

# Periodic Research

## Persecution of Transgender: A Review of Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

**Geeta Phogat**  
Assistant Professor,  
Deptt.of English,  
BPSMV,  
Khanpur Kalan,  
Sonipat

**Neha**  
Research Scholar,  
Deptt.of English,  
BPSMV,  
Khanpur Kalan,  
Sonipat

### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian playwright to be awarded Sahitya Akademi Award and is the most influential dramatist renowned for his language and characterization. His plays have broken down the line of demarcation between rich and poor people. He also includes transgender and LGBT community which are considered as outcaste community in Indian society. He has shown successfully their pain, suffering, trauma and gross injustice that are meted out to them in his works. The themes of his plays are universal and never bound to any caste, creed and class. He is well known for presenting bold themes and offers the first-hand experience of socio cultural environment of the contemporary India and the common people. In his dramatic works the intricacies of human relationship and dilemma of the common man can be seen. The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* depicts the sufferings and social status of transgender and also illustrates how they have to bear immense torture and anguish at every onset. He travels into the inner self of people and coerces them to think that there is a need to understand the consciousness of eunuchs and their quest for identity and also urges to reorganize the social structure and practices.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Outcaste, Community, Suffering, Injustice.

### Introduction

Drama occupies a place of pride among the genres of literature. In India it has the longest surviving period. Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra* is considered as the foremost treatise on drama. Mahesh Dattani is one of the most distinguished playwrights who contributed in depicting the Indian themes critically. He is not only a legendary writer but also a stage and film director, actor and playwright. His works include twelve stage plays, six radio plays and four films. There are the themes which make the audience to devour his plays. *Seven Steps around the Fire* deals with the theme of persecution of transgender and the inhuman treatment of people towards them. It lacks pity, kindness and generosity because the transgenders are considered not worthy to fit in the social structure. Despite of the callous attitude of people they remain calm because they know that they have no right to raise their voice.

### Objective of the Study

The present paper aims to analyze the agony and woe of transgender which have now been the hallmark of contemporary Indian society.

### Review of Literature

Mahesh Dattani is a remarkable name in the world of dramatists and a lot of critical work has been done on Indian drama. He deals with formidable themes in his plays which touch each and every human soul and prompt them to bring a change in the mentality which in consequence leads to the change in our social system. The important themes that he deals with in his plays are—gender discrimination, homosexuality, religious riots, exploitation of women, maltreatment to eunuch, prostitution, child sexual abuse etc. As a spokesman he targets on the weaker sections of the society and narrates every minute detail of their sufferings and trauma. Dattani always prefers to be very close to reality to unveil the social issues prevalent in Indian society. He talks about upper middle class in his plays and also epitomizes the amalgamation of Indian and western culture. He has explored such issues of which a mere mention is considered as taboo in Indian society in ancient times. As far as his stage craft is concerned he does not tell the story in a linear fashion

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rather uses flash back technique to narrate the different incidents in a play. Dattani is also the most influential dramatist renowned for his language i.e. diction and outstanding characterization which are reflection of real life characters. Though the characters in his plays are from diverse economic and social background yet they yearn for their distinctive identity irrespective of their social position in the society. He challenges the hypocrisy of Indian society who discerns their own loved ones for the sake of their respect in the society. He seems to portray the family relationship that sometimes binds its members together with a bond of love and affection and sometimes that bond is broken through mutual distrust and suspicion which results in social exclusion of the members within a family. A considerable body of critical work exists on Mahesh Dattani's plays which have been interpreted by using different critical techniques and tools. However our objective will be to study and critically analyze his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and to bring to light the humiliation faced by the transgender in the contemporary Indian society.

## Full Text

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian playwright to be awarded Sahitya Akademi Award and is the most influential dramatist renowned for his language and characterization. His emphasis is generally on regional language and this is one of the reasons for his increasing popularity. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri also says, "The need to make contact with, to speak to one's audiences in their own language is the paramount condition for the playwright's success". (129)

He has explored such issues which were considered as taboos in Indian society in ancient times. But he is never afraid of exposing those sensitive issues and even doesn't hesitate to show the grim outlook of the strained relationship and beliefs of conservative society. Mortimer says about him, "Here was a playwright who was not afraid to work within a relatively conventional dramatic structure to tell a story that was bold and powerful without ever being melodramatic." (4). The characters are drawn from every strata of society be it a common man or a VIP. His plays have broken down the line of demarcation between rich and poor people. He also includes transgenders and LGBT community which are considered as outcaste community in Indian society. He has shown successfully their pain, suffering, trauma and gross injustice that are meted out to them in his works. The themes of his plays are universal and never bound to any caste, creed and class. He presents the reality through words, images, sounds and other various kinds of embellishment. His plays are the true dramatic reflections of the society in which he lives. He is well known for presenting bold themes and offers the first-hand experience of socio cultural environment of the contemporary India and the common people. The intricacies of human relationship and dilemma of the common man can be clearly seen in his dramatic works.

