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Marginalised Existence vs Power Politics: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

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Abstract

Society has delegated the hijras to exist in the fringes. The hesitance to accept them into the fold is deep rooted in the minds of the people. Their desire to change their sex is seen with abhorrence and as abnormal. This paper discusses the condition of the hijras through an analysis of Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Dattani, sheds light on the inhuman treatment meted to the hijras by the society, and particularly the police. They are denied their basic right to survive and are considered to be a sore in the society. Legal justice is beyond their reach. They crave for love and family but are despised and feared.

Keywords: Hijra, marginalised, subaltern, denied justice, beggars, liars, dancers, abhorred, matrilineal kinship.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani born in Bangalore, and the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award for his play *Final Solutions and Other Plays* has carved a place for himself amongst the Indian dramatists of the twentieth century. He is a director, actor, dancer, teacher and a writer, an all rounder, a versatile genius. Dattani is a sociologist, who studies social problems and presents them in his plays. In the play *Seven Steps Around The Fire*, Dattani discusses the marginalised existence of the Hijiras/transgenders and how they are treated inhumanly by the powerful section of the society. The play depicts the deplorable conditions of the hijiras who are considered to be the ‘lowliest of the low’.

Individuals whose gender identity differs from the one assigned at birth are commonly referred to as transgenders. They are considered to be a minority and are pushed to the fringes of the society to exist as subaltern or marginalised. These people are not respected nor are they accepted by the society. The word “*hijra*” Dattani observes is a Urdu word, meaning neither male nor female. A neutral gender and so they are addressed as ‘it’. “Not everyone could become a hijra — it took guts. The word *hij* refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called ‘hijra’” (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 39). They are often castrated, degenerated men who dress like women but are not considered as women. “A hijra’s male body is a trap — not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man” (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 40). They are often subject to mal-treatment and the society looks upon them with disgust and contempt. Their voices are suppressed and distorted.

Historical Context

In the Indian sub-continent, the transgenders were revered and respected before colonial rule. “People believe that the blessings of a hijra come true” (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 48), this originated from the epic Ramayana. When Rama was asked to go to the forest for fourteen years in exile, all the people

from Ayodhya followed him to the forest. Rama requested the men and women to go back, promising to return to them after the exile. There were hijras too amongst the people. Since they were neither men nor women, they couldn't go back to their homes. They stayed in the outskirts of the town until Rama returned after fourteen years. "Lord Rama was moved by the penance of the hijras. He granted them a boon: their blessings and their curses would come true" (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 49). The situation changed after the Indian Penal code Section 377 named them as "outlaws". The people who were once believed to bring luck and bestow special fertility powers came to be declared as 'outcastes'.

Family and Community

Transgenders lose their 'natal kinsfolk' because of the rigid and convention bound Indian household and society where there is no place for them due to their desire to change their sex. "My parents wanted me to lead a normal life... My grandfather, Hariharan Tiwari, was such an erudite scholar; he knew the Vedas and the Upanishads by heart. And I, his grandson, was a hijra!... My parents...They were torn between the demands of the society and the love of their son" (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 49). This is the reason why the eunuch community yearns for love and family and are denied and deprived of both.

The hijras have a matrilineal kinship which offers a variety of relationships like, guru, mother, chela, nani etc. The guru or the mother clothes and feeds the 'chelas'. The chelas have to earn for their gharana: "Even though I earned money I would hand over all of it to nani and merely take a rupee every morning to start my day" (*Truth About Me* 141). Marginalised by mainstream society, denied basic human rights and legal protection, "the hijras turn to their community and its culture for nurture" (*Truth About Me* 62). But

here again the younger ones are expected to obey their elders or face the wrath of the gurus. Despite earning, the chelas are sometimes fed “leftover rice, old curry and stale chappathi” (*Truth About Me* 141).

Societal Perception

Shrouded in the cloaks of myth about their bringing luck and their ability to bestow fertility, the hijras are allowed by the society to dance at the time of wedding and birth. “Our main occupation is to perform badhai at weddings or when a child is born” (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 156). Dattani observes “ironically the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature” (Act I 7). It is a pity that only in these two events their presence is accepted by the society.

