
Humanistic Approach In Mahesh Dattani's "Seven Steps Around The Fire"

¹Dr. Suman Mohan

²Associate Prof. (English), Pt. D.D.U. Govt. Degree College, Palahipatti, Varanasi, U. P

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, the first Sahitya Academy awardee is a distinguished playwright who has dealt with the most touching and most ignored theme in his plays. He penned his plays with the theme of gender discrimination, social exclusion, eunuch's struggle for equality and justice etc. etc. "Seven Steps Around the Fire" is one of the famous radio plays of Mahesh Dattani, which is an appeal to treat hijra community like human beings. It depicts the indifferent mindset of the people towards them. Uma Rao, the protagonist of the play, a Ph. D. scholar while studying about hijra community, she goes to eunuchs personally, treats them with great humanity and tries to understand their problems and the mental trauma they undergo with. In this process, she feels that eunuchs also have thirst of love, compassion and equality.

The objective of the paper is to throw light on the theme of inhumanity towards hijra community which touches our heart and compels us to contemplate over their deplorable condition which is the consequence of our indifferent and harsh behavior towards them which causes them to be under constant mental trauma. Hence, there is need of humanistic approach towards them.

Keywords: Hijra community, inequality, injustice, deplorable condition, mental trauma, humanistic approach.

Introduction

"Drama is now becoming a fruitfully cultivated field in Indo-Anglian literature."

(K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger 2014)... (247)

There has always been depiction of social discrimination, gender inequalities and other social issues by several playwrights. 20th century dramatists also handled the theme of pains, sufferings and miseries of the unprivileged sections of the society. Mahesh Dattani, a celebrated actor, director and film producer expressed the theme of his plays different from other dramatists like Girish Karnad, Badal Sirkar, Vijay Tendulkar etc. He is the most creative and remarkable dramatist in Indo - Anglian

literature. He deals the realities of the Indian middle class society with true humanism. He highlights human dignity in his plays. Dattani portrays gender issues, child abuses and family relations with great humanistic care. He has highlighted the theme of homosexuality in 'Do the Needful'; gender discrimination in 'Tara' and 'Dance like a Man'; child sexual abuse in "30 Days in September."

"Seven Steps Around the Fire" is one of the famous radio plays of Mahesh Dattani which was "first broadcast as "Seven Circles Around the Fire" by B.B.C. Radio 4 on 9 January 1999, Seven Steps Around the Fire (the play) was first performed on stage at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi on July 10, 2004"....(xiii). This play throws light on the plight of the third gender i.e. hijra community who are exploited, ill-treated and socially neglected. They feel isolated and segregated. They suffer with insecurity, anguish and live in pathetic condition in the society. Their social status is very deplorable. Anarkali, a hijra was accused of murder of Kamla, another hijra. Thus, the play is all about the mysterious murder investigation and the plot moves like a detective story. In this play, sufferings, injustices, exploitation of hijra community and perverted nature of the upper section of society are the main ingredients of the plot.

Uma is a research scholar in Sociology who is researching on the hijra community and investigating the murder case of Kamla. Hijras, who are hated and neglected, have become marginalized in our society. Uma believes that she doesn't have any progeny because her parents had turned out hijras on her wedding without giving them bakshish, in return, they cursed the newly wedded couple. In the play, we see that Anarkali is in a very miserable condition in the prison. We come to know that Kamla, a beautiful hijra is loved by the son (Subbu) of the Deputy Chief Minister, Mr. Sharma. They marry privately which Mr. Sharma could not tolerate and on the day of wedding he got her burnt to death. An inhuman treatment of eunuch by upper class is observed in the play.

Uma is a very sensitive character in the play. She has sympathy for Anarkali and Champa. She says, "I could not tell her, I did not want her blessings for a child. All I want is...what they want...To move on. To love. To live." (52) On the other hand, Suresh, Uma's husband, Superintendent of Police (who takes bribe) doesn't make any effort to find out the culprit. Champa says if she had twenty thousand rupees, she would throw them at Suresh's face to bail out Anarkali. Both Champa and Anarkali know the actual killer of Kamla but they don't reveal the name to Uma. The police also do not try to make a proper investigation as Mr. Sharma is a very powerful minister. Anarkali tells Uma, "They will kill me also, if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail."(14) Thus, Mahesh Dattani has depicted the characterization of inhuman and corrupted modern politicians as well.

