



THE USE OF MYTH AND RITUALS IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE*

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Abstract

Myths and rituals are a part of the past of any human civilization. The writers have taken account of these in their works to mark the contrast between the past and the present. Mahesh Dattani (b. 1958), one of the promising Indo-anglian dramatists of modern times, through his radio play *Seven Circles Round the Fire* (1998) later on published as *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (2000) has vividly portrayed the plight of *hijra* community in India in the current state of affairs in contrast to the higher status they were entitled to in ancient Hindu myths and scriptures. The play deals with the sad state of *hijra* community in general and, in particular, the life of Kamla, a eunuch, who is loved by and gets married to a powerful political figure Mr. Sharma's son, Sibbu but owing to social stigma and taboos she is not accepted as bride and ultimately has to lose her life.

Keywords: myth, ritual, *hijra*, culture, tradition

A myth is generally regarded as a true account of the remote past. The main characters in myths are usually gods or supernatural heroes. As sacred stories, myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests closely linked to religion. According to Alan Dundes, a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind assumed their present form, although in a very broad sense, the word can refer to any traditional story (Dundes, p.1). Bruce Lincoln defines myth as "ideology in narrative form" (Lincoln, p. 9). Myths may arise as truthful explanation as well as overlabeled accounts of historical events. It may also arise as personification of natural phenomena and as explanation of ritual. Mircea Eliade argues that one of the foremost functions of myth is to establish models for behavior. Myths may also provide a religious experience (Eliade, p.9). Mythical narrations play an important role in nearly every genre of literature.

Closely associated with myths are rituals, a set of actions performed mainly for its symbolic value. Rituals can be prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community. A ritual is one of the patterns of the way of life of a particular society. It is rather a blue print of our living. If fact, it is closely associated with the culture of a particular society. A ritual may be performed on specific occasions. According to the variety of cultures and traditions as well as mindset of the people, there are various purposes of ritual; the objectives are varied: religious obligations, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthening of social bond, social and moral education and sometimes, just for the pleasure of ritual itself. The social function of rituals has often been exploited for political end; rituals can help in creating a firm sense of group identity. Human beings have used rituals to create social cordial relationships. They have also

been used even to nourish interpersonal relationships. In a country like India with people of various faiths and religions living together, each set of religion has its own set of rituals. The passion and the zeal with which these rituals are observed by different individuals speak a lot about their attitude and approach to various issues relating to life.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the contemporary promising Indo-Anglican dramatists whose plays are a combination of myths and rituals. His plays are rich in making use of myths and legends through which he depicts contemporary issues. He uses myths to portray social problems which Indians face in day to day life.

The themes of his plays are contemporary and modern and they are radical and unconventional: homosexuality, child sex abuse, marriage and career, gender discrimination, problems of eunuch (*hijra*) community, patriarchal social system, interpersonal relationships, and problems faced by HIV positives etc. According to Erin Mee: "he is not someone different, but he is doing things differently for creating effective and everlasting appeal" (Mee, p. 319). Tanu Pant says that "he deals with issues which are very much a part of the educated urban society but the people do not want to confront them and Dattani provides a platform for these issues"(Pant, p. 46). He exposes the "mean, ugly and unhappy things of human life"(Prasad & Yadav, p.11). The present paper intends to explore the use of myth and rituals in one of the prominent plays of Mahesh Dattani: *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.

Seven Steps Around the Fire, is a play written by Mahesh Dattani that deals with the problem of eunuchs. In Hindu mythology *hijras* or *kinnars*, the third gender, have been regarded closer to gods. They were given handsome amount of money and gifts because of their status and blessings, pure and effective, similar to god. Hindu religion forbids abusing or exercising physical violence upon *kinnars*. Numerous stories in Indian scriptures are a proof to this fact. In fact, Lord Shiva himself manifests in the form of *Ardhnarishwar*—half man, half woman— which is worshipped throughout the country. This proves that fluid genders and sexuality have been an

integral part of Indian mythology and culture. The extent to which this gender has been represented in Indian myths and religious stories is rare in other cultures of the world. However, present day conditions are entirely different, rather pathetic. Dattani through this play makes an attempt to expose the crumbling ancient myths and culture in the modern times. *Hijras* or eunuchs in India have practically no respectable public identity. They have no acceptance and no protection from prejudice and abuse.

In Indian society, even now a days, the community of eunuchs perpetually survives as outcast. They suffer from social discrimination, social deprivation, poverty, inferiority and mental torture. For their genderless identity, they are often known as *Hijra* Community. Their birth is treated as the curse of divine and they are not allowed to involve in personal relationship. They are deprived of the pleasure of family bliss. However, their presence and blessings on the occasions of marriage and child birth are regarded as auspicious.

