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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE: A PREDICAMENT & IDENTITY CRISIS OF EUNUCHS

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ABSTRACT

The awful state of Eunuchs in Indian society is depicted in the drama *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. It highlights the protagonist Kamala's sorrow, who is a eunuch. The eunuchs are not regarded as honorable or even decent people. They disguise themselves as ladies, yet they cannot be recognized as such. It is known as being "neuter gender." Dattani talks on the play's eunuchs' issues, as well as their identity and implications. It draws attention to the eunuchs' absurd exclusion from society and their desire for fairness, acceptance, and self-respect. Subject Area: Fiction (Humanities).

INTRODUCTION

The plays by Mahesh Dattani, considered a "new arrival" in the field of Indian English Drama in the final decade of the twentieth century, are distinctive in subjects, characters, and style. Mahesh Dattani has a strong desire for and inclination toward Indianness. In order to effectively convey his point, he makes great use of Indian dramatic tropes and techniques. His plays reflect an actual experience and real touch since he is a playwright who is a true observer of society and its culture. He clearly addresses the modern socio-cultural, political, and economic challenges. Being a talented and determined playwright, he depicts openly on stage; the real world of eunuch's search for identity, in his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. In this drama, Dattani raises concerns about the Hijras' social standing in our culture. In our culture, hijras are regarded as the third gender. They are taken advantage of by society. They are not given equal treatment. The public ridicules and despises them. Nobody takes them seriously. They represent a minority in our culture. He also calls attention to the ills and prejudices of society. The play challenges our understanding of the 'Third' gender in India, questions the sufficiency of sexual politics and gender performativity as adequate bases of their identity and practices, and erases other axes of identity such as religion, sect, kinship, and blood as well as local moral and economic identity of "Izzat" (respect).

The marginalized Hijra community is an undesirable yet unavoidable presence in Indian society. In the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Subbu (a typical man) shows how acknowledging a Hijra's status as a wife through marriage not only crosses the line separating gendered feminine identity, but also undermines the idea of masculinity. The behavior of freely taking advantage of an "invisible marginality" and discarding them as the "outsider" is also put under scrutiny. Naturally, the young, lovely hijra Kamla is set on fire in order to eliminate any chance of disruption. State apparatuses like the media, police, politicians, and respectable families work together to hide the facts and eliminate the legal repercussions of an act of wrongdoing. However, a resistance is developed in the course of rescuing the marginalized innocent through deception, a sisterhood forming between a respectably married woman and social outcast hijras, a truth being revealed at least to the seeker and a no normative relationship being reclaimed and legitimized through violent yet resisting means of suicide. In the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the Hijra's struggle in contemporary society is depicted. They were an 'invisible minority,' isolated from the rest of society and kept apart. Although we have seen and heard of the Hijra, little is known about them. We always maintain a safe distance when we encounter Hijra people. But we must always remember that they are also people just like us. The play begins with Sanskrit mantras, said before a Hindu wedding to start the drama.

The scene has now moved to the Superintendent of Police's office, where Uma Rao, the Superintendent's wife, is studying Hijras. She meets Constable Munswamy in order to visit Anarkali, a Hijra who is charged with killing Kamla, another Hijra. Her interest has been stirred by Anarkali's case. She thus expresses an interest in meeting Anarkali in the prison. As she comes from a respectable family, Munswamy, on the other side, does not want her to meet Anarkali. Constable Munswamy refers to Anarkali as "it" rather than "he" or "she" since he does not recognise her as a person. He treats Hijra like an animal. They are taken advantage of physically and linguistically. Dipendu Das believes that-

"The prejudice and discrimination against the Hijra in particular and the third sex in general are pervasive in language as well. There are pronouns for the male and female sexes, 'he' and 'she,' but there are none left for the third sex" (Das Dipendu 83). Munswamy recognises that it is inefficient to investigate the case of a Hijra. The Hijras are useless to talk to. He lists numerous such instances, such as murders, husbands killing spouses, wives killing husbands' lovers, brothers killing brothers, and so on. Munswamy makes an attempt to convince her that the gadget will only deceive her. He asks her to do something. "If it's well with you, Madam, why is a lady from a respected family like yourself...?" (SSAF 7).

