



Research Article

Sex, gender and sexuality: A study of Mahesh Dattani's play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire'

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Abstract

The concept of 'gender' is typically placed in opposition to the concept of 'sex'. While our sex (female/male) is a matter of biology, our gender (feminine/masculine) is a matter of culture. Mahesh Dattani deals with alternative sexuality and tabooed relationship in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* that unveils the courage of gay, Subramaniyam, who wishes to marry a transgender and faces terrible consequences in this heteronormative world. Discrimination against them is always translated into violence. Dattani, through his play, provides transgender people with a voice and space in English theatres to express their feelings and predicaments. The paper will retrospect the uniqueness of *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, demonstrating the struggle of transgenders, Kamala, Anarkali, and Champa as a marginalized section of the society with comparative analysis through gender studies and subaltern studies.

Keywords: Transgender, Subaltern, Sex, Gender, Mahesh Dattani

Introduction

Theatre is often regarded as the quintessential storytelling medium. As Goethe aptly put it, *Am Anfang war die Tat* (in the beginning was action). This sentiment underscores the fundamental nature of theatre as an active and dynamic form of expression, transcending barriers of caste, creed, gender, history, and nationality. Theatre encourages a celebration of boundless creativity and empowers individuals through its inherent call

to action. It is not just an art form; it is a powerful tool for personal growth. Anjum Katyal highlights that theatre stimulates self-expression, builds self-confidence, enhances communication skills, and fosters teamwork, cooperation, and sharing.^[1] These attributes are crucial for individual development and can lead to more cohesive and empathetic communities. R Yarrow mentions that theatre holds a unique position in the realm of activism (p.56).^[2] Unlike traditional forms of activism that rely heavily on documentation and rhetoric, theatre emphasizes performance. This aspect of theatre makes it an effective medium for addressing social issues and proposing solutions. Bertolt Brecht a German Playwright and director following Marxist frame of reference proclaims his play has pleaded to the audience intellect, as theatre erudite with social reform.^[2] Augusto Boal postulates Theatre has the power to build political and social reforms. In the second half of the twentieth century, the role of theatre on social perspectives reinforced that led to the

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implementation of therapy as in Boal's Theatre of Oppressed or 'for enabling the social inclusions of marginalized populations, creative self - expression for psychological development, and social communication as in 'community' based theatre' (p.65).

The term Indian theatre encloses within its boundaries disparate varieties of play that comprises of classical, ritual, devotional, folk, dance drama, and finally modern play. Indian theatre provides an arena to the heterogeneous play undergoing various transformations in its evolution process. During eighteenth and nineteenth century Indian theatre, when came in contact with Western literary and theatrical tradition alter its historical themes in writing the play. The outcome of it leads to the emergence of new trend 'modern Indian drama' evolved under the European impact in colonial phase. After India obtained her Independence in 1947, enumerate playwrights felt entail to flavour the Indian theatre debarring British paradigm and pursuing Indian themes. Playwrights like Kavalam Narayana Pannikar, along with Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad, began to study Kathakali, Yakshagana, Chhau and various Traditional performances which can contribute to Modern Indian drama. They were referred to as the 'Theatre of Roots' movement. The disclosure of the Theatre of Roots bestows to the development of Indian drama in regional languages. Erin B. Mee states the theatre of roots, street theatre, and English language theatre are three among the many kinds of theatre flourishing in India today, on the proscenium and non-proscenium stages invarious locations of the country in different languages, structures, and forms (p.5). These playwrights have a phenomenal endowment in moulding the Indian theatre with traditional roots and extricating it from the Western impacts. In this process, they paid surveillance to social, political problems and emphasizes on domestic violence too. Mahesh Dattani is one of the pioneers who vocalized on the subject untouched. He not only dealt with the issues related to women but focused on 'other' gender subjects. His play explores the arduous situation in the life of gay, lesbian, and transgender. My paper will deal with the issues of hijra (transgender) in comparison with perspectives of gender studies and subaltern studies in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Mahesh Dattani state

that 'theatre being a mirror to society has a great deal of truth, no matter whatever theatre one creates'(p.34).

Heterosexual relationship is embraced by the society but if one goes out of the boxes of binary male and female they may be doomed in languish. In the words of Judith Butler, 'All Gender is by definition unnatural'(p.16). For instance, the biological female is expected to acquire and promulgate feminine traits, and desire men. Instead, she claims gender to be unnatural and digressing cultural construct so that no requisite relationship between the body and gender exist. Likewise, Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (1999) differentiate between gender and sex in the following words:

'The concept of gender is typically placed in opposition to the concept of sex. While our sex (female/male) is a matter of biology, our gender (feminine and masculine) is a matter of culture. Gender may therefore be taken to refer to the learned pattern of behaviour and action as opposed to that which is biologically determined. Crucially, biology need not be assumed to determine gender'.(p.76).

