

Reflections on the Life of Hijras in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire and on a Muggy Night in Mumbai*

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Abstract – The word “hijra” connotes a castrated male, lessens the hijra community to a pathetic community. In fact, the term “hijra” speaks more of a paradigm than of an institution. The term has been used widely encompassing eunuchs or men who have been deprived of their male role or identity, men and women with genital dysfunction, hermaphrodites, and persons with indeterminate sex organs, cross-dressed impotent men, gays and even effeminate men. The term has been developed to include any man who cannot be assimilated into the main stream heteronormative masculinity.

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In India, we have a variety of people and in the same way their pains have no limitations, these are standing in front of us like an army. In Indian literature, many writers presented it in their own way. Indian dramatist such as Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar have dealt contemporary issues in their plays, none of them has ever made controversial issues an essential part of their dramatic art as Dattani does. In the hands of Dattani, dramabreaks the web of illusion and ignorance of people's perception and develops an understanding towards socially excluded identities such as *hijras* and homosexuals. Though third gender has now been given judicial sanction, the struggle for social recognition still continues. Therefore, raising these issues was of great significance at the time these plays were written or first performed. Making a brilliant use of language and stagecraft, Dattani uncovers the socially excluded queer sexual identities who are compelled to negotiate with the dominant heteronormative ideology and thus to comply with the male/female binary.

Questioning some of the norms and beliefs of the society, *Seven Steps around the Fire* exposes the ill-treatment meted out to the subaltern caste of eunuchs through the murder mystery of Kamla, a eunuch. The play presents the transgendered as the victims of a society which has its own fixed notions about the social status of the eunuchs. Eunuchs have been socially excluded due to their sexual orientation that does not fit in the male-female binary. Uprooted from their biological families, they form their alternative family and live on margins of society. Deprived of their right to marriage, they are often physically, verbally and sexually abused. Human

efforts for their social acceptance are thwarted by such forces that do not want to give them space on the socially recognized gender continuum. The first play has been studied from this perspective. Uma Rao' on the class and gender related violence and crime brings into focus the hypocrisy of our society and the fact that the affluent are capable of doing anything because they are beyond the reach of law. It highlights their inhumanity.

The play, in fact, brings forth the fact that the society accepts the *hijras* for gracing auspicious occasions like weddings and childbirth but ironically, they are deprived of by the nature these two rights. Giving birth to a child by a eunuch in case of castration or intersex category is beyond their control for physiological reasons but wishing to marry is not for marriage or family are such social institutions that perform several prime functions other than childbirth/procreation. But the eunuchs are not allowed to marry or forge their families. The play poignantly explores these dimensions of their life which is controlled by callous heterosexual normativity.

Besides, the play presents social dichotomy through their characters in an interesting way. Uma Rao, the detective researcher symbolizes the centre- the rich and the prevailing class whereas Anarkali symbolizes the margin. She is the face of the weak and underprivileged, underprivileged because they are sexually handicapped and, thus, denied the privileges of getting married and having children. There are such people who love them as humans or empathize with them, but they are silenced in a system that works through a hobnobbing of the politicians, bureaucracy and

judiciary. Dattani also dexterously explores the plurality of subalternity in the play—the sexual subaltern and the gendered subaltern represented by Anarkali and Uma respectively. If, Anarkali is biologically lower in status, Uma is the gendered subaltern. Though, Uma wants to bail out the innocent eunuch, she actually does not have the liberty to demand such a heavy amount from her husband.

The dramatist also gives a message that those who sympathize with the transgender end up in a sorry state. Subbu has to pay a very heavy price for loving and marrying a beautiful eunuch. His influential father gets Kamala murdered and compels Subbu to marry an acceptable girl. Uma Rao strives hard to reveal the truth in public and to uncover the face of corruption and hypocrisy. Only to her dismay, the murder case is entirely hushed up without making any news. The play delivers the message that the marginalized have no say in our illiberal society. They almost have no access to justice. However, it makes it clear that the eunuchs are normal human beings and they long for restitution of self-respect, understanding, identity and justice.

The second selected play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* deals with another socially excluded subject—homosexuality. Dattani, through various characters especially Ed/Parkash, criticizes the gay's policy of imbibing the heterosexual ideology to hide his gay identity. He seems to agree with Sharad, who flexes his gay identity boldly. For him, existence for a gay character is possible only if he exerts his gay identity. Sharad reflects the gradual emergence and the individual assertion of a gay identity in the 1990s in India.

