

Seven Steps Round the Fire: **A Post-Colonial Rhythm**

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Abstract: The play, *Seven Steps Round the Fire*, deals with many themes that develop along with the investigation of Kamla's (the hijra) murder. The name of the play is suggestive of marriage and its dwindling significance, in the society. Seven steps round the fire is the most important ritual in the Hindu marriages. It signifies the commitment of the couple to live, love and die under the same sacred bond. Seven steps guarantee their togetherness in life and the life beyond.

Keywords: Mahaesh Dattani, marriage, patriarchy, homosexuality

The rise of Mahesh Dattani in the field of theatre is a significant happening, it can easily be felt in the words of Padamsee, "At last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity" (3). According to the Sahitya Akademi Award, citations "Dattani's work probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and is a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English" (1). Mahesh Dattani's major contribution to the field of theatre along with the successful launch of the Indian theater in English has been recognized and appreciated. He has evolved and used the pre-existing dramaturgy to experiment and engineer with the post-colonial, socio-cultural subjects and themes in the backdrop of the Indian myths and rituals. The talk centers round the emergence of new value system and social reality which have got a mixed acceptability in the society. Identity awareness has included the search for the invisible identities of the marginalized sections of the society. The voice of those whose identity remains unacknowledged under the hegemonic and authoritative voice of the elitists is loud in all his plays. 'Center-margin' binary theme mostly revolves round the widening awareness of the living conditions, linguistic innovations, social recognition, power structure and control over resources. His offbeat issues and themes like religious tension, sexuality, gender issues, homosexuality and child abuse are yet to find acceptance in the public and academic life of the nation. Though taking up the themes of gender and sexuality he keeps himself away from obscenity. This is what Dattani reiterates in one of the interviews with Pramila N. Phatarphekar at the premier of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* when he was asked about the 'peeping audience', "I was. But as a writer-director, I carefully avoid rewarding voyeurs" (2). Alyque Padamsee calls him one of the "most serious contemporary playwrights" (3). He belongs to the new set of post colonial literary critics and writers who focused

their attention on restoring the humanity of those who were dehumanized. He does so, in order to acknowledge the history of the dehumanization. Dattani's dramatic exploration into the way of "Decolonizing theatre" results in "politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetics and dramaturgy"(14). His plays become declaration of the emergence of a new man at the same time they sound a note of emancipation from the psychological impact of oppression. Awareness of marginality, not only proclaims the end of the hegemony of the centre, but also claims psychological liberation for the sexually marginalized.

The play, *Seven Steps Round the Fire*, deals with many themes that develop along with the investigation of Kamla's (the hijra) murder. The name of the play is suggestive of marriage and its dwindling significance, in the society. Seven steps round the fire is the most important ritual in the Hindu marriages. It signifies the commitment of the couple to live, love and die under the same sacred bond. Seven steps guarantee their togetherness in life and the life beyond. As the world is passing through post-modern phase, marriage as an institution has become questionable in the civilizations and cultures world over. No doubt, there were many myths associated to seal marriages with divine arch but the time has caused a shift of values in the ages old mythical, socio-cultural and religious legacy. Mahesh Dattani takes this issue further in the Indian context by focusing on the cultural plurality of the society where people have turned blind to socially and sexually marginalized groups. The marginal social and sexual groups, unlike the major heterosexuals, contribute less to the society but are unique in their sexual preferences. When Dattani deals with the impotency of Suresh, he not only jerks audience out of the heterosexual ideals established as the perennial law but also increases the social acceptance of sexual preference of the marginal. The fight for the alternative sexuality is taken far ahead from the very beginning of the play. The first few lines can be taken as the process of sensitizing the mass for cultural changes in favor of alternative sexuality and transsexuals, which undoubtedly form the marginal group, in any society. The end of the play emphasizes the need of a serious follow up of the issues related to the sexually marginal groups, because they are also humans whose rights need to be safeguarded in case of injustice. Apart from turning "good themes into good theatre", T.Vijay thinks, "in most of his plays Dattani forces the present to confront the past—a past that is dark, hidden, and often shameful. Dattani seems to suggest that unless we as individuals, families, and communities frankly address our past, and clear the skeletons in our cupboards, we will not be able to exorcise the ghosts of the past either in the present or in the future"(20). This is practiced well with great success in the intertwining of the main plot of Kamla's death along with the sub-plot of Uma's position and struggle in the world of men. The play is about the murder of Kamla, a hijra, for which Anarkali has been put behind the bars as the prime

