



## Seven Steps Around Fire: Voice of the Voiceless

Dr. I. Kesava Rao

Lecturer in English, Sri ABR GDC Repalle, Andhra Pradesh, India

Email: [ikrenglish@gmail.com](mailto:ikrenglish@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award for English play writing in India is Mahesh Dattani. With his plays, Dattani has effectively been the voice of the voiceless. The attempt at analysing Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around Fire* is made in the paper, negotiating, identities and stigmas. Characters and circumstances that could be classified as subaltern which are discovered in the play. In this study, subaltern characters are those who have experienced marginalisation, neglect, and mistreatment due to their inferior rank and status in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. It encompasses that group of people whose voice is purposefully neglected or silenced by the power that is socially superior.

The paper is an effort to explore how society accepts transgender people. Androcentrism has always been the focal point in the play. Dattani claims that gays, lesbians, and hijras have no place in the mainstream matrix of society. They have been made due with marginalised segments of the society. The play addresses a wide range of topics, including the mistreatment of eunuchs in society. Dattani is attempting to challenge Indian society's beliefs and dogmas once more with this drama. Dattani's '*Seven Steps Around the Fire*' revolves around the existential problem of the 'third gender', the community of eunuchs their existence on the fringes of the Indian milieu. Dattani deals with the problem with socio-psychological paradigms related to the existence of eunuchs. Dattani questions the age-old belief of marriage being based on heterosexual relationship. He raises the issues from sexuality to criminality.

Keywords: marginalisation, sexual orientation, transgender, Androcentrism, socio-psychological

Mahesh Dattani is the winner of the Sahitya Academy Award for English playwriting in India. The radio play *Seven Steps*

*Around the Fire* debuted on BBC Radio 4 on January 9, 1999, under the title *Seven as Seven Circles Around the Fire*. The human

characteristics of eunuchs who experience social marginalization and humiliation are the subject of this paper. Dattani sheds information on the eunuch community's social structure and cultural customs.

He provides an oblique critique of our so-called civilized mainstream society, both its constraints and anarchical perversion. The play addresses a variety of subjects, including the predicament of eunuchs in society, man's incapacity to recognize his own weakness, how the powerful segment of society exploits the weak, the police as puppets in the hands of powerful people. Dattani attempts to challenge Indian society's dogmas and superstitions once more through this drama.

The paper investigates the existential challenge of the 'third gender', a community of eunuchs who exist on the outskirts of the Indian milieu. They dwell in Indian cities and are marginalized by society. In many ways, this is a no-man's land, and neither is it a woman's. The play is a satire of the gender-based social order. It recognizes the human identity of hijras and works to create their voice. They might identify their oppressors and raise their voices in protest.

Gayatri C. Spivak, in "*Can the Subaltern Speak*", analyzes the question of female subaltern in colonial/postcolonial discourses: the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominates, if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the female as female is more deeply in shadow. (69)

Their nature is diametrically opposed to their society's culture. This contradiction between nature and culture stifles love and poisons the psyche. Dattani raises subjects ranging from sexuality to criminality. It is a protest play against the hijras' societal isolation. Dattani addresses the issue using socio-psychological paradigms relevant to the existence of eunuchs.

The transgender become subalterns. Gays, homosexuals, and hijras have no place in the mainstream of society. As a result, they must be pleased with marginalised elements of society since androcentrism is important. It was always the main point. The sacred concept of "seven steps around the fire" in traditional Hindu marriage has been undermined by the brutality enforced by governmental authority and the police. Furthermore, the majority of eunuchs are from the lower middle class. Police harass them. The police breach all civilised norms by physically, sexually, and verbally torturing and demeaning eunuchs.

The family, media, and medical establishment all contribute to the systemic violence that eunuch's experience. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the term "subaltern" refers to the quiet against oppression and injustice. The drama addresses the violence inflicted on hijras, who are invisible and unheard in society. The play conveys the hijras' identity problem and earnest desire to be treated as social beings in an apathetic society. The postcolonial approach is demonstrated through the utilisation of several themes.

Dattani gives postcolonial analysis. He represents the concerns and anguish of individuals whose voices are muted by social customs and biases, as well as the repressive power of patriarchy. Dattani investigates the diversity of subaltern. The paper deftly explores the two elements of marginalization – the sexual subaltern and the gendered subaltern.

The drama begins with Uma, the Superintendent of Police's wife and a Ph.D. researcher in sociology. The drama is about the injustices that are done to society's marginalised people. He claims that homosexual and lesbian partnerships are as normal as heterosexual relationships. Uma Rao emerges as the play's most powerful character, serving as the playwright's voice and fighting to define the eunuch's identity.

Uma articulates the voice of the subaltern. Anarkali and Uma Rao exemplify these two aspects of the subaltern.

Uma is a gendered subaltern, whereas Anarkali is a biological one. Uma's situation is not much better than that of Anarkali. Both are travelling in the same boat, swayed by the winds of social myth and pride. Uma is a generous and loving lady; she wants to help Anarkali and pay for her bail, but she has no money and cannot demand it from her husband; she does not have such liberty. She explains it to Anarkali, "Here That is all the money I have. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't explain to my husband why I am paying for your bail." (15)

She has no power as well as permission to go against the will of her husband and in-laws. Suresh also makes it clear when he says, "Look, it is one thing that I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel compassion for them. They will take advantage . . . Keep your soft heart for me." (10) This speech of Suresh gives a clear picture of male dominated society where the woman has to submit to the man.