Uma's husband (Suresh) does not want that she should have compassion for hijras. He says, "I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel any compassion for them." (8) Not only this, he keeps on expressing his dirty ideas about the third gender:

Uma: Yes, I know she is arrested for the murder of her sister, but...

Suresh (off): What's that you said? Sister? (Approaching). There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerated men. (8)

Even Munswamy, a constable does not like that Uma, a woman of status should involve in the case related to hijras. He says it would be against her dignity and her family too:

"Munswami: Madam, if you don't mind me saying, why is a lady from a respectable family like yourself...? (3)

He says:

do you want to bring this shame on your family Madam? I beg of you go home. (5) Why

Champa loves Anarkali like her own daughter. She knows that Anarkali is not a culprit. Champa says - "She should die in jail. But after all I am the head hijra and she is my daughter". (26) Anarkali also expressed her love for Kamla. She says, "I did not do anything to Kamla. She was my sister." (11) We get a great message of humanity in the play. Hijara community has compassion, affection and love for one another. Champa expresses her love for Kamla: "You don't know how much we all loved her. You will not understand. I loved her more than you can love your daughter!" (32) Champa knew that having relations with Subbu, Kamla would fall in danger. Kamla also trusted Anarkali. She gave a photo of her marriage (with Subbu) to Anarkali. Champa treats her fellow hijras also as her own daughters. She shows a photo to Uma and tells her, "These were his first father and mother...Afterwards I am her father and mother." (30) When Anarkali feels Uma's sympathy and compassion for her, she calls her (Uma) as her (Anarkali's) own sister:

Anarkali: (offering sympathy): Oh. If you were a hijra, I would have made u my sister.

Uma: Oh. Thank you. (12)

Anarkali: Look at me. Oh! My sister! You are my sister, no?

Uma looks at Anarkali for a while, then puts her hand on her arm.

Uma: Yes.

Anarkali: Get me out of here. Sister, I did not kill Kamla. You believe me, no? You don't believe me? You doubt your own sister? (12-13)

This shows that eunuchs also crave for love and have family, but they are deprived of this privilege. It is de facto an irony that hijras have been denied both marriage and giving birth to children. But they visit on both occasions to bless the newly wedded couple and the new born child. Nevertheless, we don't feel rapport with them. Dattani writes—"The two events in main stream Hindu culture where 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 fire God, eternally binding man and woman matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons.'...(09-10) The aim of writing this play is to sensitize the people towards the pains and sufferings of hijras and to arise humanity for them. In the play when Dattani gives popular myths of origin of the hijras, he says: "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." (09) Hijra community can't raise their own voice." Champa says, "We cannot speak... when we want to speak nobody listens, when we cannot speak..." (29) She says, "Even God does not listen to us."(50) These people are always hated and neglected in the society. Champa wants hijra community to be respected and treated as human beings. When Uma expresses her affection, she (Champa) is deeply touched and calls her 'sister'.

When Mr. Sharma gets angry with hijras and asks security guards to throw them out, Uma prohibits him and tells him that it is bad luck to turn out hijras from a wedding. Humanity in Uma is well marked when she says to Mr. Sharma that they are not asking for too much. He will not lose anything by giving them little money. Hence, Mahesh Dattani has mirrored the reality of the society and tried to explore the hidden facts. What a ridiculous thing! People talk of humanity but they treat eunuchs as inanimate objects. Munswamy uses 'it' for Anarkali:

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munswamy (chuckling): She! Of course, It will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. (03)

Even Suresh, Uma's husband and Superintendent of Police uses 'this thing' for Anarkali:

Suresh: I hope this thing didn't give you any trouble.

Uma: No. she is very well behaved. (15)

In spite of their sufferings and injustices in their life, hijras have humanity and love for nice people. Anarkali understands Uma's pain of not having any child. She blesses Uma and gives her a

locket with a special mantra and says, “You will be blessed with children...sister...May you and your family be happy.”(52) Uma is touched by her love and concern and embraces her. Mahesh Dattani’s plays are mirror for those who say that they believe in humanity, but in reality they ridicule and ignore this community. Through this play, Dattani conveys the message that hijras are also human beings, they also need love, respect and sympathy. If they are kind hearted towards nice people, why can’t we be considerate towards them? Why can’t we also have feelings and compassion for them? Why can’t we become Uma? Let us sow the seeds of humanity for every transgender, change the mindset of the people and provide them their all human rights.

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