



## Marginalized Gender in Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*: A Study of the Traumatized Existence of Transgenders

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### Abstract

Among the most marginalized communities in the world today include the LGBTQ+ communities who are in minority and who suffer systematic social exclusion through several social, religious, cultural, economic and political impositions that sideline them to live a marginalized segregated existence. Even in the era of rapid development and progress in human intellect, it is ironical to find the transgender community suffer the maximum exploitation, victimization, injustice and denial of rights as human beings. The transgender people desolately suffer the 'othering' of their gender where they have no respect, no dignity, no acceptance nor protection from the overbearing abuse and prejudiced society. Being marginalized, they suffer violence and discrimination as they do not conform to the socially accepted gender roles. It is indeed unjust to note that the Transgender suffer the denial of privileges by nature as well by dominant human society. The miserable and neglected plight of the transgender shows the need that they must struggle a long way to attain the changed status quo. Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* written for BBC Radio 4 in 1999, brings to light the condition of the underprivileged, the marginalized Transgender community in India who are forced to remain silent and suffer the power politics. He gives a humanistic plea through the play to respect, accept and allow the transgender community to voice and live their lives. An attempt is made in this paper to study the 'marginalized othering' of the transgender community as brought out through the characters like Anarkali, Kamala and Champa in the play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.

**Key words:** Transgender, Marginalized, Exploitation, Victimization, Othering.

## Introduction

Marginalization is often described as a social process where people are relegated to the fringes or 'margins' of the society. It is defined as a process, in which individuals or communities are socially excluded, systematically blocked from, or are denied access to participate in social, cultural, economic and political processes which are basic to integrate with the society. Marginalization inhibits a person, a group, a section or a community to enjoy rights, privileges, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a society. Marginality is an experience that affects millions of people throughout the world. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives, and the resources available to them. In general, the term 'marginalization' describes the overt actions or tendencies of human societies, where people who they perceive to be undesirable, or without useful action are excluded, i.e., marginalized. The people who are marginalized - are outside the existing system of protection and integration. This limits their opportunities and means for survival. *The Encyclopaedia of Public Health* defines marginalization as, "To be marginalized is to be placed in the margins, and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the centre." Merriam-Webster's online dictionary definition of the term, marginalize, is "to relegate to an unimportant, or powerless position within a society or group." Marginality is both ascribed and acquired in a social setting. People who are socially marginalized are largely deprived of social opportunities. They may become stigmatised and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes, and they may develop low-self-confidence and self-esteem. Social policies and practices may mean that they have relatively limited access to valued social resources such as education, employment, health services, housing, income, leisure activities, and work. Marginalization is a process of cornering a particular group of people by not allowing them to have identity of

their own. They are made to feel less important and consigned to secondary position. Marginalization depends on multiple aspects like race, gender, ability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, age, religion and so on. It is a process of domination and subordination.

Marginalization denies opportunities and outcomes to those 'living on the margins', while enhancing the opportunities and outcomes for those who are 'at the centre'. Marginalization combines discrimination and social exclusion. It offends human dignity, and it denies human rights, especially, the right to live effectively, as equal citizens. Frank Herbert remarked "All men are not created equal, and that is the root of social evil". Through marginalization, most people are deprived across the globe. It is a complex problem, and there are many factors that cause marginalization like socio-cultural exclusion, displacement, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, discrimination at all levels, gender-based oppression, denial of rights and injustice, etc. Feminism strongly believes that women are marginalized by the reason of patriarchal hegemony. The bias against women can be seen right from the day of creation. Women aspire to be free from the restrictions of male dominated society. The secondary status of woman can be observed in Simon de Beauvoir's statement as, "The situation of woman is that she, a free and autonomous being like all creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the 'other'." (Beauvoir 29) Women are equally valuable as men but the fact that they do not have equal socio-cultural rights as men have, they, therefore, turn out to be subordinate or oppressed creatures. This same can be true of Transgender women who are doubly oppressed for being 'transgender' and 'transgender women.'