Ashis Nandy, the eminent post colonial critic proposes that the psychological liberation is more significant than social and political liberation: The colonial colonizes minds in addition to bodies and releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalize the concept of the modern west from a geographical entity to a psychological category. The west is now everywhere within the west and outside in structures and in minds. (36)

The hijras have a 'self' that desires dignity and, when denied it, attempts to break free from such conventions. When they rebel, their voices are often silenced by the established order that governs society. The marginalised, or eunuchs, are unable to speak out against humiliation and injustice. The eunuchs, Champa and Anarkali, are marginalised by social customs rather than

by nature or God. Even Subbu, invoking his father's strength, loses his voice and dies. However, neither Suresh nor Mr. Sharma is willing to listen to both his and the eunuchs' voices. However, Uma is determined to apprehend the perpetrator. She attempts to persuade her spouse by correlating each event.

Dattani's contribution is his hopeful vision of human relationships as a safe remedy for the redemption of marginalised groups' suffering. According to Pranav Joshipura, Dattani's plays: Principally deal with humanism in general and injustice to marginalized section of society such as homosexuals, hijras and women, in particular. In all of them, he provokes our thinking, compels us to think afresh about the problems . . . and to change our conventional attitudes and assumptions about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. (1)

Subbu Sharma, a minister's son, is secretly married to a eunuch named Kamala. When his father learned about this relationship, he burned Kamala to death. Anarkali, a eunuch, has been arrested for her death. But there is one item that ties everything together: a portrait of Kamala and Subbu wearing wedding garlands. To obtain these photos, Mr. Sharma sends Salim, his bodyguard, to intimidate Champa and Anarkali. But he is able to obtain the photograph following Subbu's death on his wedding day.

Anarkali, Champa, and the entire hijra community understood who was responsible for Kamla's death. They do not have a voice. The case was kept quiet and was not even covered in the newspapers. Champa was correct. The cops made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was ruled as an accident. The photo was destroyed. He has to pay a high price for the shot.

Champa and Anarkali are both aware of Kamala's illicit activities. They don't tell Uma because they are already aware of the situation. In that instance, they must endure more agony while the true offender remains unpunished. Even the police are reluctant to take action

against a well-known figure such as the minister. Police believe Subbu's suicide was an accident. The photographs of Subbu and Kamala have been destroyed, and nothing has happened to the minister. Suresh Rao admits to Uma that there is no evidence or proof against Anarkali.

They arrested her solely as a formality to conclude the case. The enigma surrounding Kamla's death is the police-politician-crime link, which is a postcolonial phenomenon. It appears to reflect the postcolonial theme of subversion and freedom from hegemonic politics.

In Indian society, men are not willing to recognise their own weaknesses. Uma, Suresh Rao's wife, has no children. She is receiving therapy from a doctor, who has asked her to send her husband for testing as well, but he refuses. It is difficult for a man to accept that he cannot be a father. He even attempts to force his weaknesses on women. Suresh Rao fears that he is barren, which is why he avoids going to the doctor. As is obvious from Uma and Suresh's exchange in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*:

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

SURESH. What did they say?

UMA. Nothing . . . They want to see you.

SURESH. I don't think so.

UMA. Just a test for your sperm count.

SURESH. I don't have to go . . . (32)

It also addresses the problem of directly blaming the woman for her barren state. However, childlessness is not the sole reason for their strained relationship. Uma wishes to obtain her Ph.D. so that she can establish her own identity and achieve independence in society. However, it is difficult for her to do. She accepts it in her telephonic contact with her lecturer. "Professor, this is Uma Rao! Do you have some time to discuss my paper? . . . 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." (28-29)

Uma asks her husband Suresh, the reason for putting Anarkali in male prison. Suresh makes very contemptuous remark and tells Uma not to believe them. He has no sympathy for them and comments and presents whole situation with a wild laughter, "They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day, that Anarkali and." (10)

Mahesh's plays frequently depict characters who are questioning their identities and feel alone in some way. Uma feels alienated in her marriage, which causes her to empathise with Anarkali, the hijra she befriends. Members of the so-called "third sex" often adopt feminine names and attire. They are typically referred to as "she".

Uma addresses Anarkali with the pronoun "she" (7). But in contrast of her sympathy, Munswamy pours all contempt against Anarkali and ruthlessly asserts, (Chuckling). She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't." (7) It is not only the thinking of few people like Munswamy, but most of us have the same notion.

Anarkali comes out of her marginalized self and articulates passionately in front of Munswamy and Uma, "We make our relations with our eyes, with our love. I look at him, he looks at me, and he is my brother. I look at you, you look at me, and we are mother and daughter." (11) This craving for personal relationship evinces that Dattani accepts personal relationship as a potent strategy to fill the gap between the marginalized and the ruling class.

Dattani has allowed the eunuchs a lot of space and highlighted their misery, including physical and sexual abuse, violence, and other crimes. The Eunuch and women are human beings without a voice, sympathy, love, solace, or justice. There is probably no possibility for acceptance in society. To some extent, Seven

Steps Around the Fire is the feminine and eunuchs's voice of identity and predicament, as well as their sensibility.

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