Dattani is primarily known for family plays which trace human relationship among the members of the family. Through his plays he brings to the fore the social and economic forces that provide a breeding ground for the growth of inequality in family as well as in society. His writings do not confine to already explored areas but deals with the left out or untouched themes. His work fundamentally navigates around human relationships within a family. He puts forward a vivid picture of inequality that exists in a family as well as in a society. His play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* narrates the suffering and humiliation of transgender people and their struggle for existence in the society. Rooted in political background, Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a serious play through which he ventures into the whodunit genre. The play depicts the sufferings and social status of transgenders and also illustrates how they have to suffer from immense torture and anguish at every onset. Uma, a research scholar in Sociology and wife of the Superintendent of Police, Suresh Rao, is researching on hijra community and is the main protagonist in the play. She explores every nook and corner of the Russel Market and goes through the hidden reality fearlessly in order to reveal the truth behind the murder of Kamla, a hijra. By showing the plight of hijras in this play Dattani has brought the marginalized and the outcaste into the centre. The section which was earlier neglected is now in the main league. He travels into the inner self of people and coerces them to think that there is a need to understand the consciousness of eunuchs and their quest for identity and also urges to reorganize the social structure and practices. Hijras are given no respect in our country. They are aware of this fact still they cannot protest or raise even a single voice against it. Their woe can be seen in following dialogues:

Anarkali . Then what will you do knowing who killed Kamla?

Uma. Tell my husband to make an arrest.

Anarkali. One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband. (CP 35)

Dattani is trying to fetch the attention of people towards their vulnerable position and status in society. On one side equality is proclaimed every now and then yet there are many issues due to gender imparity like oppression, violence, riots etc. Uma was shocked to see Anarkali who was locked up in male prison and is denied any status of gender as Munswamy addresses her by 'it'. Hijras are not even considered as human beings. They are treated just like animals. They are hated, suppressed and neglected at every step.

Munswamy. Anarkali! Come here.

Anarkali(*from far*). No! I don't want to meet any journalist.

Munswamy. I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig!  
(CP 8)

As a result of discrimination it has been noticed that there is much increase in the number of suicides, rate of depression cases and various other

health problems. Hijras are not considered as the permanent members of the society. They are treated just as objects of hate, mockery and suppression. The following conversation illustrates this

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

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

Champa. Please excuse me, madam. I didn't know that... You see us also as society, no? (CP 23)

In spite of having all the injustice meted out to them they are benevolent and compassionate by heart. There is a legend about their kindheartedness that Lord Rama was delighted to see their devotion towards him when they had followed him in the forest. After revealing the secret behind Kamla's death, Anarkali gives a locket to Uma as a blessing to bear children. This is clearly seen through this conversation:

Anarkali. A special mantra is in the locket. Champa gave this to me for you. Wear it and you will be blessed with children. Sister! May you and your family be happy! Now go away, and do not come here again. Please go, sister! (CP 41)

They also have their own self and long for their distinctive identities. They are given no respect in the society. It is a paradox that they are neither considered as capable for motherhood nor fit for conjugal harmony yet they are supposed to welcome and bless the newly married couple to have children. Being socially excluded, their presence is always unwanted and they are acceptable only at two occasions- marriage and birth. They always have to bear the biased attitude of society. Everyone knew the culprit behind the murder and Anarkali was just used as a scapegoat. She was helpless and in dilemma and did not have any choice to prove herself innocent because if she had disclosed the name of the accused she would have been killed and if not she would have been punished for murdering Kamla.

Anarkali. They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail. (CP 14)

So all the characters in this play can be seen as hopeless and desolate even in favourable circumstances. They always have a lot to say about their loneliness, frustration, lack of distinctive identity etc. Ratna Kapur also states that the lack of recognition of their gender identity curtails their access to education, health care and public places, and results in discrimination in the exercise of their right to vote and secure employment, driving licenses and other documentation where eligibility is contingent on declaring oneself as either male or female.

It is Dattani who talks about blurring boundaries which lay unfortunately within the communities. He writes propagandist plays on the burning issues of society which attract the attention of audience. To throw light on such issue Dattani's main purpose is to involve the audience, establish a relationship with them and convince them to bring a mental change in the audience. It is the psyche that

needs to be changed. As of now, we all come across the pre-conceived notion and feeling of animosity for the third gender blindly and do not bother about their position, respect and identity. Therefore there is an urgent need to reorganize the whole social system though it is difficult to do because people are socially conditioned since their birth to have a dogmatic point of view.

In the path breaking judgement of National Legal Services Authority versus Union of India, 2014, the Supreme Court has affirmed the constitutional rights and freedom of transgender persons including those who identify in a gender opposite to their biological sex i. e. persons assigned female sex at birth, identifying as male and vice-versa. By recognizing diverse gender identities, the court has broken the binary gender construct of 'man' and 'woman' that has pervaded Indian Law. The Supreme Court firmly secured the right to equality and equal protection of transgenders by prohibiting discrimination on the ground of gender identity. Significantly the court also declared that no one can be discriminated on the ground of sexual orientation.

## Conclusion

Dattani questions the double standard of Indian people who, on one side look down upon the transgender community with contempt and disrespect them publicly, and on the other side they light up a candle to support homosexuality in case something happens to it in order to pretend them selves as modern. Thus this discrimination is all a matter of preconceived thoughts and tapered mindset. The transgender community has its own adversities in life against which they fight day in and day out. They face discrimination, rejection, hatred, stigma and torture. Their story of life is an ordeal of physical deprivation, emotional denial and social isolation.

Thus there is a need to bring a change in the attitude and belief of the people mentally as well as emotionally. How can we think about an undivided society or holistic development of the country if there is disharmony at both an individual level and society level? The judgment given by Supreme Court is historic in itself and definitely it will pave a new way for them. They can now be identified beyond male or female. It is now an umbrella term which includes gays, lesbians and bisexuals also. Male and female - these were the only two parameters earlier with which people were identified. But now there is third gender instead of two which belongs to eunuchs. They are now recognized as third gender and are eligible to avail all the facilities like voter ID, passport and driving license and thus they can enjoy their rights. Hence Mahesh Dattani's contribution in furthering the cause of transgenders should be noted and his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* achieved groundbreaking results by being one of the first plays to highlight transgender discrimination in Indian society.

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