

Nowhere To Go: Marginality Of Transgenders In Seven Steps Around The Fire By Mahesh Dattani

Dr. Subrahmanya Sharma. V¹, Dr. Mohan Prakash²

¹Assistant Professors of English, University College of Arts,
Tumkur 572103

²Assistant Professors of English, University College of Arts,
Tumkur 572103

Abstract:

This paper makes an attempt to trace out how the marginalisation of transgenders is represented in the play Seven Steps around the Fire by Mahesh Dattani. The play is an attempt to shatter the male hegemony and to represent the subaltern voice of the transgender. The transgenders have a strong impulsive longing to be a part of the mainstream society. However, they are neglected socially, abused verbally and physically and humiliated repeatedly. Hence the play poignantly emphasises that the subaltern remains to be subaltern in spite of a fight against cultural and social domination. The play offers socio- psychological paradigms related to the existence of transgenders. The 'silence' and 'shame' of the eunuchs find an expression in the play with a sad realisation that they have "nowhere to go".

Key Words: Mahesh Dattani, Transgender, male hegemony, gender issues, identity, mainstream society.

1. Introduction

"They will kill me if I tell the truth,
If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail..."

The dialogue given above is delivered by Anarkali, the transgender character in Seven Steps around the Fire, who has been accused of killing Kamla, another transgender in the play. This dialogue takes us closer to the famous statement made by Gayathri Chakraborty Spivak: "The Subaltern cannot speak". In the play, Mahesh

Dattani has made an attempt to provide a space for the transgenders. For their sexual handicap, they are not permitted to share the normal life conditions. The play makes us to rethink regarding the identity, social acceptability and tolerance of transgenders in the society, taking us closer to the subaltern. The term subaltern studies is sometimes identified as a parallel movement for the “history from the below” approach of the West (Dr. Mosharraf Hossain, p15). In a broader context, subaltern refers to the subjugation in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture.

Seven Steps around the Fire uncovers the truth behind the murder of Kamala, a eunuch through Uma Rao, who uncovers the reality in the course of working on her research paper titled “Class- and Gender- Related Violence”. In the play, Subbu Sharma, the son of a minister is married secretly to Kamala, a eunuch. When his father, an influential politician, came to know about this relation, he burnt Kamala to death and got Anarkali, a eunuch arrested as the accused. The play represents the marginalisation of transgenders in the society. The mainstream society welcomes them on two occasions- wedding and child birth but they are denied both-by nature and by the society. The play also presents the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless. The eunuchs, who are powerless, are not given any space in the society. Any attempt to transgress the boundary will end in disaster.

II. Discussion

In the play, different characters react differently towards the transgenders. While Uma Rao refers to Anarkali as “She”, her husband uses the phrase “ that thing”and Munuswamy uses the term “it”. The extremes of love and contempt are characterized by Subbu Sharma who has wedded Kamla. The brutal murder of Kamla raises the issue of contempt upon an abandoned section of humanity that does not have a legal system or a forum for redressal to protect their lives and dignity. Seven Steps around the Fire addresses the question of concern and possibility of support to the transgenders. Therefore, Uma’s repeated attempts and smart planning for bypassing her husband in the course of her inquiry are due to her genuine concern and interest in establishing justice to the subalterns in the play.

Anarkali and Champa, both being transgenders, are victims of the male hegemony in the society. Hence their language is obscene and vulgar, their tone of speaking is aggressive, violent and distasteful. Yet the love that Uma bestows transforms Anarkali. Confessing her innocence, Anarkali admits that “I didn’t kill her, she was my sister”. Dattani seems to suggest the need for adopting a policy of inclusion, love and sympathy in order to transform this marginalized section of the society. It is ironical that Suresh Rao decides to put Anarkali in the male prison. He comments that the eunuchs are “as strong as horses” and adds that “they are all just castrated degenerate men”. Dattani has emphatically stated that “there are transsexuals all over the world and India is no exception. The purpose of this study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love”.

Despite her antagonism, Anarkali is encouraged to reveal her own life conditions. She develops a sister kind of affinity with Uma. She admits that “If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister”. This craving for personal relationship evinces that Dattani accepts personal relationship as a potent strategy to fill the gap between the subaltern and the dominant. Later in the play, Champa, the head of the hijras confesses her helplessness to Uma: “We cannot speak..when we want to speak, nobody listens” and adds that “there is no world for a hijra other than the one we make for ourselves”. Though marginalized, these transgenders too are sensitive enough to understand social hegemony.

There is a voice over of Uma in the play in which Dattani takes care to explain the term “hijra” by digging up the Indian myth from the Ramayana: “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. (10-11).

III. Conclusion

Seven Steps Around the Fire presents two dimensions regarding the plight of transgenders. First, the apathy of nature – their inability to fulfil sex assigned roles and Second, their misfortune to develop the bonds of human relationship. Anarkali's yearning for relationships suggests that the transgenders too have desire for the protection of personal relationships. Anarkali is torn between the fear of social code and legal provisions but finds consolation in the love and sympathy of Uma. Dattani's art is distinct in the sense that he makes representation of Subalterns, defends their cause and stirs awareness in them through the bonds of relationship. Uma and Anarkali represent the dichotomy of margin and centre. Dattani presents the various aspects of subalternity in Seven Steps Around the Fire. If Anarkali is a gendered subaltern, Uma is also a subaltern in comparison to her husband. She has no freedom to spend money according to her own choices, "Even if I wanted to I couldn't explain to my husband why I am paying for your bail" (15). In the process of discovering the pathetic life conditions of Anarkali, Uma gets entangled in the enigma of her own life. Hence the play poignantly emphasises that the subaltern remains to be subaltern in spite of a fight against cultural and social domination. The play, hence, offers socio- psychological paradigms related to the existence of transgenders. The 'silence' and 'shame' of the eunuchs find an expression in the play with a sad realisation that they have "nowhere to go".

Works Cited:

Primary Sources:

Dattani, Mahesh. Seven Steps around the Fire in Collected Plays of Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2000

Secondary Sources:

Boral1, Savita. "Mapping the Subaltern in the selected plays of Mahesh Dattani." International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES). Volume-3, Issue-12, 2021 pp56-60

Das, Bijay Kumar Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt. Ltd., 2008

Dhavan, R. K and T. Pant.eds. The Plays of Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi. Prestige Books, 2005.

Guha, Ranajith. " The Prose of Counter Insurgency" in Subaltern Studies, Vol 2, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1982.

Hossain, Dr. Mosarraf, Reconsidering the Subaltern in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi : Notion Press. 2020.

Ludden, David.ed. Reading Subaltern Studies. New Delhi: Permanent Black.. 2001

Spivak, Gayathri Chakraborty. "Can The Subaltern Speak?" in C. Nelson and L.Grossberg eds. Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1988 pp271-316

Thakar, Rishi A. "Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire : The Plight of Subalterns." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 9, Issue 6 (Mar. - Apr. 2013), PP 28-30.