Historically, the society and its patriarchal setup has recognised only two genders i.e., the male and the female. Gender assigns cultural and social characteristics to men

and women based on perceived biological differences. The term 'gender' was introduced in the late 1960s to reject biological determinism that interprets behavioural differences as the outcomes of biological disposition. The so-called mainstream society accepts the gender binary and does not recognise/accept the 'third gender'. The LGBTQ+ communities suffer marginalization and gender disparity as they do not confirm to the binary defined roles. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler in their book *Gender Trouble* argues that "being born male or female does not determine behaviour. Instead, people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. The idea of gender is an act, or performance." By arguing that gender is not something one is, but rather something one does or performs, Butler views that gender identity is not based on some inner truth, but instead a by-product of repeated gender performance. Butler argues that Gender performativity theory shows that a person's performance is naturally produced and is true about the person. Gender performance is the act that people perform certain behaviours to show 'his/her' gender. Therefore, Gender, according to Butler, is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore, is open to change and contestation. One can understand that gender determines sex, completely debunking the notion of sex being a fixed category. Contemporary feminists argue that gender and sexuality are fluid, should be studied as a continuum, and cannot be limited within binaries to be categorized. The queering of sexuality or 'othering' has meant that studies are now tracing the ways in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, inter-sex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) people experience and live their gender beyond normative binaries.

In this light, one needs to recognise the LGBTQ+ people's life and rights as human beings to enjoy privileges of the society. When it comes to the 'transgender women', Butler says, "what it means to be a woman does not remain

the same from decade to decade. The category of woman can and does change, and we need it to be that way. The historical meaning of gender can change as its norms are re-enacted, refused or recreated. We should not be surprised or opposed when the category of women expands to include trans women." (Gleeson, The Guardian.com) So, in the context of accepting the third gender as part of society, and accepting that gender is open to transformation, especially the transgender women, need to be supported and given equal rights to live as human beings and as women freeing them from all kinds of marginalization. New ideas like socialism, nationalism and women's rights helped transform traditional attitudes and expectations and as a result gender rules begin to shift and change. As a socio-cultural construct gender varies from society to society, culture to culture and can change over time. Gender disparity could be resolved if one can accept what Butler writes in the essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," that gender is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief" (520).

Mahesh Dattani is a distinguished contemporary Indian playwright in English who works as a writer, stage and film director, actor, and theatrical personality. He writes plays about scintillating issues that are relevant to today's society. Through his plays he is known for uplifting the cause of the neglected and marginalised section of the society such as minorities, women and LGBTQ+ communities. He focuses on contemporary social reality in the fast-changing world, the issues that some of his predecessors have addressed in their plays, such as gender discrimination, child sexual abuse, patriarchy, and taboos that are not allowed to be acknowledged vociferously, such as homosexuality and the plight of transgenders, and communalism. He delves deep into the human heart and creates characters true to life

situation addressing the invisible issues of contemporary Indian society like homosexuality, lesbianism, gender relationship and the plight of transgenders. He happens to be the first playwright in English to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for his play *Final Solutions*. He wrote several significant plays published collectively in two volumes- *Collected Plays* (2000) and *Collected Plays Vol. II* (2005). His noteworthy plays are *Where There's a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions*, *Do the Needful*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Thirty Days in September*, *The Girl who Touched the Stars*, *Brief Candle*, *Where did I leave my Purdah* and *The Big Fat City*.

