

## Living the life of a transgender: A study on Mahesh Dattani's "Seven steps around the fire"

\*<sup>1</sup> Rajeswari A, <sup>2</sup> Thatchanamoorthy P

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English Barathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup> Director, Madurai Kamaraj University Evening College, Palani, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Abstract

Indian drama has reached its pinnacle in the hands of Mahesh Dattani. Unlike other Indian play writers, he writes his plays directly in English and addresses many socio-political issues of India. He dares to write about the marginalized homosexuals, lesbians, transgenders and socially oppressed women of the contemporary world. This paper attempts to trace the effective portrayal of the lives of transgenders in his play *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Transgenders are deprived of normal life and they are not allowed to marry a normal person and enter into family hood. Once a lonely transgender should live a lonely life till death; a cursed life. This prejudiced society fails to realize the fact that only this society gave them this piteous and so called low life. Ignoring this fact, the society misuses, mistreats and accuses them for being a transgender. Dattani takes up such characters to educate the world on their agonizing life.

**Keywords:** Marginalized Transgenders Prejudiced Agonizing

### Introduction

India is known for its richness in culture and moral values. Knowledge on such richness reached worldwide through Indian literatures that were carried by the traders and voyagers of ancient world. Drama is one among such literary works, read and appreciated by the world reading community. On tracing the history of Indian drama, it is evident that its growth can be categorized in to three stages. Stage one is where drama was written in Sanskrit to spread religion, stage two is where it was used for pleasure and for freedom struggle, and finally the third stage is modern plays which cover various themes and motifs. Indian drama has reached its pinnacle in the hands of Mahesh Dattani as he writes all his plays originally in English and addresses all socio-political issues prevailing in the contemporary world.

He became the first Indian playwright writing in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1988 for the play *Final Solution* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Dattani's plays deal with Indian mythology, Indian traditions, Indian dance, Indian English, and Indian social problems - yet speak of themes which touch any audience. His plays deal with the search for individual identity inside and outside the family, the need for happiness, love, sexual fulfillment, security, loneliness and emptiness of superficially successful lives, belonging and not belonging, the pain and pathos of keeping up appearance. He is the one and only writer to portray some of the Indian taboos like homosexuality and transgender. To be specific his play *Seven Steps around the Fire* brings the turmoil of a transgender on stage or before the eyes of the reader.

This paper attempts to trace and study the portrayal of transgender in his play *Seven Steps around the Fire* through a subaltern view. Hijra is the popular name for transgender in South Asia, especially in India. Though they have been accepted as a third gender by law in many countries and Indian society, they still are facing ill-treatment. On analyzing their origin, it is understood that some transgenders are born that way and very few homosexuals undergo illegal surgeries to transform themselves. This transformation is rare; those

homosexuals who could not act heterosexuals to the society and family undergo such transformation. This happens because; the society can accept transgenders and their existence but not homosexuals.

Hijras can be seen in almost all Indian festivals where they dance, sing and clap to earn money. Indian people give them money, food and clothes not with a helping mind but with a fear that they will the family. If such a mythology is not brought to Indian by our ancestors then the earning of transgender livelihood would have been a question mark and even they won't move freely outside. There was a time when these people were used to make the audience laugh in a theatre. As many characters on the stage dresses like them and speak in their tone. In short eunuchs are made as a laughing stock in front of the society. Only later the playwrights started displaying them in a different angle. That is they started discussing their pain, suffocation of suppression, zest for living a normal life etc which made the viewer's think about them and gave the thought of helping and respecting such kind of people.

In a general perception hijras can be seen publically on two occasions where they are welcomed and get appraisal. These two occasions are wedding and child-birth where they used to come and bless the newly wedded couple and newly born baby. But the irony of their life lies in the fact that they are denied from these two privileges by man as well as by nature. Nature has deprived them to give birth to a child. Our society does not allow them to take seven steps around the fire that unites two souls in a beautiful form of wedding as Dattani says:

"Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony or the blessing and may be the mother of a hundred sons" (SSAF ACT II).

This play is about a transgender by the name Anarkali and how she is mistreated and accused by the prejudiced society for a crime, which is not true. She is accused for killing her fellow transgender. The character Uma is the mouthpiece of

Dattani and she, throughout the play, advocates Anarkali and the other transgender characters of the play. Dattani beautifully opens his play by revealing the culture and manners of hijras. All of them form a group outside a house, dressed in colorful saris with lots of jewels and “clapping hand widely in the special manner of hijras, with hollow palms, making so much noise with their high pitched voices” (SSAF ACT I 6). One thing is clear that their language is totally different from a normal person. They mostly speaks vulgar words very casually as when Uma first introduces herself to Anarkali that she is a journalist and have come to rescue her, she retorts by saying “I don’t care if you are the mother of all whores”(SSAF ACT I 43). Anarkali even rebukes Munswamy as a “sister-fucker” (SSAF ACT I 11).