suspect. Uma happens to be the lead actor who brings the loose strings together about the murder of Kamla. Anarkali is the prime witness of Subbu's marriage with Kamla and her murder. With Uma's success, a lot of themes related to gender bias against eunuchs tumble out of the cupboard. In Uma's success we can find the success of Dattani who has sufficiently highlighted the gender issues involving eunuchs. The rise of patriarchy against the marriage of Subbu's marriage with Kamla results in their deaths puts a heinous face of the age's long system. Most pertinent question raised by him is, whether this exercise of power and force was of worth it. Nick Harvey writes:

Hijras have a recorded history of more than 4,000 years. Ancient myths bestow them with special powers to bring luck and fertility. Yet despite this supposedly sanctioned place in Indian culture, hijras face severe harassment and discrimination from every direction (13).

The play becomes a revealing ground of the fore said statement. The opening lines of the play are suggestive of marriage and murder of Kamla, the hijra, "Sanskrit mantras fade in, the ones chanted during a Hindu wedding. Fire. The sound of the fire grows louder, drawing the mantras. A scream. The flames engulf the scream" (7). Anarkali has been arrested and is put behind the bars. For research purpose Uma accompanied by Munswamy wants to meet Anarkali. Uma, while addressing hijra uses 'she' but Munswamy and Suresh use 'it' that is used for neuter gender. Munswamy is surprised at the use of "she" for a hijra.

"Munswamy: You may see *the hijra* now if you wish, madam.

Uma: Will *she* talk to me?

Munswamy (chuckling). *She!* Of course *it* will talk to you. We will beat *it* up if *it* doesn't" (7). (italics are mine)

Anarkali is virtually beaten up in the lockup by the inmates at the provocation of Munswamy. The play truly justifies what Siddhartha says in his article about the treatment of eunuchs in the prison and their vulnerability to sexual abuse:

Prisons are also places where anyone who is seen as not being 'masculine enough' is harassed and often physically and sexually abused. According to the PUCL(K) report, the deeply sexual nature of the violence indicates that the sexuality of the hijra becomes the target of prurient curiosity, which could in its extreme form manifest itself as brutal violence. Sexual abuse and violence, apart from being the most systematic tool for dehumanization of an individual, can be understood as a punishment for not conforming to the gender roles laid down by the society (35).

Stereotyping hijra as liars and making them a subject of ridicule, the straight peruse the politics of marginalizing the group as subalterns. Munswamy to dissuade Uma from meeting Anarkali says, "It will only tell you lies" (7). The marginality is being produced here. Gayatri-Spivak has rightly recognized marginality in terms of "silence and speech". As social practice, eunuchs as marginalized groups were denied of self-affirmation. Suresh not only associates and looks at the hijra community but also hurls fun on them, "That is just the sort of name a hijra would