Mahesh Dattani is considered the genuine voice of the urban middle class society of India. His plays focus on the issues that are both contemporary and timeless. His plays make him the spokesperson of all the marginalized people who are forced to lead a horrible and degraded life – not merely for shocking the public but with a specific purpose of arousing awareness about these invisible problems mainly the repressed desires, innermost emotions, loneliness, feelings of different groups, etc. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* was first written as a radio play and broadcasted by BBC Radio 4 on 9<sup>th</sup> Jan 1999 under the title *Seven Circles Around the Fire*. It was premiered on stage by MTC Production and The Madras Players on 6th August 1999. Dattani's interest in the queer themes of homosexuality and transgenders has made this play most attractive and radical. It portrays the miserable plight and repressed life of the transgender women or *hijaras* in Indian society. The play focuses on the exploitation in the lives of transgender women (TGW), their pitiable condition in society, mainstream society's inhuman treatment of them, the injustice and violence endured by them leading to a life devoid of voice and love. The play creates awareness of eternal conflicts of marginalized gender and the courage to break the barriers of voiceless life to be transfigured

into a life of freedom. This paper attempts to bring out the realistic picture of the traumatic life of the marginalised gender that is the transwomen/transgender women (TGW) who are regarded as the 'invisible ones' and are relegated to the periphery of the society as brought out in the play *Seven Steps Around The Fire*.

The present grows from the past and both the past and the present change together. Transgenders in India have practically no respectable public identity, no acceptance and no protection from prejudice and abuse. The discrimination against them is often translated into violence. The main factor behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that transgender do not conform to the accepted gender divisions. Male and female – these are the only sexual categories which have secured society's approval. Individuals, who do not fit into these two classes, must bear social ostracism, isolation and contempt. The invisible clutches of social forces do not permit the transgenders to carve their own design beyond the patterns recommended and accepted by society. Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who is bold enough to narrate a tale that is defiant and impactful without having a recourse to being over sentimental. The characters are taken from every walk of life or class-whether it an ordinary man or a high-profile personality he encompasses LGBTQ+ people and transgenders who are regarded as undesirable aliens in Indian context. He has effectively exhibited their profound distress, torment, exploitation, violence and inhuman treatment that are inflicted upon them in his play. Mahesh Dattani gives the transgender women of India a voice to articulate their feelings and predicaments through his play *Seven Steps Around The Fire*.

### Discussion

India is a country that celebrates diversity in culture and religions so vibrantly that the whole world talks about unity in



diversity. Ironically the ugly side of the society is that the 'third gender' or the LGBTQ+ is not free from gender disparity. When it comes to transgenders there is still a taboo in the society. The third gender in Indian society are the marginalized gender that is the reason they are subject to social oppression, physical violence, face lack of education, unemployment, homelessness, lack of healthcare facilities, social exclusion and discrimination at many levels. They face social stigma as the mainstream society avoids them and considers them obscene and dangerous. The third gender community go from the revered to living on the fringes of society. Being pushed to the margins of society they suffer social and cultural exclusion, and have been subject to discrimination, harassment and persecution for their gender, queer self-identification, from family and society. As citizens they have restricted rights, restricted participation in decision making processes and politics. In India, third gender community is still a stigmatised and invisible minority and whatever gains the community has won have been granted by the judiciary; not by the legislatures. Despite judicial verdicts India's third gender minority face discrimination and this makes it incompatible with India's liberal and inclusive constitution. Transgenders face discrimination as their gender was not recognised by the society and the government. Because of this discrimination the third gender law was introduced. It is estimated that there are 5,000,000 transgenders in India. In April 2014, the Supreme Court of India formally recognised the existence of third gender. There is no formal definition of the third gender in India. The government has given the Transgender Persons Act in 2019 which gives the transgender rights to register themselves under the third gender category. Despite the constitutional and legal protection, the third gender is usually out of the mainstream gender discourse, and they face acute neglect and discrimination because of their gender. This makes it the most disempowered and deprived gender even more than women. The magnitude of the challenges

that they face needs to be understood. They suffer from socio-economic, cultural and political challenges. They not only suffer physically, but psychologically, emotionally and mentally due to social rejection, violence and isolation. They experience anxiety, depression, substance use and suicidal thoughts. They suffer violation of human rights and fundamental rights.