The word eunuch denotes the idea of a castrated man, especially one in charge of a *harem* or a highly pitched voice singer. In ancient India, kings used to keep these eunuchs for the management of women's chambers. It is evident that *hijra* community in spite of being sexually handicapped is gifted with identical potential and human sensibility. There are ample evidences in history that kings used to encourage these eunuchs for sexual prostitution. According to social conventions they are not permitted to live in the respectable society. It is the horror of social convention they are not even permitted to achieve professional skills to earn their bread and butter. The venues of education are closed for them. Many of them are obliged to die without proper medical care because doctors take it as their misfortune to attend them.

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is the first authentic representation of the community of eunuchs in theatre. The play is constructed on the line of detective serial. The plot revolves round the murder of Kamla, a young and beautiful eunuch and this case is to be investigated by Uma Rao who is

doing her research in Sociology. She is the daughter of vice chancellor of Bangalore University and is married to Suresh, the superintendent of police. Police suspects that this furious crime has been committed by Anarkali, another eunuch.

Uma Rao, working on her thesis, resolute to unveil the mystery of Kamla's murder, decides to check out the murder case at her husband's police lock up. She, in her superior position of being the superintendent's wife, takes a condescending attitude towards Anarkali's situation. Anarkali manipulates her into accepting her as a sister. Uma is trapped. She is compelled to prove the innocence of Anarkali. With the help of constable Munnuswamy, a reluctant accomplice in her detective journey, Uma enters the fascinating world of the *hijras*. Her objective is to trace the *hijra guru* Champa and offer some money which Champa can use as bail to set Anarkali free. Uma gets more than she bargains for. In Champa's inner chamber lies a trunk filled with secrets of *hijra* clan. There is one photograph of Kamla which seems to be much sought after by a hoodlum, the body guard of a powerful political figure Mr. Shrama, Salim. It transpires that Salim was a regular visitor to Kamla and often took her out to his home when his wife was away. The plot thickens. But who kills Kamla is a mystery and even more mysterious is the motive behind the murder.

Through one photograph, at Champa's place, Uma comes to know about some secret involvement of Salim, the bodyguard of the minister Mr. Sharma, in Kamla murder case. Uma visit Sharma's place to ascertain the identity of Salim and his concern with the case. When Uma arrives at Mr Sharma's place his son Subbu appears there. Mr Sharma anticipates some crisis and tries his best to prevent Subbu from being involved in this case. Later on the occasion of Subbu's marriage Champa appears there with her team and all start dancing. As soon as the dance of team begins, in the image of dancing Anarkali, the image of dead Kamla starts haunting Subbu's mind. With the shift of consciousness of past Subbu loses control over himself and says that none can keep Kamla away from him. Taking advantage of Subbu's nervousness, Champa takes out his photograph with Kamla and gives it to him. As soon as he looks at the

photograph, he starts identifying Kamla with Anarkali. He also reveals the secret of his relationship with and the murder of Kamla. In a state of sheer depression, Subbu takes out the gun and kills himself. It is only after the death of Subbu that Kamla's murder mystery was resolved. Subbu dies but both Suresh and Mr Sharma are not ready to listen to the voice of Anarkali. Thus at the minister Mr Sharma's son Subbu's wedding it all begins to fall clearly into pieces as Uma and the audiences realize the reason for Kamla's untimely death and the repercussions of Kamla being alive would have shaken the very pillars that the cream of society rests on: the institution of marriage.

We note that Uma appears as an instrument of awakening and, therefore, she takes the responsibility to articulate the mute voices of eunuchs in the centre and to expose the community of elitists that drags them to the margin. From the dramatic point of view, the conflict of social commitments and the obligations of interpersonal relationships are successfully taken to make the argument more viable. Uma does manage to unravel the mystery and the real murderer is brought to full public view. But she has to rely entirely on her husband to make the arrest and reopen the file. But she hardly succeeds in bringing justice for Kamla and the *hijra* community. Champa leaves the town after giving Uma a lucky charm, a *tabeej*, to beget children.

Mahesh Dattani gives the *Hijras* of India a voice to articulate their feeling and predicaments through his play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. We see that a *Hijra* in the play secretly marries the son of a politician-minister for which she has to bear the consequences by being killed by the minister's men. The role of the police, politician and the society as a whole is questioned. According to Miruna George:

Hijras are isolated and segregated community and they constitute an invisible minority, within the society. They are the neglected gender. They sing at the wedding and at a child birth with other *Hijras* and people give them money; otherwise, they put a curse on them. They are considered as the

chosen of God and a curse by them cannot be revoked.(George, p. 147)

Though, once the *Hijra* community was pleased and blessed by Lord Rama, today they are neglected and ignored by the modern so-called civil society. This is well brought by Dattani in his *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. *Hijra* communities have existed in most parts of the world with their own local identities, customs and traditions. They are known as *baklas* in the Philippines, *berdaches* among American Indian tribes, *serrers* in Africa and *jogappas* in South Asia. The evidence of *Hijra* community can also be found in *Mahabharata*. The tale is that Aravan was the son of Arjun and Nagkanya. He offered himself to be sacrificed before goddess Kali to ensure the victory of the Pandavas. He put a condition. The condition was to spend one night of his life in matrimony. Lord Krishna assumes the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and marries him. Even today the *Hijras* in Tamil Nadu consider Aravan their progenitor. They call themselves Aravanis.