Continuing, he says, "Please, Madam, take on another case. Madam, why do you want to make our family look bad? I beg you to go back home" (SSAF 8). Munswamy forces Anarkali to meet Uma. She is adamant that she won't meet with her, on the other hand. Anarkali claimed that neither males nor women interacted with the Hijras. They are actively avoided by society. Not even an invitation to the party has been sent to them. Without being invited, they attend the wedding and births. Uma is perplexed when she first encounters Anarkali in the police station. She initially questions Uma's arrival. "ANARKALI: (from far) No! I have no desire to meet any journalists." (SSAF 8). Uma starts off by claiming she is not a journalist. Then Anarkali starts speaking in slang. The Hijra's primary shortcoming is their willingness to speak to anyone at any time in an unsuitable or unbalanced manner. They openly use words that average people would hesitate to use while acting as though they have no sense of shame. Dattani throughout the play exhibits all of Hijra's habits and traits. Uma's feelings over Anarkali's behavior are not strong enough. She only reiterates what Anarkali says. Anarkali is finally moved and chooses to inform Uma of her issues and suffering. She tells Uma that Kamala was her sister and acknowledges that she did not kill her. She cared deeply about her. She was falsely charged with murder. The Hijra is kicked and beaten by Munswamy. Uma then steps in to take down Anarkali. Anarkali vehemently disagrees with Uma's suggestion to make the murder investigation public. On the other side, Uma's love and compassion give her the confidence to open up and share everything that has happened. Anarkali grows emotional and admits, "I didn't kill her, and she was my sister" (SSAF 9). Uma is shocked to see Anarkali, who is detained in a facility for men only. Uma asks her husband to explain to her why she is being imprisoned in the same jail as the males. Uma is informed by Suresh as to why Anarkali is being confined in a cell among men. Suresh quips ironically that the Hijras are as strong as horses. They are consequently kept in a cell with males.

"They are just as powerful as horses, SURESH. Put the purple one on" (SSAF 9). Suresh gets the wrong idea about the Hijras. They lie, and he hates them for it. They are unimportant in his eyes. He also remarks on their purple attire. Hijras typically don clothing meant for women. They make a living by snatching cash from passengers in trains and during weddings and deliveries. Is it appropriate to keep the Hijra together in one cell? But in addition to the cruel punishment she has already endured, it is done to her. Uma's speech serves as proof of this. She is being abused by every male prisoner there. Suresh, Uma's husband, asks her about Anarkali's interaction with her, when she gets home. He cautions her not to take whatever she says at face value. He also informs Uma that they consistently tell lies. She shouldn't believe anything Anarkali says as a result. "SURESH: Don't take what it says at face value. They all tell lies." (SSAF 9).

Suresh also elaborates on the mindset of the Hijras. They argued amongst themselves. He also cautions her against reading the entire Hijra file. Uma holds a particular place in her heart for the Hijras. She suggests that Anarkali take on the role of her sister. She tries to convince her to tell her all that has happened. Anarkali requests that Uma free her so that she can visit Champa, the head Hijra. In order to assist Anarkali, Uma decides to borrow money from her father. She also meets with Champa to provide the money in exchange for Anarkali's release from prison. She conveys Hijra's social status in society. They are a gender-neutral person. Uma continues by advising that one should comprehend the Hijra's innermost thoughts. They build relationships with their eyes, says Anarkali. She refers to Munswamy as her brother. Anarkali recognizes that men and women are not treated equally with Hijras because of their higher social status. She then apologizes and informs Uma, "ANARKALI: I would have made you my sister if you were a Hijra." (SSAF 12).

It's important to note that Hijras try to socialize with both men and women. She is aware that society would not permit that, thus it would not be possible. Uma is aware of Anarkali's emotions. She answers, "Of course we can be sisters!" (SSAF 13). Uma visits a prison to collect information for her thesis. She was unable to help her get out of the jail as a result. Anarkali desires to expose the murderer's identity, but she is afraid that if she does, they would kill her. But she tells her that she will tell the truth because she is Uma's sister. Uma instructs Anarkali to inform her husband of all the happenings so that he might intervene and save her. Anarkali gives Uma some tips on how to escape from jail. "ANARKALI: They will free me if you give them money." (SSAF 14). Anarkali is in a similar predicament to Hamlet, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet was reluctant to carry out his father's instructions. Hamlet's inability to do his task quickly serves as an example of his mental anguish. Hamlet asks if it is nobler in the mind to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fates or to take up arms against a sea of problems and by doing so, put an end to them. Anarkali is equally confused. She is unsure about whether she should tell the truth or not. She had been preoccupied with this query. Nobody thinks she was wrongly accused. She thinks no one will show up to bail her out of jail. Her friend Hijras arrive to save her, but they don't have enough money to do it. They are awful. As a result, she requests 100 rupees from Uma.