Although the third genders have been subject to much hate and discrimination in recent times, this has not been the case in earlier times. In ancient India, the third gender were well respected and revered, in fact they played an important role as Hindu religious texts mention. The third gender community showed a loyalty to Lord Rama when he went on 14 years forest living. In the Mughal era hijras held religious authority and important court positions and administrative roles. They were extremely loyal and well trusted enough to be given important governmental and religious roles. Believed to have the ability to bless, many would seek their blessings during important religious ceremonies like marriage and birth of a child. In modern times, the third gender have been ostracised and persecuted. During the British rule in India the western concept of hating and marginalising anybody took hold in Indian society and the third gender community was forced to being treated as social outcasts. They were denied all socio-economic facilities and opportunities and were discriminated against in every area of their lives to live a stigmatised persecuted existence.

Decades of subjugation stretching back to generations have left an indelible mark on the lives of the LGBTQ+ people. Even with many public relations campaigns along with growing group of supporters, most people in India are still against the third gender community. Many of them do not respect the third gender and only consider them to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits during marriages and childbirth. Due to such discrimination, majority of the third gender community are forced to beg and go for

prostitution as a means of living. Police harassment has also burdened the hijra community as they imprison them over offences such as begging and prostitution. They are attacked even more for trying desperately to survive in a society that was practised institutionalised, pursued and encouraged harmful policies towards this community. In addition, third gender has difficulties in receiving access to basic medical care. Majority of the doctors are not educated on gender identity issues and suffer from transphobic stigma. The third gender in addition to facing persecution and discrimination daily, suffer physical harm and even death from bigoted doctors and nurses who are not trained to deal with gender identity issues. Fear of the social stigmas for being associated with the transgender community is a major reason why many doctors try to avoid seeing transgender patients and refuse to treat one altogether.

Today in the contemporary society it is necessary to empower and educate not only women but also transgender women or transwomen, freeing them from exploitation, oppression, violence and injustices. And see to it that they receive all fundamental rights recognised by the Constitution of India. *Leave no one behind* principal should be relevant for the third gender community as they have been left behind by nation and the world due to discriminatory law and societal attitude. It is time to augment behavioural change towards the third gender and end the violence against them. It is necessary to sensitise the general public and officials, including police to reduce and finally eliminate the stigma, the discrimination and human rights violation associated with the third gender community. The school and university students also should be sensitised about the diversity of sexuality to reconstruct the myth of heteronormativity. Therefore, time for change and responsibility not only lies with the people in power and authority but also with the civil society as well as the third gender community. It is necessary to

bring the change in third gender lives to mainstream, to recognise them, to address the challenges faced by them and to emancipate them. The need of the hour is to explore the representation of gender roles and their depictions in literature, media and society at large and more challenging is to dismantle gendered portrayals and narratives.

In the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* Dattani has spotlighted the plight of the Transgender women in the Indian society. They are isolated and segregated and constitute an 'invisible minority' within the society. They are the neglected gender. They sing and dance at wedding and at childbirth with other transgenders and people give them money otherwise they put a curse on them. Dattani is probably the first playwright who has written a full length play about them. For the very first time they get a depiction in the theatre as human beings with their individuality who need space in the society. Commenting on the theme of the play, Beena Agarwal remarks:

Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real-life experiences tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order. (Aggarwal 34)

The play concentrates on the life of the transgender women, especially the treatment of them by the mainstream society. Through the play Dattani addresses the marginalized condition of the transgender women who face maximum exploitation, violence and victimization at the hands of those who are in

power and authority for not conforming to the restrictions imposed on their lives. Social transformation or transition of transgenders is not accepted by mainstream society so transgender people suffer stigma and discrimination every day in life. They also suffer social dysphoria as they are rejected by family and society. Dattani draws the society's attention to the injustice and impoverished living of the transgender women and stimulates to question about the transgender human rights to live as they desire. Transgender people adopt gender non-conforming behaviour which is rejected by the mainstream society wherein they suffer maximum injustice and denial of human rights which forces them to relegate to the status of the 'other' to suffer being marginalized gender throughout every situation in their lives.