Plot Analysis

The plot of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is centred around Uma Rao a Research scholar of Sociology from the Bangalore University who ventures to write a paper on the life of hijras. As her husband Suresh is the Superintendent of Police, she gets the chance to meet Anarkali, a hijra who has been accused of murdering Kamala, another hijra. In the process she unravels the truth behind the mysterious murder of Kamala. She develops sympathy towards the hijras and wants to help Anarkali who has been falsely implicated for the murder. The real culprit happens to be the most powerful minister whose power and wealth has silenced the police. The minister had ordered his body guard to kill Kamala because his son Subbu secretly married her. Uma is unable to do anything against the power politics despite her high status in the society. She remains a dumb spectator of the events that unfurl around her.

Munuswami, the constable who accompanies Uma to meet Anarkali, is surprised when Uma addresses the hijra as ‘she’. His reaction is akin to the thought deeply embedded in the society. When Uma asks: “Will she talk to me?” Munuswami replies: “(chuckling) She! Of course ‘it’ will talk to you. We

will beat it up if it doesn't." (Act I 3) His words reflect the belief that hijras are neutral gender. The society considers it undignified to talk to the hijras. Munuswami says: "Madam, if you don't mind me saying, why is a lady from a respectable family like yourself...?". He even goes to the extent of telling her that there is no use talking to the hijra because they are perpetual liars. The society assumes that the hijras are incapable of speaking the truth. Munuswami says: "If you don't mind me saying, what is the use of talking with it?" A surprised Uma asks: "Why not?" Munuswami casually tells: "It will only tell you lies". Even Uma's husband Suresh holds the same opinion. He tells her: "Don't believe a word of anything it says: They are all liars" (Act I 5).

Denied Justice

Anarkali is locked up in the male prison because she is a hijra. There is no separate prison for them. Uma asks Munuswami: "Why did they put her in a male prison?". When Anarkali refuses to co-operate, Munuswami orders the male inmates to beat her. He says: "Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!" (Act I 5). He unleashes and abuses his power resulting in Anarkali getting beaten up and wounded. He talks with contempt when he says that Kamala the hijra wore a lot of jewels when she was burnt to death. He says: "All stolen, I am sure. How will hijras get so much gold if they can only beg for a few rupees?" (Act I 11). Hijras make money by begging or by threatening people. Uma notices a hijra saying: "Give me fifty rupees, Madam. I will bless you. Madam! Fifty rupees only and you will have a son! If you don't give me money I will put a curse on you! Madam! Madam!" (Act I 12).

The voices of the hijras are suppressed and distorted. Uma questions Anarkali why she did not tell the truth to the police. Anarkali says: "They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail" (Act I 9). Either way she is bound to suffer. The police would never take their words seriously. When a hijra goes missing or is murdered the police suspect

the involvement of other hijras, assuming professional jealousy as the reason. “They looked at us with suspicion and bias” (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* 54). Even if they want to speak, no one is ready to listen to them. Their voices go unheard. When Uma questions Champa why she never revealed the truth about Kamala, she says: “We cannot speak. When we want to speak, nobody listens. When we cannot speak..” (Act I 18). Their voices are muted.

Power Politics

Anarkali and Champa are well aware of their situation in the society. They have understood that justice for them is like a mirage. Uma tells that her husband Suresh will protect Anarkali if she reveals the truth about Kamala’s murder. Anarkali knows that police will support only the powerful and would turn a deaf ear to all her claims of truth. Anarkali remarks: “You are an innocent fool” (Act I 9). Champa’s assessment about Uma is prophetic: “Ignorant women. She thinks she knows her husband” (Act III 27). Uma trusts that her husband will arrest and punish the culprit. Her illusion is shattered when Suresh tears up the photo, the only evidence that was available to prove that the minister, Mr. Sharma was involved in the killing of Kamala. Suresh’s action reiterates the idea that people with wealth and influence can get away unscathed even after committing a heinous crime. Subbu, the minister’s son, accuses his father “You Killed her!” and Mr. Sharma confesses: “Subbu, I did it for you! It was wrong. It was wrong. Forgive me” (Act III 31). Mr. Sharma ordered his bodyguard Salim to kill Kamala, a hijra because his son had secretly married her out of love. The photo which Suresh tore was the one taken after Kamala and Subbu had married. Everything is hushed up, Subbu’s suicide, the minister’s involvement in the murder, nothing is reported in the newspaper. That is the power and influence of people in power.

Conclusion

Pushed to the fringes by society, the hijras barely manage to survive. Powerful people like the politician and police occupy the center and exploit the marginalised and deny them justice which results in their precarious existence. Dattani symbolically shows the hijras dancing in the periphery of the spotlight at the end of the play. Acceptance and inclusivity seem like far-fetched dreams for the hijras.

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