On the other side, Uma is short on money. Anarkali advises her to extort money from her husband as a result. Uma claims she was unable to explain to her husband that she was paying for Anarkali's release, and she denies accepting money from him. Additionally, Anarkali requests that Uma go with her to Shivajinagar's Russell Market so that they might give money to the Hijra, Champa. As suggested by Anarkali, Uma obtains approval from her husband Suresh to visit her father's residence in order to borrow money. More information regarding the guru-chela relationship is provided by Dattani. She displays her strong personality "I will select the guru who will succeed me since I am the chief Hijra. The guru will never be Anarkali." (SSAF 23) Due to their social exclusion, Hijras form their own community. They are unable to establish a respectable place for themselves in society. Uma informs Champa that Anarkali has sent her to meet with her as a social worker. Because she was unable to save Anarkali, Champa is ecstatic. If she had any, she claims she would spit money in the superintendent's face to get her money back. In exchange for Champa releasing Anarkali, Uma promises her money.

Salim, meanwhile, enters Kamla's house and takes all of her possessions. His attention is also drawn to Kamla's trunk. Salim is introduced to Uma by Champa. He is searching for a photo of Kamla. Salim is asked to keep silent in front of Champa's visitors. Salim reveals to Uma, why he wants to search through Kamla's possessions. As soon as Salim learns about Uma, he quickly leaves the room. Uma is curious to know more about Salim. Champa informs Uma that Salim used to come for Kamla every day. Champa requests financial assistance from Uma in order to rescue her daughter. Before she can respond to Salim's question about what he's looking for, Uma won't release her money. A threat to tell her father-in-law that Champa killed Kamla is also made to Champa. Salim's whereabouts intrigue Uma. Champa says she lives in Palace Orchards. The minister's bodyguard is named Salim. On the basis of her narration, Uma recognizes the minister. She also understands from Salim's question that she must go through Kamla's possessions in order to find the person who initially committed Kamla's murder. Champa makes an attempt to convince Uma that neither she nor Anarkali are to blame for Kamla's passing. She goes on to say that the police could do nothing and were helpless in the face of them. Since Champa was the only one who wanted Uma to die, she must be held accountable for her death. Champa rejects Uma's assignment of duty to her. Uma wants to persuade Champa that she wants to take over as leader of the Hijra without Kamla. In a fit of fury, Champa yells.

"She is my only child, Champa! (Stop) Take your cash and leave my home! Go! This is my residence! (Pause) You have no idea! You are ignorant!" (SSAF 28). Uma is convinced that the Hijras are aware of Kamla's killer but are keeping it a secret. They are reluctant to make it public. On the other hand, Mr. Sharma believes that one of the Hijras must have committed the crime. The news that Anarkali has been granted bail is relayed to Uma by Suresh. He tells Uma there isn't any concrete evidence against her. For the second time, Uma meets Champa and Anarkali without telling her husband. She is told by Uma to speak with Anarkali. She requests their help in finding Kamla's killer. Champa denies lending Uma any assistance. Anarkali captures the truth of civilization.

She discovers that in the world of the heterosexual, Hijras are meaningless. They can't expect anyone to help them. They are avoided and dismissed. She additionally requests Uma not to endanger her own standing. It is true that society will have suspicions toward anyone who helps the Hijra. They give the person who has come to help the Hijra a sidelong glance. It accurately depicts society. The fundamental qualities are still present in people in the twenty-first century. Marriage is only permitted between men and women. Uma is relentless in her search for the person who killed Kamala and eventually makes it to her target. She regards the Hijra people with respect and treats them as though they are her sisters. She is the only female who hears the Hijras' screams for assistance. She experiences a terrifying encounter after looking into Kamla's murder. Her struggle to speak out against injustice is one of her biggest life challenges. According to Bijay Kumar Das, the play "could be considered as a protest piece against the injustice meted out to the downtrodden in society" (Das 17).

Subbu, the Minister's son, goes into a rage and forgets the wedding ceremony. He demands the pictures, the final keepsake of his marriage to Kamala. Champa gives him the photo out of pity. The moment Subbu takes a glance at the picture, the living scenario is suspended, and Kamala, who has passed away, takes over as the living entity in charge of the scene. Subbu takes the revolver, points it at his father, and confesses the truth about Kamala's murder while in a very depressed state. He murders himself. The true mysteries behind Kamala's murder continue to be a mystery. What does it matter who killed Kamala? asks Anarkali. She's gone. I warned her so many times. Firstly, I believed Salim was pursuing her for his own amusement. Madam, when she started telling me about Subbu, I tried to stop her. I quarreled with her. I scratched her face in the hopes that Subbu would lose interest in her if she turned ugly. He desired to wed her. I attended their wedding in person. (SSAF 281). The policeman believes that it would be wasteful to look into a hijra's situation. The murder mystery's hidden motive is revealed by Subbu's death, but Uma remains silent. It is challenging to be exposed in public since reality is so unpleasant. The conclusion is a little dismal, but it demonstrates that speaking up against injustice is a huge challenge in and of itself.