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* shows the playwright's concern towards the marginalized lives of transgender women, namely Anarkali, Kamala and Champa, who have to face the brutal treatment by the insensitive, inhumane mainstream society. The play focuses on the double jeopardy endured and suffered by the transwomen in their lives. They not only endure exploitation as transgender but also as transgender women. Anarkali, a transgender woman is put behind the bars falsely accused of murdering another transgender woman named Kamala. Kamala was burnt and killed by a politician Mr. Sharma because his son Subbu had married Kamala and Mr. Sharma could not accept Subbu marrying a transgender woman. Champa, the leader of the transgender women is not able to help Anarkali as she has no money to bail her out. Champa had misunderstood that Anarkali was jealous of Kamala not only for being beautiful but also for being chosen to become the next leader of the transgenders. Later, Champa sells her jewellery to bail out Anarkali. The truth of Kamala's relationship with Subbu and the reason for Kamala's murder gets revealed only with the intervention of Uma. Uma is a sociology lecturer at Bangalore university who is doing research

on "Class-gender related violence." She is the wife of Suresh, the Superintendent of Police and the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner of Police. Her father is the Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University. Uma has taken permission from her husband to meet a transgender woman for her research paper. In this context Uma gets to meet Anarkali and through interactions with them, finds about the sufferings, victimization and marginalized existence of the transgender women. Uma plays a very significant role in the play. It is through her that Dattani strikes his blow on the sterility and decadence of the patriarchal society and the corrupt social system.

Through the character Uma, Dattani voices the voiceless marginalized transgender women's plight and persecution. The play not only creates awareness about the neglected, secluded, victimized lives of the third gender / transgender women but poses questions on accepting and allowing the different gendered people to survive as a significant part of mainstream society and as to who can contribute to the socio-economic, political development of the society. A study of the lives of the transgender women Anarkali, Kamala and Champa shows how they are to suffer physically, emotionally and mentally. The corrupt police department in order to protect the minister from scandal, arrests Anarkali, an innocent transwoman, on the charge of Kamla's murder. Anarkali's imprisonment opens up to the readers of the play to inspect the manner in which transgender women are treated in mainstream society.

#### **ANARKALI**

Anarkali's imprisonment serves as an effective tool in the hands of the dramatist to probe into the injustices perpetrated on the marginalized gender in our society. Uma's research on the third gender brings her to the police station to interview Anarkali. Uma is able to gather the treatment met out to the transgenders in the prison. Anarkali is placed in

the prison with male cell mates. She suffers extreme torture and violence from at the prison, she is beaten; her hand is broken, and her face is wounded. She is forced to service the physical wanton of the male cell inmates. An injustice to be noticed here is that transgender women do not have a separate cell in the in the prison. Placing Anarkali in the male section of the prison is another significant pointer to society's inherent confusion and inability to decide about what to do with the transgender. The prison in the play has, in fact, been portrayed as a microcosmic reflection of mainstream society. Just as there is no place for the transgenders in the society, similarly, despite having a female name, Anarkali is given a place in the male section of the prison. Keeping Anarkali in male prisoners' cell shows the bias against the transgender women. The mainstream society, the police consider that transgender women do not have rights to enjoy or receive treatment as women. The transgender women's gender identity is completely rejected. Violent treatment shows that the police station is not safe place even for transgender women. This is a sheer anarchy where power is unduly used for unjust treatment by the law protectors, the police.