Gender critics strongly accept the view that gender is a social construct and reject gender to be natural. Gender critic canvasses on the divergence opinion stating 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' to be a social construct. Several critics do agree that sexuality is often comprehended on pertaining to duo prospect of homosexuality and heterosexuality disdaining sundry divergence and disparity among individual. Few critics view sexuality as a continuum, not a fixed set of binary oppositions; they also recognize that sexuality encompasses a range of behaviors, from bondage to bestiality. Remaining few gender critics (especially many gay and lesbian critics) emphasizes on sexuality and wrangle it as culturally produced. 'These critics would argue that sexuality is innate, that homosexual and heterosexual are naturally different' elaborates Ross c. Murfin and Supriya M. Ray. The elucidation of gender and the periphery of gender seem to shift in the twenty-first century, but their importance lies unchanged. In this contemporary world, where the function of gender overlaps, it still remains intermediate to whatever we do. According to C R Ember et al., 'Each age has only one issue to think through and

one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our salvation on an intellectual level' (p. 45).

The terms sex, gender, and sexuality are often used interchangeably, but they refer to different aspects of human identity and experience.. Sex is a biological phenomenon that states a manifest distinction between penis and vagina. The term was used earlier in the sixteenth century; clarify the segregation of male and female. Subsequently, in the nineteenth century, the meaning alters to physical relation between two sexes be it heterosexual or homosexual. The concept of sex is the very notion of sexuality, is itself a product of discourse. As interpreted by Gayle Rubin' Every society has a sex/gender system-a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional matter, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be' (p.75).^[9] The concept of gender is evasive. Examining the definition of 'gender', we realize that it ventures the self-complacent of an individual as being categorized in the boxes of male or female, aberrant from biological sex. Gender is defined here as the cultural construction of femininity and masculinity as opposed to the biological sex (male or female) which we are born with as stated by Pearly et al.^[9] Gender is a social set up which is not neutral. It is marshalled in Pyramid way, and address the polarity and segregation between female and male and between predominance forms of masculinity and other less hapless. Gender is about power, and historically has been built on the subordination of women and the execration and outlawing of patterns of sexuality which did not readily conform with acceptable forms of masculinity or femininity - especially homosexuality. Gender identities are performatively produced in various cultures.

The play proclaims the life of hijra (transgender) with various aspects that showcase their plight through gender studies in comparison with subaltern studies. E Kilian asserts that gender studies extensively hold feminism and masculinity studies, and add to sexuality, queer, transgender, lesbian, gay studies inclusively (p.88).^[10] Gender identity is not static and uniform as it entails feminism and masculinity studies too. The duo categories of cultural gender norm: heterosexuality and the binary structure of gender are the

theoretical interventions that Judith Butler Vanguard and disassemble. Ember et al. rightly points that this cultural construction of sex summons the dual nature of sex and gender that imposes an arena lies between and beyond male and female, conceptualizing a 'third space' or plethora of sexuality and genders which is enclosed by the term transgender (p.77).^[10] As stated by Stryker et al. Transgender functions as an umbrella term for all kinds of gender diversity that, explicitly or implicitly, question the binary gender order (including trans sexuality, inter sexuality, cross-dressing, and other formations) and has initiated a separate area of research: transgender studies (p.78).^[11]

In Symposium Plato grants an opportunity to Aristophanes to articulate the power of love. As stated by Harvey, Aristophanes illustrates. 'For one thing, the race was divided into three; that is to say, besides the two sexes, male and female, which we have at present, there was a third which partook of the nature of both, and for which we still have a name, though the creature itself is forgotten, they are hermaphrodite, The males were descended from the Sun, the females from the Earth, and the hermaphrodites from the Moon, which partakes of either sex'(p.32).^[12]

T M Bettcher states being 'Trapped in the wrong body' that illustrates a symptom of gender dysphoria in children asserting a strong preference for toys, games, or activities stereotypically used/played by the other gender, and astrong rejection for those things that aretypical, ly masculine (if the child was assigned a boy) ortypically feminine (if the child was assigned a girl) (p. 387).^[9] In this way, the medical model establishes a norm in which those who adhere to stereotypical gender presentation have ahealthy and natural gender, while those who do not is measured by how far, and in what ways, they deviate from the norm. Thus, the norm of healthy gender acts as a regulatory mechanism, in which a generalized account of gender transgression encourages doctors, parents, and teachers to seek out transgressive behavior, monitor and speculate upon it, and in doing so, keep both non-transsexuals and transsexuals in adherence to their roles.

Judith Butler observes that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender identity

is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.^[9] In the twentieth century, the results changed, as the performance of gender roles now variegates in disparate societies thus, leading to the re-organization of social boundaries of gender.

