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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the social injustice as observed in the play *Seven Steps around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani. It is a Radio play, which was first broadcasted as *Seven Circles around the fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9th January 1999. It was later performed on stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai on 6th August 1999. It's a remarkable play with dramatic excellence. The key argument of the paper describes how transgender classes are discriminated against and stereotyped as criminals and worth for nothing. However, the so-called democratic version stresses the equality but the ground reality is the other way round. The 'Hijra' community of India is looked down upon. They are demarcated from the society. They enjoy their own world and have many inhibitions about the 'other' world. In this play, all the fears of the 'Hijra' community come true when Kamala, a beautiful eunuch, tries to settle down in the 'other' world by marrying Subbu, the son of a minister. This paper endeavors to analyze the thin line between the two worlds of the same society. Transgenders are the unheard voices in the society. They can be held responsible for any crime and people believe it. In fact, the paper intends to portray the miserable lives of the 'hijras' which become more pathetic if they cross the threshold and enter the other world of human beings.

Key words: Hijra, social injustice, oppressor, brutality, transgender

KY PUBLICATIONS

Mahesh Dattani, a Sahitya Academy award winner, is known for covering extra miles for his stories. He shares a great bond with the Indian society. His stories, characters, settings and the dialogues are liked and appreciated worldwide. He touches the bottom of the hearts of his audience by handling the burning issues that are mostly preferred to be kept hidden. With a strong sense of human responsibility, Dattani always attempts to project reality on stage.

Mahesh Dattani is a contemporary modern Indian English writer whose works delineate the tyranny of the society. The society rules the minds of

the people. The fear of the society does not let the different schools of thoughts meet and mingle with each other. In fact, Dattani's plays are choked with emotions. The problems dealt by him trigger public anger and strictly criticize the oppressor. His plays are epitome of perfection. His appeal in the plays depicts the social ills vividly. The oppressors in his plays project male chauvinism, gender discrimination, injustice, etc. His works widely attack the social injustice in the contemporary India.

Seven Steps around the Fire is one of the masterpieces of Mahesh Dattani. He is a social realistic writer whose pious intention lies in bringing

about a positive change in the society. Every society is unique in itself but some people are still treading on the beaten path. Dattani's plays act as the eye-openers for the masses. He has to share a lot of experiences that he does through his works and characters. He himself states in the Preface to the Collected Plays, "I also know that I have to say and probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too, they seem to be doing rather well at having their say".

Seven steps around the fire is a prejudiced play. It is the recorded journey of 'eunuchs' in the fire of hatred, animosity, and superiority. The story depicts the injustice done to the deprived community of 'eunuchs'.

The play has a very dramatic and meaningful beginning.

"Sanskrit mantras fade in, the ones chanted during a Hindu wedding. Fire. The sound of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras. A scream. The flames engulf the scream".

In our society the wedding mantras celebrate the union of the two people, where as in the play the wedding of Kamala and Subbu results in destruction and their deaths. The play deals with Kamala's murder and its investigation. Kamala is a beautiful 'hijra'. All hell breaks loose when Subbu, the son of a minister, falls in love with her. His father does not approve of it. But he marries her secretly which leads to the further consequences.

Uma Rao, daughter of Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University and wife of Chief-Superintendent, plans to work on her research paper titled as 'Class-and Gender-Related Violence. It's she who insists on unfolding the mystery of Kamala's murder. The characters of the play are introduced through the inquiry of Kamala's murder. Her interaction with Anarkali, Champa, Mr. Sharma, a minister, Salim, and Munswamy throws light on the social injustice generally done to the 'hijra' community.

Suresh Rao, chief superintendent of police, appoints Munswamy, a constable, as her body guard. She talks to Anarkali, a eunuch arrested for Kamala's murder. Anarkali asks her to meet Champa, the head of the local eunuch community, and give her some money for her bail. Uma does the

same. She borrows money from her father and gives it to Champa. Salim, a disciple of Mr. Sharma was at Champa's house where she meets him and notices that he is upto something that is very important for him. She tries to find out what it is, but in vain. She goes to the minister's house to meet Salim and his wife so that the confusion can come to an end. There she meets the minister, Mr.Sharma who is busy with the preparations of his son's marriage. His son is Subbu. He is a very important part of the play. It's he who acts as a rival and tries to do what he finds right for him.

In the play, Kamala is shown as a beautiful eunuch who is loved by Subbu. He marries her secretly. But when his father comes to know about wedding, he burns Kamala to death and gets Anarkali arrested for the murder. The reason is given that Anarkali hates Kamala's beauty and rising fame. The photograph of the marriage remains the concern of the minister. He asks Salim to get the photo from the eunuchs that he fails to bring. Anarkali and Champa know about the murderer of Kamala but are afraid to reveal it to Uma and others.

On the day of Subbu's wedding, all the characters of the play gather there to witness the occasion. It's the time when Kamala's murder mystery gets resolved finally but with a great shock. The minister gets the photograph but only after Subbu has committed suicide. The case gets closed stating it as an accident and nothing happens to the criminals and the oppressors. The ending suggests Uma's helplessness to get the culprit punished by law. She says:

They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the 'hijra' people knew who was behind the killing of Kamala. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people..." (42, Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani).