The transgender women are not respected as their gender identity which is not socially accepted becomes a matter to be made fun of. Uma meets a young constable Munswamy who is shocked to know that Uma a woman from a respectable family was interested in meeting a Transgender at the prison. He is amused at Uma's addressing Anarkali as "she". Munswamy immediately goes on to dehumanize Anarkali by referring to them using words like "the Hijra" and the neuter "it". Suresh, Uma's husband, the Superintendent of Police also refers to the transgender women as "creature", "thing", as "castrated degenerate men" who are "strong as horses". A very low opinion is held about the transgender women. They are considered culprits and Suresh says to Uma, "...they cut off

their balls... they kill. It could be any one of them." (SSATF 25) The transgender woman's identity does not get accepted by the society. Transgenders are considered to lies always and not to be "trusted" and the police throttles them and uses vulgar words and brutal treatment with them. The society thinks that with the application of stringent restrictions and harsh violence, transgenders have to be "tamed" like wild animals and controlled as social and sexual inferiors, though it is not difficult to infer that this need to control and regulate stems from the patriarchal society's deep sense of insecurity and unknown fear surrounding the transgender community. Thus, almost from the beginning of his play, Dattani strikes a blow on the insensitivity of society, which denies the right to life and identity on the basis of sexual differentiation to marginalized community.

Anarkali is arrested by the police for murdering Kamala though there is no solid proof of the crime being committed by her. The police, hands with the corrupt political power arrests Anarkali as there is no one suitable to be held responsible for the crime. This shows how the society and people in power treat and misuse power for exploitation against the innocent marginalized. The transgender women though innocent will never be given an opportunity to be considered so as they have already been branded as people who commit grave crimes. Here we find the unjust treatment suffered by the transwomen. Normally the mainstream society does not trust the transgender people because of their behaviour and their way of living. Uma does not trust Anarkali in the beginning; she thinks that Anarkali had killed Kamala to become the leader of the transgender group. Lack of trust in the transgender women shows one more way of oppressing them. Being brutally beaten at the police station, Anarkali is not able to get a doctor to treat her wounds even if she would give him more money. This shows the pathetic condition in which medical facility is also not available for the transgender community. Anarkali must



suffer the physical pain and heal themselves with some brandy at home.

#### **KAMALA**

Kamala, a beautiful innocent transgender woman is brutally murdered by burning on the instructions of Mr. Sharma. The politician Mr Sharma's son Subramaniam/Subbu falls in love with a transgender woman Kamala and gets married to her secretly in a temple. Mr Sharma does not accept this marriage, nor does he appreciate a transgender woman becoming Subbu's wife or his daughter-in-law. He would like to have a fine wife from a fine family for Subbu. This kind of a marriage is a stigma, so Mr Sharma arranges to murder Kamala by burning her. It is the most heinous violent crime committed by Mr Sharma. What is Kamala's crime if she is pursued and loved and married by Subbu? Mr. Sharma, being a politician and belonging to the upper echelons of the society, he holds power over the voiceless marginalized transgender women and oppresses them. There is no safety nor protection in their lives and they remain in the margins, live a burdened life in constant fear of the powerful, especially the police and politicians or the mainstream society that exploits them. Subbu's father a corrupt politician, misuses power to oppress the marginalized transgender women. Mr. Sharma represents mainstream society that cannot accept a 'Transwoman' as the 'daughter-in-law.' Kamala was burnt and her body was thrown in a pond and found four days later because of the stranger. This shows the predicament of the transgender women who are treated brutally by people of power. The violence committed against Kamala shows the stern patriarchal rigidity, inhuman treatment and the denial of human rights to the transgender women by the societal powers. It is ironical to note that in India in mainstream culture, transgender women's presence is acceptable at the celebration of marriage and at childbirth, but the same privilege is denied to them by nature and society. They are neither allowed to get married nor is their marriage into the society accepted.

They also are denied love, relationships and having children or even to adopt children legally. Transgenders continue to remain as victims of nature as well as society.