The play is path-breaking as it triggered a public discourse on homosexuality. Taking encouragement from Mahesh Dattani, many activists started raising questions relating to socially excluded identities. In December 1998 Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire* relating to lesbianism brought issues of sexuality open into the Indian household. Political parties like Shiv Sena did whatever they could do to oust the issue of lesbianism as Westerners by vandalizing the cinema halls film was released but the discourse has resulted in a social transformation.

In 2005, *My Brother Nikhil*, a low-budget Hindi film, talked openly about homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. It is around this time that marked changes began to be seen in the attitudes towards homosexuals not only in media but also in popular notions about them. Consequently, controversies and arguments regarding the Article 377 brought open discussions in social media and news channels. The situation demanded consolidation of this sex to fight a collective battle for their rights. In 2004 a petition filed by the Naz Foundation to review and reformulate the Article 377 was dismissed by the Delhi High Court which ruled in favour of the central government's

opposition to the petition on the ground that homosexuality cannot be legalized in India. But on July 2, 2009, the Delhi High Court overturned Article 377, legalizing consensual sex between adults of the same gender on the ground that the Article violated Article 14 of the Indian Constitution which gives every citizen equal opportunity of life and equality before law. Though in December 2013 the Supreme Court overruled the decision of the Delhi High Court, asking the Parliament to decide on the matter and re-criminalizing gay-sex, even in this tumultuous situation for the gays, sudden and feverish political sympathy showered on the country's alternate population suggested that citizens of alternate sexualities are growing in numbers, they are becoming a number to reckon with, and becoming more and more visible.

The traditional religious stance against gay marriage is also witnessing a gradual softening of attitude. While most of the religious gurus, may be they Hindus, Muslims or of any other religion, show a vehement unanimity regarding opposition to same-sex marriage, and many of them have even moved the courts against such marriage, some of them are beginning to see the matter on a sympathetic ground. The latest judgment of the Supreme Court on April 15, 2014, ensuring equal rights for the Third Gender, is a step forward in the recognition of alternate sexualities. The judgment rules that the state would ensure legal protection for the Third Gender, would ensure their fundamental rights and that the Third Gender would enjoy reservation in education and jobs. However, it does not mean the decrease in all sorts of attitudes of prejudice against the Third Gender; it only means to take gender and the behaviours connected with it as something spontaneous and beyond the society-imposed male/female binary. Thus, the Supreme Court judgment fails to erase some doubts and speculations. Though it legalizes the Third Gender and gives everyone the freedom to express one's gender, it says nothings about choosing one's sexual partner. So, even after this historic judgment there are apprehensions that the State can still book any person under Article 377 for having "unnatural" sex. Thus, the judgment does not give any respite to the people of alternate sexualities who are not free to choose their individual sexual behaviour and sexual partner. In a way, thus, the Article 377 keeps itself intact.

However, the historic judgment has led the media to utilize these people for advertisement. Rayban, the famous brand of sunglasses, publicized their "Never Hide" campaign by showing two male models walking together hand in hand. After the Supreme Court re-criminalized homosexuality in its December 2013 judgment, Amul India, the largest milk co-operative in the country, came up with the publicity poster in which the Amul-girl is paying floral homage to "Freedom of Choice" which is shown to have died in 2013. The watch-maker

Fastrack created the catch line, "The Road to Equality has Never been STRAIGHT," using the word "straight" very creatively. The creative use of the word "closet" is seen in another Fastrack advertisement which urges lesbians to come out of the closet. The seven colours of the LGBT community were used by the suiting brand Allen Solly in their advertisement: "All colours were created equal". Not only the tech-savvy Indian youths but also the aged people, too, are nowadays interacting a lot among each other about these issues. All these prove that there is nowadays a wave of sympathy among people who are at least aware of these issues.

But still, there are miles to go. The State should come forward to incorporate the so far marginalized people in building the national identity. To that end, not just the marriage and family laws should be reexamined and reformulated; the State should make it a policy to expose the country's queer past which has so far been presented with a heteronormative turn. No doubt, the age-old hegemonic heteropatriarchal family ideology cannot be reformulated overnight, a new politics of sexuality, incorporating not just the straight but also the differently sexed and differently gendered, can be formed in future. Just as economics, in its emphasis on the greatest good of the greatest numbers, has forever played a great role in constructing the politics of heteronormativity, today the demands of new economy emphasizes the need to cater to the taste of the "growing" population of gays, lesbians and third gender and their sympathizers, mostly young people.

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