"The matter was kept quiet, and newspapers did not mention it. Champa had a point. Police didn't make any arrests. The suicide of Subbu was dismissed as an accident. The image was obliterated. Two people's lives were also affected." (SSAF 282). The drama exposes the shameful nature of our public attitudes and cruelty of behavior in this way. The drama examines how marriage as a social institution affects interpersonal interactions. By exposing the cracks in husband-and-wife bonding, it compromises the purity of marriage. The background is the sacred representation of marriage, which is the married couple walking around the fire while taking the seven steps that stand for the sacred rows of marriage. Dattani doubts the applicability and legitimacy of this tradition in modern culture. He moves the play away from the usual path of family drama. The focus shifts from the Margin, where the centers of power are located, to the specifics of the weak people's life. More light is shed on the gloomy settlements of the eunuchs' community, hidden from the judgmental eyes of the public, as Uma strolls through the passageways tucked behind the Russell Market. Their low

social standing becomes clear. Uma brings the margin to the centre of the eunuchs by becoming friends with Anarkali and Champa. The problem ceases to be a fringe concern and moves into the mainstream. Dattani intends to intentionally attract attention to the suffering of the eunuchs in order to raise their voices and create a new sense of social consciousness. More comprehension of the injustice done to the disadvantaged group in society is anticipated than merely more expressions of sympathy. The writer gives them the self-respect, inner fortitude, and courage they need to face their challenges and persevere. The drama emphasizes how society discriminates against transgendered people. It accurately depicts the situations and environments in which they are treated suspiciously, highlighting their status as outcasts. The brutal living circumstances they endure as well as the sexual assault demonstrate how law enforcement officials may become tormentors. It is obvious that they yearn for justice, identity, acceptance, and self-respect. In his play, Mahesh Dattani refers to the eunuch population as an "invisible minority." It tells a horrifying story of the eunuch community's tyranny, which is largely ignored. More agonizing than interpersonal disputes are life's difficulties and psychological disorders. Depriving someone of their right to a dignified life is not just a burden but also a penalty for the group. Even from a glimpse of hatred that pierces the heart and extinguishes the will to life, the community hides its environment. More intolerable internal conflicts are present.

The social structure rejects equitable treatment of eunuchs. Because of this, the Minister kills Subbu's wife and arranges for his son to wed a high-class family member because he cannot bear the knowledge that Subbu had an affair and is married to a eunuch. It focuses on the eunuchs' exile from the outside world. After being released from prison, Anarkali experienced discomfort. She laments, "ANARKALI," with great sarcasm, knowing full well her predicament. So, now that you know who killed Kamala, what will you do?

"UMA: I'll ask my husband to call the police.

ANARKALI: Your husband is unconcerned by the loss of one hijra in the world." (SSAF 272). It indicates that no one is particularly interested in the presence of hijras in society. Each individual stays away from them. Mahesh Dattani questions if the eunuchs' infertility should be used as a justification for their inhumane treatment and isolation. Simply because they are not biologically capable of bearing children, they are treated like third class citizens by society. The problem of eunuchs has multidimensional angles. The discussions Uma has with an accused person make clear a lot of the hidden truths that are hidden under the numerous layers of cultural beliefs. The terrible murder of the woman as a result of the son's secret marriage to a eunuch broke the need for love and identity. The play examines two opposing viewpoints: one is society's rejection of being human, and the other is nature's apathy its failure to fulfill sex roles.

The murder brings up the problem of a group of people who have been abandoned and lack a platform to advocate for their lives and dignity. The play promotes the need for comprehension while recounting how they were treated unfairly within the constraints of the legal system and the use of force by the police. The drama sheds light on the inhumane treatment meted out to prisoners. Anarkali, an accused person, is housed with male inmates and is referred to as "it," which denotes that they are neither considered to be masculine nor female and are instead simply beaten like animals. The area represents a no-man's-land that is completely cut off from the rest of the human world. Dattani talks on the play's eunuchs' issues, as well as their identity and implications. It draws attention to the eunuchs' absurd exclusion from society and their desire for fairness, acceptance, and self-respect. The play achieves its pinnacle when, after learning the real motive for the murder, further investigation is halted, symbolizing how the screams of the oppressed for justice, equality, and acceptance have gone unheard. The awful state of Eunuchs in Indian society is depicted in the drama *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. It highlights the protagonist Kamala's sorrow, who is a eunuch. The eunuchs are not regarded as honorable or even decent people. They disguise themselves as ladies, yet they cannot be recognized as such. It is known as being "neuter gender." As Beena Agrawal says, "*Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a drama, serves as the voice of the eunuch community, members of which are not even permitted to reveal their faces in public. They are not allowed to socialize with others or demonstrate their care for human relationships." (Agrawal Beena 35)

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