#### **CHAMPA**

Champa is the head of the transgender women's community. She is like a mother to all the transwomen. Champa has the experience of living life as a marginalized gender. She knows how transgenders are considered 'the lowest of the low', their position in society is always at the margin and how they yearn to have family and love like any other human being. When Uma comes to meet Champa at Russel Market in Shivajinagar, she gets to experience the atmosphere and the precarious conditions of the marginalized genders living. Poverty is the reason that forces the marginalized community to beg and behave in wanton ways. Lack of money is the reason where Champa does not bail out Anarkali from the prison. Uma finds Champa tell that Anarkali and Kamala were like sisters and that she would certainly help to bail out Anarkali from prison if she had money. Later it is found that ultimately Champa makes use of her jewellery to bail out Anarkali. Uma could not give money to Champa as they do not reveal the truth about Kamala or Salim. Champa does not tell anything related to Kamala or Salim as they said, "I cannot say all that. You are the Police. And ... We cannot speak... When we speak nobody listens. When we cannot speak ..." (SSATF 18) The marginalized transgender women are always in fear because of police and power politics. Champa's words reveal the helplessness as well as the oppressed conditions of living as marginalized. They cannot speak the truth and nobody gives heed to their call. Champa and Anarkali know who had murdered Kamala but they cannot reveal the truth as powerful oppressors will kill them. One can notice the exploitation of the weak and marginalized at the hands of people with power. Anarkali fears that she might die in prison if she does not tell the truth, but if she tells the truth she would be killed by the powerful people.

Anarkali tells Uma that Salim's wife killed Kamala. The weak invisible minority community of transgenders is afraid of power, authority and exploitation.

Champa had not wanted Kamala to marry Subbu because they would not have been happy in the outside world. Champa's belief, "There is no world for a hijra other than the one we make for ourselves" (SSATF 20) showcases the harsh reality that the mainstream society with its patriarchal mindset would not accept the transgender women for what or who they are. This is because of the societies prejudiced behaviour against the transgender women. A normal man marrying a transgender woman and leading happy family is something unthinkable and unacceptable by the mainstream traditional society. For this reason Kamala was heinously murdered. Uma doubts Champa to have killed Kamala as they was running away from their community. Champa does not tolerate this accusation made by Uma and they throws away Uma's money and tells her, "This is my house! In my house you respect me." (SSATF 20) The transgenders are taken for granted and they are not trusted, easily accused of crimes and denied respect which hurts them as they also are human beings.

It is ironical to find that it is considered dangerous for the mainstream society women to go into a place where the transgenders live. It is considered not suitable and below their mark. This happens with Uma when she shows an interest in solving the murder case of Kamala and meets the head of the transgenders that is Champa, Uma is stopped by the police constable Munaswami. When Uma visits the place where Champa lives, Champa finds it surprising and says, "I did not know that...You see us also as a society, no?" This remark shows that the mainstream society does not recognize the transgender community as part of society but rather prefers to ignore and push them to the margins.

Transgender people develop a feeling of inferiority because of the mainstream society's treatment of them. Champa tells Uma, "Madam, you should not mix with people like us." (SSATF 26) Champa doesn't want to entertain or talk to Uma and disclose the truth relating to Kamala's death. They do not want to reveal anything to do with Salim or the minister Mr. Sharma. Champa tells Uma "There are other more dangerous than he. Not even your father-in-law can put them in jail." (SSATF 26) When Uma tells them that she would ask her husband to make an arrest of the culprit, Anarkali said, "One hijra less in this world it does not matter to your husband." (SSATF 27). The fear of the powerful people controls the lives of the marginalized. Here it is to be noted that the police submit into the hands of corrupt politicians. Police are party to corrupt politicians. This shows that the transgender community are not considered as important part of society neither are they given any status or importance to their human life. They are oppressed and treated like dirt or worms, kept at the margins. When Subbu holds a gun to kill himself, Mr. Sharma requests Champa to talk to Subbu so that he does not shoot himself. In the situation Champs said, "Even God does not listen to us." (SSATF 27) This statement brings out the gender disparity and injustice met out by the transgender women. Here one can notice that the transgender do not find anyone to listen to them or their problems in the society. Saying that even God does not listen to them highlights the helpless marginalized condition in which they suffer exploitation and the inhuman acts.