Language used, is a unique identity of transgenders, both used by them and used on them. Most of these people are addressed as ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’. This is because the society never treats them to be human and as a result it fails to understand that they too have feeling like every other. Almost all transgenders, except very few educated, are looked down and ill-treated by the society. They are exposed to sexual harassments and all vulgar and abusive words are used on them. On a long run, they get used to this vulgar language and so use them casually in public.

Their birth is consider as a curse from divine and the irony is that they are deprived from the personal relationships but their presence is made obligatory when common person’s celebrates their own personal relationships. That’s why when Uma calls Anarkali as ‘sister’ in a occasion, she initially becomes over-whelmed but soon she has a fear and says “Oh! You are only being kind- Don’t hurt my heart” (SSAF ACT I 53). Anarkali is torn between the fear of social code and legal provisions but get some sort of relief and strength in the love and affection of Uma. Dattani’s uniqueness is that he never allows his subaltern to suffer throughout the play and makes them strong and aware of the pros and cons of society by introducing strong bond of relations for them like Uma.

According to the prevailing laws of Indian government, male and female accused should be locked up separately. But there is not word or law on the treatment of transgenders. Anarkali is locked up with male accused and there she undergoes a lot of harassment. Finally, with the help of Uma, when she comes out of the prison with lot of wound all over her body, she requests her friend Champa to take her to a hospital. But, Champa refuses and says that no hospital will allow transgenders to get treated and even then she tries to contact some of the doctors but they either ignores her call or gives false excuses. That’s why Champa finally consoles her:

“Champa: I tried

Anarkali: If we gave him more money?

Champa: Stupid woman. As if they want our money.

Anarkali: What about the other doctor? Gulab’s customer?

Champa: It will go away. Let me give you some brandy.” (SSAF ACT II 51)

Even animals have the privilege of getting medical treatment in this world but not a transgender. On seeing a hurt dog or a cat even a passerby will inform the BlueCross and it will be take care, no one really knows, why these people are be let down even on a grave situation? This exposes the mentality of Indian people who consider transgender to be even low than animals. Dattani says that whatever good or bad happens to them it is their head (Champa) who takes care of them and she

is looked as a living God for them. Finally Champa comforts Anarkali by embracing and keeping her head on her lap and swings her like a kid by singing lullaby. She even diverts her mind by discussing Anarkali’s favourite things in order to make her forget her pain.

Later, Uma finds out the true murderer of Kamala (for which Anarkali is accused) and also the reason behind the murder. Salim the son of Mr Sharma, who is of high social status, was in love with Kamala (a transgender) and so Mr Sharma was filled with shame. To put an end to their relationship Mr Sharma murders her through his servant Subbu. In Indian society no one will accept the wedding of a hijra with a common man and everyone tries to save his or her own son from such people like Mr. Sharma. Through him Dattani reflects the socio-political issues of present day. He also exposes the reality that hijras are deprived of the right to marriage and having love with a person of their own choice as Kamla, has to bear the consequences. Their love may be pure and keen but such lovers have to suffer the rules made by hypocrite and diplomatic society that does not allow them to live happily. Dattani highlights the hypocrite face and pathetic system of our society where an innocent people like Anarkali are arrested just on the basis of suspicion but no case is registered against Mr.Sharma who confessed his crime publically.

This play clearly shows that transgenders are not accepted into normal families in any way and they have to live a lonely life till death. Such lonely transgenders are misused or misguided into sexual work by the society and in turn the very same society will accuse them for prostitution. No one really understands that transgenders are mostly forced sex workers for various reasons and the present life style is given to them only by this society. Transgenders are misused, mistreated and accused by the societies for the reason there is no one to protect and save them. Even the family in which a transgender is born fails to protect them or they chase them out of family fearing the society. On reading or watching Dattani’s *Seven Steps around the Fire* one can feel the cursed life of a transgender. His objective of authoring this play is to educate the mass with the plight of living a life as a transgender. They need to be give treated at least as human beings if not treated equal. They have to take education seriously and should prove the world that they are not inferior to any other. More research should be done on them and how they are projected in literature to bring changes in their lives.

#### References:

Dattani Mahesh. *Collected Plays*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005.

Dattani Mahesh. *The Invisible Observer—a profile* by Anita Nair, <http://www.anitanair.net/profiles/profile-mahesh-dattani.htm>, accession date 14-3-16, time-13.30