma that if she thinks them (eunuchs) a members of society and Uma answers positively.

Champa: Oh. So you are a social worker. Say that.

Uma: Yes... I am a social worker.

Champa: Please excuse me, madam. I did not know that ... You see us also as society, no?

Uma: Of course. I mean_____you are (Dattani 23).

Dattani shows that the motivating factor of society is money that rich people can use any poor person's life for social and domestic purposes as Mr. Sharma uses his money and status to hide the case of his son's suicide and Kamla's murder. On the other hand the situation in the case of a transgender is more pathetic because nobody claims them as their own except their own transgender companions. Anarkali tells Uma that it does not make difference if there is any investigation of Kamla's murder because she is dead now and nobody will take interest in this matter. "Uma: Why didn't you tell me?

Anarkali: Would you have believed me? Anyway, what is the use of all that? What does it matter who killed Kamla? She is dead... (Dattani 41-42)"

The writer shows the manner of cruelty with eunuchs by the policemen who have a social authority and they make fun of them and treat them as animals. They beat them and torture them so that they accept the crime of murder or any other social crime that they have no concern with. Suresh Rao (Uma's husband) puts Anarkali in a male cell where she is physically and sexually abused. There is no one to take notice for Anarkali's arrest except Uma Rao who Uma asks her husband about this; "Uma: why do they put her in a male prison?

He comments;

Suresh Rao: They are as strong as horses (Dattani 09)."

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* ends at a grief note which justifies this study that eunuchs are voiceless people whose existence is taken as a

stigma at the morality of so-called civilized society. The society only sees morality in these aspects otherwise there is acute lawlessness and there is no body to take initiative. So in this struggle of getting more and more morality, the poor eunuchs are crushed bitterly. Uma Rao describes their situation very aptly in these lines:

Uma: (voice over). They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all other hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspaper. Champa was right. The police made no arrests... Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people... (Dattani 42)

Seven Steps around the Fire is a complete representation of invisible issues of eunuchs. They are taken as a subordinate gender to human beings that do not confirm any right to take part in social, domestic, political and most significantly in matrimonial affairs. The common person has a preconceived notion that transgender is a deformed creature and the significant productive function lacks in them so they are like other human beings. Quite ironically the presence of transgender is on the happy occasion of wedding is considered as necessary in South Asian families but their basic rights are exploited by everyone in the society who has some social post or status. This uncommon situation creates perplexion and transgender becomes the victim of hatred, contempt and despising remarks of people. Mahesh Dattani's plays makes good commercial success in this way to raise a voice through his pen for the troublesome identity issues of the third gender. The play speaks about the hidden problems of eunuchs and asserts the helplessness that nobody cares and investigates the life and death of these eunuchs and they have no worth at all whether alive or dead. The similar injustice is the content of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The injustice reaches at its peak in the play when it shows the little concern of police and common people about the murder of a eunuch. It deals with the poignant realities of human beings who crush the human rights of eunuchs. The social rights are banned for them because they are deprived of the blessings and enjoyment of matrimonial life. At the surface level, the play shows many other characters such the role of police, political workers and educated women with different moods and manners but in reality it is a wailing upon the human outward beauty and indifferent behavior of society and un-adoptability of eunuchs. The eunuchs live in cramps in some abandon places as they have to secure themselves from the mockery and contemptuous conduct of the

society. The condition of these innocent eunuchs is getting worse day by day because of the increasing crimes in the society. As Dattani has presented a crime case in which a eunuch becomes victim of that crime, similar cases are reported in newspapers and news headlines but no fruitful step has been taken yet to secure the transgender rights. It is a satire upon the liberal- minded people who raise voice for the human rights and the technological advancements are reaching at peak where robots are being given significance in our lives but human beings (eunuchs) are deliberately neglected and their rights are suppressed in South Asian countries. However, Dattani's attempt is notable that he has presented a different view of the modern South Asian society in world perspective. It can be called an artistic endeavor to determine a perception in a small but comprehensive play on the part of Mahesh Dattani among his contemporary literary circle.

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