The play is a mourning saga of the eunuchs. They are only welcomed on two occasions –wedding and child birth. There is a myth if they don't dance or sing on the auspicious day, they curse the family.

They are the most neglected and hated section of the society. In Lakshmi's story in a magazine, she, a 'hijra', herself states, "Like the underdog, we are respected by nobody". No doubt, the eunuchs are not given any status in the society. Rather they are taken as taboo. The play throws light on the rule of the power and the exploitation of the weaker and the lower section of the society. If someone stands for them like Subbu, he has to face the consequences.

Mahesh Dattani highlights the atrocities and brutalities done to these people in this free India. They are not given equal rights and stature. They are still tied in iron shackles that are difficult to be broken and impossible to get unlocked.

When Uma wants to talk to Anarkali and she addresses her as 'she', Munswamy chuckles and says, "She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't". This statement proves the filthy attitude of the society towards the innocents.

Go away. Madam is no longer interested in your filthy lies. (8, Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani)

Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra! (9, Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani)

Shut up. And don't call me brother. (11, Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani)

Above dialogues are of a constable, Munswamy. He represents the society as a whole.

The play witnesses the man's world. The male characters of the play represent power, determination, strength, and superiority. Be it Munswamy, a constable or Salim, a mere disciple. The males symbolise authority till the end. They are projected as the successful regimes. Mr. Sharma burns Kamala to death and never regrets the deadly murder. He takes it to be his birth right to eradicate the problem from its root. Mr. Sharma arranges Subbu's marriage with the girl whom he wants to see as his daughter-in-law. He tries his best to hide the brutality from the people. As luck would have it, the hidden ending chapter of Kamala's death gets cleared from the dust. It is revealed that Subbu's true love for Kamala killed her and now it's his turn to go for salvation.

Before shooting himself, he talks to his father saying:

Stay away! You killed her! (40, Collected Plays)

The wedding observes the end of the ill-fated lover. People discover the reality. All keep quiet and behave like rational beings. Nobody complains against the killer due to social restraints and political apprehension. The death of the two is the disapproval of the prevailing social injustice in the society.

Females enjoy equal rights and opportunities but it's all in the outer world. She is subjected to follow her husband, father, son within the four walls of the house. The gender segregation itself keeps a check on the woman power. She is portrayed as a semi-automatic machine that always depends on the instructions. Uma is an educated lady, working on her thesis but has been opposed by his husband.

Suresh says:

That is the sort of crap that finds its way into your academic papers (16, Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani)

Jeremy Mortimer firmly believes, "Mahesh Dattani's plays often project characters who are questioning their identity, and who feel isolated in some way. Uma certainly feels isolated in her marriage, and this sense of isolation makes her empathize with Anarkali, the hijra she befriends". (4, a note on the play)

Uma realizes Anarkali has been trapped just to save the wealthy minister. She is unable to do anything for Anarkali except being a calm and passive listener. She is not satisfied in her personal life. She does not have a baby. She goes for check-ups to have one. She gets to know that everything is fine with her. The doctor asks her husband to be there for the examination. He refuses and strictly replies, "I don't have to go. . ." (32, Collected Plays). Males never doubt their masculinity. Its only females who are pointed at.

No doubt, honesty and sincere efforts are needed to transform the country, but a few raise their hands to bring a revolutionary change. It's difficult to swim against the current. In Mahesh Dattani's plays, the female characters mostly leave

themselves to their fate. Though they are the main characters yet they maintain a very low profile. The whole story revolves around Uma's efforts to unveil the truth of Kamala's murder. Her intense curiosity of knowing the reason behind the murder crumbles to dust when the real world proves its mettle. Uma can never be a surprise for the readers. She does what is expected out of her. In any society, the females remain quiet and neutral.

Kaustav Chanda states, "if 'Femininity' is associated with passivity, we come across a number of characters who are passive, and therefore, feminine". (165, New Academia International Journal) The other characters except males don't urge for justice. They know justice is not their cup of tea but meant for the rich and wealthy class. The irony in the play is that males being involved in all illegal activities yet don't feel remorse. But the females suffer from psychic conflict within themselves. As usual, Mahesh Dattani has typically portrayed the characters of his play, males as hard, rough, self-centered, on the other hand, females as soft, sensitive, and remorseful.

The play begins and ends on a symbolically poignant note. The murder, arrest, torture of the different eunuchs eternalizes the agony of a transgender. Though we all know that no one becomes a transgender deliberately, yet being one is a curse. This fact emerges from the incidents of the play. The transgenders are only welcomed in the two celebrations but these are not meant for them. The roots of social injustice are so deep in the minds of the people that they cannot get rid of it. Dattani has always dealt with unconventional themes in his works in order to relieve the society from the rigid rules and regulations. How far his efforts would spell success, only time can tell.

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