Dattani, dedicating the whole play to the *Hijra* cause, has brought marginalized to the centre, the underdogs to the forefront. He has granted them an audience. He has made the society think about the feelings of the *Hijra*. He is not only advocating their cause but also underlying the fact that they need understanding and concern, not pity and sympathy. The traditional rules and norms are challenged and the hypocritical social setup is exposed. In the words of G.J.V. Prasad:

Dattani sensitizes the audiences with the issue without being didactic and the audiences are made to think off the state of affairs of the *Hijra*. The play portrays not only the tragedy off the *Hijra* but also the tragedy of the whole political, legal and social system of India. It is the society that acts as the villain and Dattani is ruthless in exposing such hypocritical society (Prasad, p.141).

Dattani raises many questions regarding *Hijra* identity, their constitution, connotations, their social acceptability and tolerability. They are the invisibles in the society. His play gives the message 'to live and let others live', which is the basic philosophy of Jainism, an atheist school that can be considered as

humanist school of thought. He tries to bring out the message of humanism, compassion and peaceful co-existence.

We observe that very beginning of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* builds the atmosphere of ritual of wedding in Hindu families along with their variety of traditions and rituals. Dattani explains these rituals in his stage-direction: "Sanskrit mantras fade in the tones chanted during the Hindu wedding. The sound of the fire grows louder drowning the mantras."(*Collected Plays*, p.7).

Dattani describes the detailed rituals of Hindu wedding. He describes the wedding of Subbu, son of Mr. Sharma, a powerful politician, with all its beautiful and typical rituals of Hindu tradition. We come to know about a variety of rituals which take place while wedding: chattering of guests, bringing of bride and groom to the sacred fire, chanting of priests. The guests are welcomed and simultaneously the rituals of wedding continue: "Cut chatter to fade in Sanskrit marriage shlokas being chanted. Occasionally the fire crackles as butter is thrown into it" (*Collected Plays*, 37). Mr. Sharma, watching his son performing the marriage rituals, feels the happiest moment of his life.

Giving a realistic picture of the Indian society through the play Dattani has depicted the rituals and traditions of *hijra* community. *Hijra* people are ostracized by the society. It is a ritual of Indian society that they are welcomed only on very few occasions. It is also a ritual among *hijra* community that they attend such a celebrations to give their blessings. Dattani has depicted this through Uma:

Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture when 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 finding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessing of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons.'(*Collected Plays*, p. 11)

As Uma explores the tryst between Anarkali and Salim, her marital situation is under tension, primarily because of her inability to have children.

She begins to reflect on the irony of hijra community. Their presence at births and marriages is acceptable but the gift of motherhood is denied to them by nature and privilege of marriage is denied to them by society. Uma has a choice in having both but deep down she realizes she wants neither.

Dattani also traces the *Guru-Shishya* tradition in *Hijra* community. The head of *Hijra* community remains careful about his/her *Shishyas*. The *shishya* has to pay some entry fee. Then he works for the guru. The guru takes care of *chela*. It is well depicted in this play. Such a ritual brings more knowledge to audience. Through the character of Champa, Head of *Hijra* community and Anarkali, one is reminded of the *guru-shishya* ritual and tradition. Pranav Joshipura in his book *A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays* comments:

The relationship between Champa and Anarkali can be compared with the Hindu life stage, particularly that of the house-holder stage. The process of becoming a guru is like 'procreation'. One becomes a guru only after adding chelas from the larger community. This is similar to having children. Guru takes the care of his 'children' i.e., chelas. In that sense, he has to perform the role of the parent. Once guru becomes older, he might be replaced by a good chela. It is also equally true that all chelas cannot become gurus. For a *Hijra*, who has left all his relations behind, this structure is mentally satisfying as it provides a sense of family. (Joshipura, p. 50)

Uma reflects that in spite of the truth of Kamla's murder known to all the members of hijra community and the police as well, the case of Kamla's tragic end is closed. The police does not make any arrest, the media does not report anything and Subbu's suicide is treated as an accident. Dattani makes a bold attempt to give central space in the mainstream drama to the community of Eunuchs, the myths associated with them, and the Hindu rituals in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. In Indian society, contrary to ancient times, the community of eunuchs perpetually survives under the cover of shame and silence.

Thus we find that Mahesh Dattani is not a brand playwright but his plays have varied content and varied appeal. "He deals with issues which are

very much a part of the educated urban society but the people do not want to confront them and Dattani provides a platform for these issues, so that the people are aware of the fact that they are a reality and not just the fantasies of a playwright" (Pant, p.47).

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