Transgenders are exploited for selfish pleasures of others. Anarkali and Kamala suffer gender related violence at the hands of the mainstream society, the police and the politicians. Transgender people are considered pervers and denied access to all human facilities and developments, human relationships; finer values are not meant for them, they are denied friendship and love also. The hypocrisy and the double standard inherent

in patriarchal society become clear from its surreptitiously using the transgender women to cater to men's homosexual needs, yet vehemently denying them the privilege and sanctification of marriage, which is viewed as the sole prerogative of mainstream society:

UMA (voice-over). Perceived as the lowest of the low, they [the hijras] yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable - marriage and birth - ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of "May you be the mother of a hundred sons" (SSATF 27).

Yet, though women and the transgenders are thus marginalized in society, in Dattani's plays they eventually fight back, though in their own limited ways. Living in a narrow, constricted world formulated by rigid patriarchal norms and dictates, Uma transgresses its boundaries by befriending Anarkali and Champa, and eventually solving the murder mystery in the transgender community all by herself. Uma defends the transgender women, helps them to speak and share their problems though she is not able to help bring any justice to Kamala, she is able to free Anarkali from the burden of being the culprit of murdering Kamala. She encourages the transgender women to be allowed at Subbu's marriage to sing and dance and give their blessings to him and his new wife and further find the real culprit to confess his crime, but at the cost of loss of two innocent lives, Kamala and Subbu.

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* highlights the societal injustice, discrimination and the marginalized exploited life lived by the transgender women. In the play innocent Kamala is murdered but the murderer Mr Sharma being a politician is not arrested neither

tried for murder legally. There was no complaint filed in the police station. The police did not take any initiative in bringing justice for Kamala and Subbu. The case was hushed up; even no news was printed in the newspaper. One can notice the play of power politics, how innocent people, the transgender women, are left in the periphery to suffer socio-cultural, political exploitation and injustice. The transgender women have no voice as they have no means to voice against their problems and injustice. They are left to remain in the margin, to suffer the unjust inhuman treatment, gender disparity and injustice at the hands of the mainstream society. The societal stereotyped behaviour that is caused by patriarchal orthodox perspectives is a factor that dominates the transgender women's lives leading them to live a marginalized life.

### Conclusion

With the spread of knowledge in post-colonial era, social activists as well as social thinkers devote most of their time and energy in giving voice and space to the marginalized, victimized and rejected classes of the society. To study the present scenario in the contemporary society of India, there have been efforts by social activists, NGOs and legal authorities to fight for transgender people to get them fair treatment, legal protection, medical facilities, job opportunities, etc. Governmental/judicial reforms have helped the transgender people. In 2014, The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill was introduced and passed in 2015. In 2019 the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) has been enacted. This has been a major milestone in protecting the transgender community in India. In 2017 the Supreme Court decision has increased the rights of the third gender community that is the right to privacy. This right will go a long way towards helping prevent socio-cultural-economic and medical discrimination. The National Council for Transgender Persons in India has the responsibility of ensuring the welfare and protection of the transgender persons. With

awareness, education and empowerment, the transgender women are being able to achieve the changed status quo for themselves in the mainstream society. We find today in India transwomen achievers as IAS officer, as Judge, as Writers, as Sport persons, as Models, Actors, Beauty Queens, etc but this is true only for a selected few where family and society at large support them. It is painful to know that numerous transgender women continue to suffer gender disparity and injustices leading to a marginalized existence in the dark shadows. It is high time that such disparity is not only to be questioned, but the mainstream society should not confuse gender identity with sexual orientation, rather accept the change in gender roles, that gender is a fluid concept, prone to transformation and dependent on performance. We need to develop and practice democratic outlook to forego all kinds of marginalization for the welfare of humanity, to make the world a better place for all living beings. Can we look ahead towards a genderless/free society? Can we not do away with gender disparity and respect and accept gender variety without bigotry?

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