fancy. (Chuckles.) Anarkali!” (9). Stereotyping of eunuchs as liars has marred the common jurisprudence and righteousness of the society at large. Suresh forbade Uma, “Don't believe word of anything it says. They are all liars”(9). Uma did not like the way Anarkali was beaten by male inmates so she inquires Suresh that why Anarkali has been put up with the male prisoners. He answers, “They are as strong as horses”(9). He considers them more of a man than a female, “They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day,”(10). His views present glaring misconception and grudge against the particular community. He blently delivers his misconceptions with finality and authority with full confidence that what he believes should be taken by his wife without any questions. The society of the straight has naturalized and generalized such misconceptions, so similar views are also accepted and expected by the eunuch community. If Munswamy is skeptical about the truth of Anarkali, she is equally suspicious about the proclamation by the constable about the identity of Uma. It is surprising and curious that why Anarkali rejects to meet any journalist. What does a journalist stand for her? It seems that she fears further manipulation of the truth, and, in order to save her skin she doesn't want to be in news about the crime that she has not committed. Before divulging anything, she is abusive and raucous even in the presence of Munswamy Rao till she remains skeptical about her identity. She is abusive, “I don't care if you are the mother of all the whores in Bangalore. I said I am not in the mood”(8). After getting assured of her identity, Anarkali tries to develop a relation (of a sister) with her as if social relations still hold significance for her.

Anarkali: So you will not be my sister.

Uma: Of course we can be sisters.

Anarkali: Where are you and where am I (13)?

Knowing the truth, she pleads innocence before her, “I didn't kill her. She was my sister!”(9).

Uma just gives a brief introduction to the popular myths on the origin of Hijra and also tries to find out the meaning of the lexicon and its origin. She attempts and also presumes, that she will also access the class-gender-based power implication. She is a researcher and her short note only reflects her own ignorance of the theme and practicality attached to it. About the origin of the word she thinks, “The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female' (10). Then she also reflects back on the mythological background of the birth of the Indian transsexuals. She acknowledges that their presence all over the world and, India too, is no exception. Her research proposes the study of the position of transsexuals in the society. More than study, pity for Anarkali is reflected in her conclusion about them i.e. “they are the lowest of the low, they yearn for a family and love. The two events in the mainstream of the Hindu culture, marriage and birth, their presence is acceptable-ironically, the same privileges have been denied to them by man and nature”(11). Not for them, the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god,

eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessing of “may you be the mother of a hundred sons (11)”. In the conclusion there is a haunting question about their selective segregation from the societies. It mentions the reality ironically that is, though they are the part of the society, we have assigned them their roles and selectively segregated them from the social life. So, conclusion can be drawn that their lesser social bodies restricted to dancing and singing at birth and marriage which they themselves will never be blessed with. In a way, they are lesser citizens or no-citizens, because they remain less represented and have no representatives to care for them or register their history. The mainstream of history was never their space because all through, no one cared for them as they have no active role in the development of any kind, may it be economical, political or social. They are never represented so they are historically absent people. This becomes obvious when Uma discusses her problems with her professor. She says,

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 do through research... I know there is very little written about them and now I understand why... But there is no way I can win their trust! Maybe there is, but I don't know... How important is it? ... Oh ... I guess I will have to ... If my family throws me out, I hope that doctorate will come in handy (28-9).

The hijra community is socially unacceptable and socially unproductive, so when Anarkali is asked about her work and designation, she only repeats general social conviction that has been imposed on them as an outcome of a socio-cultural conditioning i.e. they are worthless and has no economic values, “What is there to tell? I sing with other hijras at weddings or when a child is born. People give us money otherwise I will put a curse on them. (Laughs.) As if God is on our side. (Smokes)”(12). The laugh and the last sentence “As if God is on our side” (12) is the ironical statement to which any one in the mainstream can feel the pangs of belonging to none. Though, a part of the body and a citizen of the world, she has contempt, dissatisfaction and anger on herself and the society which has ravished her of all the rights of being a person. The struggle of the gender margin is so prominently and sensitively portrayed, that it makes us commit ourselves to create a space for these silent sufferers. Mahesh Dattani, in a subtle way has put his ideas across his characters. It seems that God doesn't exist for them, but it is their necessity to keep God living because their necessity in society and economy thrives on that. Anarkali is not only aware of the gender marginalized position but, she is also aware of the class segregation that is violently practiced to the extent of blindness. “Anarkali: You (Uma) are innocent fool”(14). With all Uma's status, education and affluence she seems to be ignorant of practical forbearance of reality. She knows no fear under the strong protection at her father's and in-laws house where she never faced the naked life that frightens common people every day. The play is the journey of Uma from ignorance to knowledge that reveals