One is not born, but made hijra

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* was broadcast on BBC Radio4, on January 9, 1999, and was first staged at Museum Theatre, Chennai by MTC Production and Madras Players on 6th Aug 1999.^[9] Dattani's audacity is perceptible, as he locomotes the context from conventional to discrete. He chastises the behavior society possess towards transgender (hijra in India) and unveil hijra plight. N Sen affirms Dattani is the precursor, who introduced 'the social dogma, quotidian hijra confronts' (p.34). He courageously dares to vocalize hijra agony without trepidation of society and opprobrium. Unabated with his quest to delve into more mysterious, uncovering some of hidden India. The peripheral Hijra community is unbidden yet holds inevitable existence in Indian Society. Dattani, through his play, has endeavored to highlight the struggles faced by hijras, as well as the tribulations endured by women due to societal oppression. The belief of hijra as an alternative gender category is succored by linguistics affirmation. G Reddy asserts that Hijra is of Urdu derivation, is either eunuch or her maphrodite. Eunuch alludes to a castrated male and hermaphrodite to ambiguous genitalia (p.76).^[10] Albeit, in North India lies a linguistic contrast betweenborn hijras (hermaphrodites) and made hijras (eunuchs) recent use in both categories. The view of hijras as an 'in-between' gender begins therefore not men, or as Wendy O' Flaherty puts it, Aseunuchs, hijras are man minus man (p.56).^[10]

Serena Nanda, in his book *Neither Male nor Female* presents the idea of hijra as inter sexed impotent man, enduring emasculation by removing all or parts of genitals, which has an incompatible difference between the cultural ideal and the real behavior (p.77).^[10] Many hijras have procured space in the hijra community without undergoing the process of castration. It is sarcastic to elude, hijras who are sterile, are welcomed by the society for blessings on childbirth and marriage ceremony. The society that isolates this discrete community greets them for celebrations and scores their

blessing. This ambiguous despotism and therapy tendered to them by man and nature makes them impotent and immedicable, and puts them in the category of Gendered Subaltern. Leela Gandhi accredits Subaltern studies, as an attempt to allow the people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography, and in so doing, to speak for, or stand the muted voice of truly oppressed (p.45).^[10] Locating hijra in the subaltern category, as they cannot speak for themselves, helpless to injustice forced upon them. The case is not only evident in the 1990s when Dattani took a brave and bold step to write the play, but also in neoteric time situation repose the same. Hijra struggles with discrimination, injustice and torment even today. Post-Colonial intellectuals should take up the subject of subaltern studies, which forge a sincere attempt to speak for marginalized and subdued. Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the fire* is the first radio play to unveil the subject matter of hijra. This paper will explore the hijra characters in the play of Mahesh Dattani in the 1990s in comparison to psychological and physiological perspectives. How far has the situation changed, stimulated or deteriorated?

The commencement and denouement of play *Seven steps around the fire* have a special significance. The play begins with the marriage ceremony and ends with it, staining an unforgettable tragedy. In the outset, Subbu, a gay tied a knot with Kamala, a hijra. The result was adown hearted slaughter of Kamala by the squad as instructed by Subbu's father, who hardly bears to imagine the sight of his son marrying a hijra. This scene is heart throbbing, leaving a question behind life's trivial or hijra life is trivial?.. The play winds up with marriage ceremonyunaccomplished as happened early. Society unacceptability of gender variations has often led to a drastic outcome. Kamala marriage with Subbu is evidence of the diabolical face of society. Hijra marriage is impermissible in the 1990s as well as in present day. A. Revathi in *Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Lifestories* accumulates distinct tales of hijra life. Opposed to Dattani's play, after two decades few tales of hijra are contentedly expressed. Aruna, a hijra was eluded by her husband's infidelity. The moment she discerned her husband actions, Aruna departed without informing. Moreover Rajam, a hijra lives with her husband, who loves and fosters her. Boy's family

too acknowledges her. Rajam affirms He behaves with me as a husband and treats me as his wife. He never considered me as a hijra. We are living happily without any hassles.

