

Social Exclusion in Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire



Literature

KEYWORDS : social exclusion, hijra (eunuch), marginalised, underprivileged

Mr. Hemanta Sarma

Asstt. Prof. Deptt, of English

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani has touched a number of issues which are of great interest of the world today. Dattani mainly deals with the public issues like globalisation, gender discrimination, same sex marriage, marginality and other touching areas of Indian life. Another important motif of Dattani's play is social exclusion. However, he underlines this theme not on the basis of social customs and bindings, but on unbiased gender. The world of homosexuals, dreaded diseases like HIV/ AIDS, bi-sexual diseases become a prime concern in the contemporary Indian society and it gives birth to social exclusion in our society. Dattani's Seven Steps around the Fire dramatises the identity crisis of hijra (eunuch) community in this world who suffer from social exclusion in our society. The hijra community is underprivileged of several rights. They are the abandoned gender who faces discrimination in every step of their life. Dattani has taken a bold venture by introducing such a theme in this play. The present paper is an attempt to show how the theme of social exclusion is best reflected in Seven Steps Around the Fire.

Mahesh Dattani deserves no introduction. The first proud Indian English playwright to win prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, Dattani entered the Indian theatrical world in 1980. Indian theatrical world was dominated by the best known four playwrights – Mohan Rakesh (Hindi), Girish Karnad (Kannada), Badal Sircar (Bengali) and Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi) for a pretty long time. Dattani's appearance in the scene revolutionised both Indian English plays and theatre. Apart from being a playwright, he is an actor & director. His dramatic outputs consist of two volumes titled – Collected Plays (2000) and Collected Plays Vol.II (2005). Most of his plays have been staged in Bangalore and Mumbai. Some of them have been broadcasted on AIR and BBC.

Most of Dattani's plays are set in contemporary society and reality of this world. He depicts the realistic world of gays, lesbians, impact of dreaded disease HIV/AIDS, gender inequality, eunuchs' fight for identity and other touching areas of Indian life. He touches the underprivileged segments of Indian society and discrimination against people in our society and how they face social exclusion, separation and hatred. Social exclusion is very deep rooted and common in our Indian society. Indian society witnessed social exclusion since time immemorial. Discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, gender and sexuality leads to social exclusion. Sometimes, it has been seen that some dreaded diseases like tuberculosis, AIDS, leprosy cause social exclusion in our society. As a result, a section of people are marginalised and victimised and they are subject to domination and injustice.

Dattani deals with the theme of social exclusion in some of his plays. However, he underlines this theme not on the basis of social customs and bindings, but on unbiased gender. The world of homosexuals, dreaded diseases like HIV/AIDS, bi-sexual, transsexual diseases etc. become a prime concern in the contemporary Indian society and it leads to social exclusion in our society. Dattani depicts these themes in some of his plays – *Seven Steps around the Fire, Do the Needful, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Mango Soufflé and Ek Alag Mausam*.

The objective of this paper is to show how the theme of social exclusion is best reflected in Dattani's play, Seven Steps around the Fire.

Dattani's Seven Steps around the Fire first broadcasted by BBC Radio 4 on 9th January, 1999 under the title 'Seven Circles around the Fire'. This drama was first performed in theatre on 10th July, 2004 in New Delhi under the title 'Seven Steps Around the Fire'. Mahesh Dattani himself directed the play. The play dramatises the plight of *hijra* (eunuch) community who suffer from social exclusion in our country. The *hijra* community is underprivileged of several rights. They are lonely and segregated and constituted 'an invisible' minority within the society. They are the abandoned

gender. In Seven Steps around the Fire Dattani gives voice to the *hijras* to articulate the humility, pain and sufferings they are facing in society. Dattani is the first playwright to introduce such a theme. Commenting on the theme of the play Bijay Kr. Das says "The plight of hijras in our society is deplorable. It is an irony of life that the hijras who are welcome on two occasions – one, at the time of marriage and two, at the time of childbirth- to sing and dance, are themselves deprived of marriage and childbirth. Dattani has done a good job by introducing a new theme to Indian English drama." (p.85)

Dattani explains the term of *hijra* through the character of Uma, a Ph. D. scholar in Sociology from the myth in the Ramayana :

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. There are trans-sexual all over the world, and India 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. (CP 10-11)

A *hijra*, named Kamala was secretly married to a minister's son, Subbu. Kamala was killed soon after her wedding and the plot of the play revolves round this murder mystery. The researcher, Uma investigates the case of Kamala for her thesis and meets Anarkali, another *hijra* who has been arrested for the murder of Kamala on suspect. Uma becomes interested in the case and makes personal investigation to prove the innocence of Kamala and to find out the man behind Kamala's murder. During her course of investigation, Uma happens to meet other *hijras*. She is disturbed to see the maltreatment to a *hijra* and thinks about their identity and present condition:

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?* (CP 16-17)

It is Uma who always believes in the innocence of Anarkali. *Hijras* don't have any existence in common man's life. When Uma wants to know about Kamala's death, Anarkali says, "What is there to tell? I sing with other *hijras* at weddings and when a child is born. People give us money; otherwise i will put a curse on them

(laughs) (CP 12)

Anarkali can't name the person who is behind Kamala's murder to police and has to bear the consequences of her false assert. She depicts a true picture of social system before Uma who is innocent to believe that police will do justice to Anarkali:

Anarkali: *Then what will you do knowing who killed Kamala?*

Uma: *Tell my husband to make an arrest*

Anarkali: *One hijra less in this world doesn't matter to your husband* (CP 35)

Anarkali's statement clearly reflects the agony of being a *hijra*.

Anarkali wants to raise her voice against the corruption and name out the real culprit but nobody is going to listen and believe her. She accepts the miserable plight of being a *hijra*. She tells Uma: 'They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth I will die in the jail.'

The play ends with Uma's realisation of the hypocrisy of the society where *hijras* suffer a lot.

They know. Anarkali, Champa all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people (CP 42)

To sum up, the Seven Steps around the Fire addresses one of the 'invisible issues' of contemporary Indian society. In this play, Dattani presents the plight of *hijras* and show how they are excluded from our society. By representing *hijras* on the stage he appeals for social inclusion for them.

REFERENCE

1. Dattani, Mahesh, Collected Plays, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000 | 2. Das, Bijay Kumar, Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays, New Delhi, Atlantic 2008 | 3. Agarwal, Beena, Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre, Jaipur, Book Enclave, 2011 | 4. [http:// www.Researchersworld.com](http://www.Researchersworld.com)

Researcher'sworld.com