the realities of social institutions that are respected, followed and feared in our daily life, like journalists have been respected to bring out the truth, the police are taken to be the protectors of the society and politicians who are chosen at the end of every five years, as our noble representatives to safeguard political interests but all have failed in the Kamala murder case. Munswamy informs Uma about Kamala murder case. After burning the body, it was thrown in the pond near the temple. It was recovered after four days of its disposal. It was the priest who informed of the stench. She curiously asks Munswamy whether there was report lodged of missing Kamala. He replies that when it was found that the carcass was a Hijra, the community was informed but, when they visited, their interest in the jewelry was much more than the dead one. Munswamy's reply is remarkable, "police cannot do anything" (18). "Anarkali: One hijra, less in this world does not matter to your husband" (35). This is ironical situation in a civil society where life is preserved like anything and there only is a number of laws to protect the life of each one. Hijra's death as it seems is not covered by the law. It reveals a hidden legal truth that they belong to a society and a nation but ultimately they belong to no man's land. There is no one who can fight for them and represent them and save them when they are in danger because the police listens to the majority and acts accordingly.

To know the truth behind Kamla's murder, Uma visits minister's house to find out Salim's wife whom Anarkali had accused of having put Kamla to fire. Salim does not let her meet his wife. Coincidentally, Sharma, who is considered to be out of town, is surprisingly there and gives her jitter when he wants to confirm their identity at the pretext of their unauthorized entry in their house. Mr. Sharma says that his son is getting married to a girl from a fine family and that he is happy to see him enter into the phase of a householder. Why all fathers are so? What is so great about it that every father feels so irrespective of his caste, class and creed? Sharma says, "Don't they look fine together? This is the happiest moment for any parent- watching their child perform these rites" (37). No doubt, as a prestigious member of the society people need to follow the rules of the society and also make others to follow. So, normative nature of the male in the society trains them for acceptance of heterosexual marriages only that does not provide any space or hope for transsexuals and the people opting for alternative sexuality. His joy and happiness puts a question mark when we really know that Subbu was not at all interested in the marriage because he loved, a hijra, and married her in a clandestine way. But Subbu's appearance gives the tale a new twist where he says that Salim is a good man and he believes in him. At the same time, he reveals his dislike for marriage, "I hate weddings. I don't want all this. I don't wish to go ahead with this" (31) but the situation turns pathetic, when he is forced by his father to marry. Sharma wants to hush the uninvited hijras away from marriage ceremony. Mr. Sharma is annoyed with them but, it is Uma who intervenes. There is a dramatic twist at the end, where Subbu

takes out a gun and puts it on his own head to commit suicide. Mr. Sharma realizes his mistake and says "It was a mistake. I am sorry son"(40). For Mr. Sharma the marriage of the both, his son and hijra, was unacceptable because, as a leader and father, he needed to protect the social fabric and his own family tradition. It seems, if Mr. Sharma would have been at Subbu's place there would have been the same result without the slightest change. Mr Sharma is only a representative of patriarchy to which he too belongs and is a part of. Anarkali gives the photo which was taken just after his marriage with Kamla At last, Subbu commits suicide.