Disparate life stories have been vocalized by different hijra, as per their experience. N Hagel state that the austerity, a transgender confronts is because of the unaccepting nature of society, which mirrors 'male' and 'female' as two sides of the same coin, eliminating other gender, for instance, transgender, big ender, pangender, lesbian, gay and gender queer (p.604).^[11] C Witt states that society emphasizes on Gender Essentialism that asserts the idea that male and female have intrinsic, idiosyncratic, and congenital characteristics that certify them as discrete genders (p.34).^[11] These are often biological or sexual differences, and they are exclusively examined as polar opposites. Gender Essentialism amalgamates gender and sex ineffaceably. J Weeks proclaims that After all, if essentialism can be shown to be a paradigmatically exclusionary form of thinking (the exclusion argument) that distorts the inherently fluid character of the language of gender (the instability argument), a language which expresses temporary congregations of power rather than enduring substantial realities (the power argument), then it might seem that anti-essentialism is the only viable position (p.79).^[11] Challenging the essentialist thought, critics argue that gender and sex are opposites. Gender is a cultural phenomenon whereas Sex is biological. Sex does not predict the gender one is bound to endure. As we see the cases of trans women, born with male genital, desires to acquire feminine traits and genital. Many undergo hormonal therapy, sex reassignment surgery to drag themselves out from the wrong body. R Lane state that these cases are evident as many transgender undergoes sex reassignment surgery, Concentrating on the artificiality of gender can downplay the need to change the sexed body, which is central to the transsexual lived experience (p.140).^[11] Transgender can become an exclusionary identity-only for those who seek to smash the gender binary in their public identities.

Mahesh Dattani has depicted through his play the muffled voices of a deviant group, considering it to be first play in India that has articulated this subject. Kamala, a beautiful hijra was married to the son of

Minister, Subbu. The outcome was remorseless death of Kamala. Anarkali, the sister of Kamala was arrested on suspicion of murder, tormented by the police. She was in extreme sufferings and tribulation. Champa is the Nayak of the hijra house. Despite having knowledge of the assassination performed, she was incompetent to succour Anarkali and unveil the truth about the murder. Dattani has illustrated the deprivation, distress and dejection of hijra community through his characters Anarkali, Kamala and Champa. Uma, a research scholar and wife of the police superintended, is working on the hijra case study that forges her to encounter Anarkali. Characters of Dattani are comprehensible and unveil their mind to the audience. He embedded through his play the acrimonious ambience of the world he lives in. Anarkali, Kamala and Champa, like other hijras, are the oppressed subaltern. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari commented on Dattani that, He deals with sexuality and gender issues, religious tension, and the workings of personal and moral choices as he explores a gamut of human relationships. Dattani calls for the interference of gender expectations and escorts further issues and themes that elucidate a prevalent comprehension of transgressing gender boundaries as asserted by K Tyagi.^[11] His plays endeavour to capture the function of gender-behaviour as a curtailment on the ways in which people perform, and how it acts as an obstacle to free participation and indulgence.

Conclusion

The play presented in this paper emphasizes the helplessness and catastrophe of the hijra. Anarkali, being innocent was imprisoned and demeaned. Mun swamy referred to her as 'it,' which diminished her identity. Hijras of India suffers an identity crisis. Through Uma, a manifest layout is contemplated of Anarkali and other hijra life. Anarkali, being gendered subaltern was silenced to speak the truth and for herself. A. Revathi in *Our Lives, Our Words: Telling Aravani Life stories* presented the preface suggesting hijras collective voice for metamorphose and acceptance.

In the battlefield we stand.
We do not seek sympathies
Understand our emotions - we
Demand our dues and nothing else.
Amma should accept us

Appa must accept us - and
Society should accept us
Property we ought to get - sirs
Pleasure we must have
House we need - sirs
And jobs we need (p.56).^[11]

Hijra was referred to as khawajasar as protecting the royal harems and confidants of the rulers. They had historical significance in our religious text, were respected and admired by the Mughal court. With the arrival of Britisher's in India, they were adjudged as criminal under The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 and lost dignity and integrity. Now they are toiling for their rights and identity, earning a livelihood through begging, dancing in wedding and prostitution. Hijra in the past was treated as Demi-Gods in Hinduism. In India Ardhanaree swara who is half-male and half-female is worshipped. The question then arises, why in such country hijras are hated, where God Ardhanaree swara is worshipped. How those people who have heard the stories of Shikhandi in Mahabharata, refuse to understand hijra? Why is hijra humiliated, distorted, abused and unprivileged. Seven Steps Around the Fire mirrors the same tribulation and anguish through a heart throbbing story. Humanity was crushed when Kamala, a hijra was burned to death for loving Subbu. Anarkali was treated like animals and whipped in jail, she underwent endless sufferings. Champa, who was hijra's Nayak, was like the rock, pain in the heart but was bold to face the challenges after Kamala's death. Uma played a significant role in hijras life; she was an innocent woman unaware of the truth. Dattani in his last scene has done justice to hijras when the guilty was known and everyone was astonished. Truth can never remain hidden; this was limpid in the play. Justice was done when the true face of the minister was unveiled; he was claimed as the mastermind in Kamala's death.

The paper has demonstrated Uma's struggle in patriarchal society and the subjugation faced by

hijras, Kamala, Anarkali and Champa as a marginalized section of the society, applying the theory of subaltern studies and gender studies. Quoting Galatians 3:28. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all in God. Exempting ourselves from the binary notions of male and female, let's accept with an open heart and mind the transgenders, whom society rejects brutally.

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