

Visualizing the Outcry of the 'Invisible Minority' in Dattani's 'Seven Steps around the Fire'

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Abstract

In 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' Mahesh Dattani visualizes the outcry of hijra (eunuch), 'invisible minority' who suffers a lot as they are deviated from society. Quite naturally, they are neglected and socially alienated. They have lost their identity, rights and they been discriminated in every step of their life. Dattani is the only playwright in India who has taken bold step to write on the theme of the underprivileged section of people whose outcry could not be heard.

Key Words: Alienated, Deviated, Minority, Underprivileged, Visualizes.

Mahesh Dattani, being a realistic playwright of modern India, tries to write something on the common issues of the uncommon. He dared to publicize the voices of such community as others always ignore them. He harboured and knew the inner-self of the deprived section and presents them to his audience. He has strong will to do something for such community and discussed their problems openly in his plays. In his play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' he realistically presents the pitiable condition of Hijra whom the normal human beings consider as 'untouchable'.

Mahesh Dattani wanders to and fro and finds out the problems of the society and estimates to discuss them openly. In 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' he draws such kind of theme that is uncommon and unusual. He showcases the condition of the voiceless Hijra and their social status in the society. They are considered as the 'third gender' or 'transgender'. They are deprived socially, educationally, economically as well as politically. They are isolated, separated and constituted as 'invisible minority' within the society. As Jeremy Mortimer puts it:

For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. The murder victim Kamla, a beautiful hijra eunuch, had, it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young hijra burned to death, and hastily arranged for his son to marry an acceptable girl. But at the wedding- attended of course by the hijras who sing and dance at weddings and births - Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijras community. (C P -3)

Uma, a sociology scholar and the wife of Suresh wanted to investigate the case study of the murder case of Kamala and met Anarkali in the prison. When she went to the prison, she faced lots of problems and also noticed how the Hijras are exploited in the prison. She noticed that the Hijra, Anarkali was badly treated by the other male prisoners in the prison. She was beaten up. Munswamy is a constable who also beats and kicks the Hijra. He also shows his power and rebukes Anarkali. Uma watched all the incidents that happened in prison and how people treated hijra. Uma asked her husband to know the condition that the Hijra faced in the prison. She also mentioned 'Why do they put her in a male prison?' Then Suresh said, 'They are as strong as horse.' (CP-9)

Suresh, being a Superintendent of Police, misbehaved the Hijras. He even asked her wife not to believe a word of anything that the Hijras say. They are all liars. Uma did not believe what her husband said. Then she expresses her emotion and the origin of hijra.

Uma(voice over). Case7. A brief note on the popular myths on the origin of the hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications. The term hijra, of course is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female'. Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayana. The legend has it that god Rama

was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, 'Men and women, turn back.' Some of his male followers did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. They are transsexual all over the world, and in India it is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable—marriage and birth—ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. (C P -10-11)

She also expresses the social status of hijra in the society. They are neither male nor female. They are transsexual. We should not know the inner feeling of the hijra. But Anarkali said that they make their relations with their eyes. She also called Munswamy as her brother. Anarkali asked Uma whether she was really the wife of the Superintendent. She told her that she was doing her paper on class and gender related violence. She wanted to know something about Anarkali.

In the play Dattani minutely presents that the hijras are not respected anywhere. They are not recognized in the society as normal human being. They are badly treated by the police and by the aristocratic class. Hijras can be seen on two occasions – wedding and child birth. But they are also exploited in the wedding ceremony of Subhu. When Champa, the leader of hijras and their group entered into the house of Mr. Sharma to bless the marriage with their singing and dancing Mr. Sharma cries,

'Stop! Stop it!

They stop beating drum

Who invited you here? Where are those security people?' (C P – 38)

Mr. Sharma belongs to the aristocratic class and has no sympathy and humanity to the hijras. He also misbehaved with them. He has no perception about the solidity and the profession why they have undertook to perform dance and sing. It is the only way to conceal their inner- self by singing and dancing. They come to the wedding and child birth in order to collect money and give the people enjoyment.