The story of Suresh and Uma has been put as a background of failing marriages and resistant patriarchy where, in order to save itself (patriarchy) it can go to any extent that includes even murdering people for the satisfaction of its whim. Their story has not been developed, otherwise the main story of Kamla-Subbu would not have produced its desired effect. Uma borrows fifty thousand rupees from her father to help Anarkali out of police custody at the pretext of buying a gift for Subbu who happened to be the Minister Sharma. While dwelling on the life, and the misconceptions of the hijra community, Uma's life with Suresh gives a new dimension to the complexities of man and woman relationship in the patriarchal set up. In their relationship the importance of gender norms, expected in the patriarchal family Suresh confronts Uma that why without his knowledge she has taken money from her father. Here, the route of reporting really conveys a lot that how patriarchy functions and protects itself. Her father informs Suresh that she has taken fifty thousand from him for the gift of Subbu's marriage. But the most pertinent question is why her father informed her husband. The answer in the patriarchal set up is that who has maximum right to her. Before marriage, it is always her father, in the Indian families at large, but after marriage it is always her husband who has his rights reserved for him. Then Suresh, the husband, exercises full control or possession over her. He is the responsible person to whom the information must have been passed on. Suresh is in a way hurt. He enquires, "Why did you ask your father for the money" (32)? His male ego provokes his sense of patronage for his wife, Uma. He feels that somewhere there is something wrong in him, either as man or as husband. He emphatically reminds her of his care for her. , "You should have asked me. Have I ever refused you any money"(32). This further leads to questions about heterosexual marriages particularly about the married life of Uma and Suresh. Uma is not able to conceive, so her mother in law takes her to a doctor for advice. When Suresh wants to know about the diagnosis, she conveys that the doctor wants to see him because there is no physical problem with her in conceiving.

Uma: I went to the doctor again. Your mother insisted she takes me.

Suresh: What did they say?

Uma: Just a test for your sperm count.

Suresh: I don't have to go... (32).

Suresh represents a typical Indian male who thinks that he can do nothing wrong, there is nothing wrong with him and if something is there, he cannot be held responsible. So, he can escape all the penalties and social censors at his sweet will. It is the virility that makes man a man, this is the patriarchal rule and in order to remain unquestioned, he just rejects her proposal to visit a doctor. He could have been cured but the sense of becoming guilty of not conceiving her makes things a bit complex. He prefers to remain unexposed. Instead of treatment, he chooses to remain indifferent to the whole situation and save his position as the head of the family and the man of Uma. In spite of being educated and able, she is webbed in the strong structure of patriarchy, but she marks her presence felt with commitment and unrelenting force when she promises, "No. I owe it to you and Anarkali and ... and ... all of you!" (34) This is an ironical situation in the civil society where life is preserved like anything, and there is a number of laws to protect the life of each one. Various state machineries function in such a way that it seems there is no social will to provide them with legal rights. It is a glaring evidence of dominance of sexual majority over sexual minority where rights are encroached upon and often declined. Negligence towards hijra's death reveals a hidden legal truth that they belong to a society and a nation but ultimately they belong to no man's land. There is no one who can fight for them, represent them and save them when they are in danger because the police listens to the majority and acts accordingly.

Anarkali as a goodwill gesture gifts a special mantra locket to Uma, so that she may have a baby this time. This also reveals the truth that in a hostile society there are a few good relations between transsexuals and straights. As Anarkali had said one more hijra less in the world doesn't make difference to police or society or polity or law. Things remain as they were. Nothing happens to Mr. Sharma. Subbus's suicide was proved accidental and no arrests were made in the Kamla murder case. Uma couldn't do anything because she needs to save her family and her family needs to abide by the system. Though educated and committed, she fails to do her duty to save the gender or familial norms set by the patriarchal society. To safeguard the system two lives were ravaged. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a mockery of the gender oriented social system where the playwright sympathetically accepts human dignity of eunuchs and struggles to construct their voice so that they might identify their oppressors and register their voice of protest. The recognition of the marginal voice, not only empowers the sexual marginality but also liberates their psyche. Nandy postulates that psychological liberation is more significant than the social and political ones,

The colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities ones and for all. In the process, it helps to generalize the concept of the modern west from geographical entity to a psychological category.

The west is everywhere within the west and outside in the structure and minds (83).

The interface of eunuchs and the middle class society developed by Dattani has resulted in their respective representation of eunuchs as a class that perpetually survives under the cover of 'shame' and 'silence' and the middle class that is hell bent on sexual segregation and actively participates in the marginalizing act.

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