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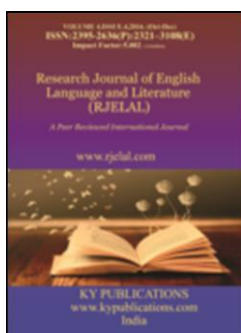
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## AN ANALYSIS OF THE SIGNIFICATION OF THIRD GENDER IN MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAY *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE*

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### ABSTRACT

The article explores the problematic signification of the third gender in Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven steps around the fire*. Though queer identity is gaining much momentum in contemporary literature, their representation is still a site of conflict. The article explores the play and unravels the complexity of the queer representation in it. The theoretical premises of queer theory are employed to justify the reasons that underlie the representation of the third gender in the play. Furthermore the article explores the reductive identity and the reward and punishment methods that the patriarchy resorts to in eliminating or muting the queer existence. The study is solely based on the language analysis of the play.

**Key words:** gender dysphoria, queer

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"Identity is about embodiment and spatiality" (Rodríguez, 5). It is constructed through a process of comparison and contrast with "other selves" in social frameworks that furthermore institutionalize relationship between the self and the other. Thus identity is strictly formed in a context; hence it becomes a spatial entity. The social space is an unlimited source of preexisting narratives of previous encounters. These spaces thereby are sites of symbolical affordance in decoding acts that are possible within definite sociolinguistic frameworks (Rodríguez, 5). Identities are thus a product of sociolinguistic interactions.

These interactions are regulated by power politics of a specific space. Discursive spaces exist as sites of knowledge production. Art, in specific literature is a field of knowledge that inspires this identity production. This article will analyse Mahesh Dattani's play, "Seven steps around the

fire", to explore the construction of identity for the third gender.

Judith Butler's in her discussions on gender and identity explicates that enforced gendered identity is a fundamental norm of the patriarchy that hurls individuals into all cultural customs or repetitive acts that confine us into the binaries of gender (McRuer, 151). Heterosexuality is thus a complex socio cultural product that denies any existence outside the binary of male or female. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* is similar stance in his concept of "the birth of the prison," i.e. that docile body is shaped in cultural space in the society (McRuer, 153).

This understanding takes us to the fact that though the third gender is marginalized, it still faces a strong opposition in the socio cultural fabric to be destroyed or dissolved. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that this is due to the fact that heterosexual identity is structured around a definite the

differences of gender dimension that unify into an organic whole, which further is pivotal in other societal customs. On the contrary queerness opens a “mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically” (Tendencies 8) (McRuer, 156). An analysis of Literature will justify the fact that it replete with derogatory images of the gender dysphoria.

The queer is rather a difficult or problematic entity to categories as our society exists in binaries. For instance the term “Trans- sex” is in itself a trap. Serena Nanada in, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* states that they are “an intermediate sex or gender category as nothing other than transitional; it cannot be, in our culture, a permanent possibility” (Nanada,123). Thus they are always subjected to reductive identity.

Dattani's plays explore this temporal uncertain existence of the trans-gender. They stress on the marginality of the third sex and the difficulty of representing the same. For instance in the play *Seven Circles Around the Fire*, opens with the rebuke. “Uma: Will she talk to me. Munswamy (chuckling): She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't.” (Dattani, 7). The reduction of the hijrahs identity to an “it” and the rebuking chuckle that accompanies, in reluctance to give the hijarah a gender identity is a classic example of reductive identity. The inhumanisation of the third sex or gender with the use of “it”, makes it difficult to claim a permanent identity in the main stream.

Critics like Leo Bersani, in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” states that the sex becomes a feared site for the “breakdown of the human itself” (Chen,187). Sandy Stone's in a “posttranssexual” provocation affirms that the disruptions of the established patterns of desire that the transsexual body indicate produces innumerable of alterities, which Donna Haraway calls the promises of monsters. An identity which is continually unstable and exceed the frame of any possible representation (Chen,187-188).

The play through out projects the hijarahs attempt to claim an identity. For instance the clever

use of namonaculture, “Anarkali”( (Dattani,8). Anarkali is stereotype of sacrifice in Indian literature. The hijarah character is also a symbol of sacrifice in the play. Throughout the play the hijarah's dialogues replete with an attempt to claim this trans identity. “ 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” (Dattani, 11). The vacillating identity and relationship is evident in the dialogues. Moreover the sentence structure is limited which compliments the problematic representation of self in a patriarchal language.