An Interview with the Hijras

To know the inner feelings and sorrows of the Hijras I have decided to take an interview personally with them. I met two hijras namely- Beauty and Kohinoor. I asked them some questions to know their feelings and suffering.

Why are the hijras telling lie?

Beauty: We tell lies to escape ourselves from people and hide ourselves from those who want to be close with us. We don't take people in our society. People always joke and insult us.

Why did you change your name?

Beauty:- I did not change my name. My actual name is Taher. The group leader of our genre is empowered to select the newcomer's name and she keeps the name by seeing our physical appearance and accordingly she named me as Beauty

Did you go to school?

Beauty: - Yes, I did go but left unfinished.

Why did you leave the school?

Beauty:- I have had a dream to be educated but the students of the school where I was admitted took amusement by teasing me now and then as I was physically somewhat difference from them and they called me hijra. The teacher advised the other students not to joke me but they daily joked and teased me which compelled me to leave the school without completing education. But I do not blame them as their parents and other normal human beings usually joke us as if we are laughing stock of them and children learn that from their guardians.

When did you participate in the group of hijras?

Beauty: When I had been recognized by my activities as hijra and when it spread out, the leader of the hijras came to my house and took me to U.P. They taught me there how to dance and sing and give amusement to the public and collect money from the people. Then we came back to New Bongaigaon where the other hijras stay and I am engaged with them to collect money from people in the train.

Who helped you to join the group?

Beauty: Kajol, the leader of my group who came to my house helped me to join the group.

Who are the other members in your group?

Beauty: Moina, Teena, Sweety are the other members of our group.

How did the member of the family treat with you?

Kohinoor: The family members treat me well. They show their sympathy, patience and also repent for me.

How did the people behave with you when you went out with your father?

Kohinoor: When I went out with my father to the market, people saw me obliquely and called me 'sexy', 'Hijra', and also instigated me to involve in the bad work. I felt ashamed as I am with my father. My father also felt bad enough.

When did you leave home?

Kohinoor: I left home when I was thirteen.

What did you do then?

Kohinoor: I went to Guwahati to collect money from my brother and met there one hijra named Samina now Deepali. She encouraged me to join their group. I also met there other hijras namely, Sweety, Paki, Sheela, Monjila, Nileema, Urmila. They encouraged me and requested me to stay with them.

What is the name of your leader?

Kohinoor: The name of our leader or guru is Jeena who is from Sivsagar, Assam. I joined her group.

Did your leader take any money from you?

Kohinoor: Yes, it is the rule that we must pay our leader an amount of Rs. 300/- a day as commission. It is mandatory to every hijra of a group to pay their guru. Otherwise she can beat us.

In India there are about 19 lakhs of hijras. But we, the normal human beings never think of their problems, issues and their needs. There are three types of hijras such as male hijra, female hijra and neutral hijra. They have been divided and termed as 'Hijra' but Indian constitution has not provided any privileges to the natural backwardness of hijras. They have the heart to feel, they have the mind to think, they have physical growth but the only defect is that they are neither male nor female.

Uma. (thought). Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists? And why do they not take singing lesson? (CP-16)

In the modern artificial and busy world we should not know the life and condition of hijras. We always keep ourselves away from them. We think that if we come in touch with the hijra society will ridicule us.

The hijras are impotent. Impotency is not their crime. It is not their crime but the 'unfortunate curse of nature' (Agarwal 36). It seems nature laughs at them by neglecting them through its other entity i.e complete human being. Sometimes we puzzle them by enquiring their identity in which section they are contained, whether they are male or female. Such type of enquiry by us makes them baffled to clear our queries and that remain them dumb or to expose their anger in an abnormal way. As they are not categorized as male or female, they are not usually engaged in any

type of work which compels them to take the shelter of beggarship to earn their livelihood for which only we are responsible.

It is the duty of every citizen to show sympathy towards them and treat them as they are the part of our society. They are not neglecting section as we think. On humanitarian outlook we should pay homage towards them to minimize the gap that we enlivened in the society.

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