In Queer literature this difficulty in representation is often challenged by stereotypical gender behaviour. Any act of gendered behavior, is also an attempt to reinforce and categories. To challenge and claim the identity Anarkali resort to striking practices the transsexual men engage in, that is to create a sexually gratifying identity. Anarkali challenges the traditional representation of the vagina as the only sexual means of gratification, by claiming “...Go away. After servicing all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk” (Dattani,8). This is not just symptomatic of sexual violence or exploitation due to the third sex identity but also an attempt to categorize oneself into a complete sexual identity. Anarkali's alternation of sexual behavioural patterns by gratifying the men in the police station is also a rebellious attempt to claim her predominant feminine identity, as suggested in her name. However ironically Anarkali in her attempt to claim and identity tries to categorize herself as the feminine. This act of neutralising the queer identity further complicates the process of defining the same.

Violence is a common denominator in the queer representation and Dattani's plays doesn't differ from it either. The stereotypical danger they are prone to in revelation of their identity is pivotal to the plot. Anarkali becomes an easy target of the society, due to the identity. Only towards the denouement of the play, the reason for Kamla's death is unravelled.

Patriarchy structures people in gender categories. Gender is classed hence Patriarchy ranks masculine over the feminine. It works on a reward and punishment system. Thus gender is also a social

system of power and privileges. Dttanai projects the repression that confines the trans or queer identity. The play explores pushinment from death to confinement. Here again Mr. Sharma and his hosuehold provides the backdrop of the heterosexual life style that enahce the conflict of the play. sterotypical institutions like marriages, family contrsat the quuer identity through out the play. Subbu being characterised as ill or sick is yet another inastance of reductive identity. Mr. Sharam depicts the typical pratorach who povbserves any type of sexual deviancy as an illness that can be treated. The stereotypical understanding of the queer as unnatural is projected with much subtility by Dattani. Subbu being forced to marry is yet another instance of repressive confinement. However Dattani rightly projects that homes as confinements of the queer. "Mr. Shrama: ...my son is getting a wife from a fine family. I am happy to see that he is entering the pahse of the householder. Uma: and you feel the truth lies in that ? Mr.Sharma: For him, yes. My turth is in enusing he is on the right path." (Dattani, 37). This rather a forceful dialogue that encapsulate the confilct of the play. Here the rule of binaries that structure the society is evident. As discussed earlier the patriarchy functions within the safe space of binary, that is easy to absolute definition. The indeterminate sites of representation threatens the structure hence it is repressed. Here Mr. Sharma's stress on redirecting his son Subbu to the right path is symbolic of this repression. He does not consider his sons sexuality as a natural one but rather a sign of deviance which has to be corrected by him as a patriarch. Moreover the ideas of family and marriage as socially integral institution is ingrained in the voices of characters like Mr. Sharma. This is also a social form of resistance, whereby the trans or the queer is projected as the twisted. This projection of the trans as a deviance, makes them a symbol of vulnerability an incomplete symbol that lacks an absolute signification. Here the trans gender as a symbol lacks the social context that provides them as space to actualize. Mr. Sharma's attempt to reprimand Subbu and punish him with a confinement is an act of dominance of that his masculinity confer on him and

moreover a strategic way to set Subbu identify with them mainstream gender identity and its power.

This lack of power or vulnerability is also seen in Uma's statement that : "They knew ...all the hijrah people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They had no voice...Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident ...so were the lives of two young people" (Dattani, 42). The play is depiction of the muted third sex and their existence in a transition or limbo. The power to voice oneself is again a reward of the system. The powerful is voiced in the play, whereas as Uma suggest the lives of two transgender is lost . This idea of a worthless existence is also resonated in Anarkhali's words "one hijra less in this world does not matter to your husaband" (Dattani, 35).

Uma becomes a strong mouth pice for Dattani in voicing the cultural nuances of their existence. She traces the Hijrahs to myth and glorifies their existence as one of sacrifice by associating them to the story of Rama (Dattani 10-11). To an extend her story is an attempt to give an identity to the third sex , an history to creat an acceptance. Ironically here again the identity is symbolic of the sacrificed. It resonates the ambivalence of neither male or female, lacking a sexual organ.

To conclude the transgender or the queer becomes a defeering symbol in Dattani's play. It is astounding that the plays like that of Dattani offer a true picture of the sturggle of the third gender even in 21st century india, which implies the ongoing struggle in the cultural site of the country. Their identity is denied a social context to actualise and hence attain an aboslute meaning or catogory. As observed in various instance dicussed they are denied any attamept to constuct relationships or signification in terms of their essential existence. The very fact that they are muted as suggested by Uma, symbolically convey their need to alter the language and social system to gain an identity for themselves. The patriarchal language that play within the binary structure does not provide a viable ground for the third gender to identify themeselves, as they are the indeterminant symbols of the system that threaten to subvert it or deconsturct the very essential norms of the power structure that they

creat. These power structure that work on reductive identity thrive on marginalisation and elimination of the queer, that challenges its stability.

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