

A STUDY OF EUNUCH CHARACTERS IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS*

AROUND THE FIRE

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ABSTRACT

Apart from the theme of oppressive nature of Indian joint family system and its morbid shadow on the individual's social and psychological, behaviour, Mahesh Dattani treads another area—human sexuality—both in its natural and so-called unnatural facets, in his play *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Eunuchs in India generally belong to the *hijra* community. *Hijras* are found all over India leading a pathetic life devoid of any social recognition. They are objects of mistrust, ridicule and contempt. Their marginal status is revealed in the very fact that they earn their living by collecting alms and receiving tips for performances given at weddings, births and festivals. They are viewed with suspicion for their ‘unnatural’ behaviour. In the present paper, Dattani examines and makes a threadbare analysis of how despite the fact that human rights are guaranteed for every human being irrespective of class, caste, religion, gender, sexuality, race, language, nationality, ethnicity or political beliefs, human rights of Eunuchs are blatantly violated everywhere in India, forcing many to lead a sub-human existence.

KEYWORDS: Eunuchs, *Hijras*, Unnatural, Marginal, Ridicule, Contempt

INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani focuses on the fringe issues that are generally brushed aside by ‘mainstream’ concerns of a society that prefers to believe that they do not exist at all. In a radio play commissioned by the BBC, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, Dattani deals with the suppression of the marginalized *hijra* community. The play was first broadcast as *Seven Circles around the Fire* in January 1999. Later on, with the modified title *Seven Steps around the Fire* the play was staged for the first time in Chennai in August 1999. Also, the play earns the distinction of becoming the “first authentic representation of the community of Eunuchs in theatre” (Agarwal 2).

The play *Seven Steps around the Fire* dramatizes the heart-rending story of a *hijra* by name Kamla, who is brutally murdered on account of her secret marriage with Subbu, the son of a wealthy minister, MR Sharma. Unwilling to tolerate and accept a *hijra* as his daughter-in-law, the minister connives with his henchman Salim and gets the *hijra* burned to death. A false case is booked against the victim’s friend, another *hijra*, Anarkali, whose innocence, the protagonist of the play, Uma Rao, sets out to prove. The play carries more messages than the central issue of the murder of a transgendered. It presents the transgendered as the victims of a society which is quite rigid in its notions about the social position of this gender-variant category.

The transgendered characters portrayed in the play, Kamla, Anarkali and Champa recount their miseries, the physical abuse, sexual abuse, violence and other discriminations. In the play different characters react differently towards the transgendered. There is no one but the good-hearted lady Uma Rao to empathize with them and to appeal on their behalf for social justice in the play. It is only she who uses unconventional means with the help of Munswamy her reluctant aide to unravel the truth behind the mysterious murder of the *hijra*, Kamla. When Uma visits the central prison to interview Anarkali, the chief accused in the case, Munswamy who has a strong aversion for the neuter gender dissuades her from taking up the case because the idea of investigating the case of a *hijra* is a demeaning and loathsome exercise:

MUNSWAMY. There are so many other cases. All murder cases. Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother. And that shelf is full of dowry death cases. Shall I ask the peon to dust all these files? (CP 7)

Uma's repeated attempts and smart planning bypassing her husband, is due to her genuine concern and interest in establishing justice. She is sympathetic in her disposition towards Anarkali and develops sisterly affinity with her. Later, by winning the confidence of Champa she is able to relate to them and bring out the truth. On the other hand, Munswamy treats Anarkali at par with animals and shows his inhuman attitude. He is upset that Uma is only trying to bring disgrace upon her family by moving around with a eunuch and dealing with her filthy case. While Uma, with her humanitarian approach addresses Anarkali using the feminine pronoun 'she', Munswamy, who symbolizes the prejudiced society against the eunuchs, deliberately refuses to recognize her identity as a person and grudgingly addresses her in 'it':

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. (CP 7)

Uma's husband Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of Police of Bangalore city and the only son of the Deputy Commissioner of Police; Bangalore City also fails to acknowledge eunuchs as fellow human beings and shares the same negative sentiment with his subordinate Munswamy. The attitude of the elitist Suresh which is expected to be more refined is, in fact, no better than that of the attitude expressed by a semiliterate person, Munswamy. It even gets worse when he makes a very casual contemptuous remark, "They are all just castrated degenerate men" (CP 10). At the same time, he is totally aware that with their extraordinary physical stamina and muscle power they can very easily overpower even the strongest of the males. His hypocritical nature is exposed when he says that "They are as strong as horses" (CP 9).

A *hijra's* marriage with a male is viewed as an odd and perverted act in Indian society and is not legally approved. As a result, *hijras* lose their gender and familial identity in society and lead deplorable lives as 'invisibles'. In reality, *hijras* don't like to associate with men. They play the role of women. They dress like women and adopt feminine mannerisms and even change their names to women's names. They identify themselves with a female goddess by name 'Bahuchara Mata', and proclaim themselves as wives of certain male deities in some rituals they participate in (Nanda 239-40). This ritual role played by them indirectly exhibits their strong inclination for a familial life which they are ruthlessly denied.

MR Sharma, a seasoned politician and minister in power is deeply agitated when he learns that his son has secretly got married to a eunuch. It spells doom to the continuation of his family lineage because a eunuch cannot bear a child. Hence he takes the most heinous step of eliminating her from Subbu's life and from the world itself by getting her murdered. The police department represented by Suresh Rao lends it support to MR Sharma in hushing up the case:

SURESH. Sir, that is the truth. I have my resources to verify all this. Of course, they are all sworn to secrecy and Mr Sharma's gratitude will be expressed in ways that will be, I am sure, more than adequate. (CP 42)

Kamla, Anarkali and Champa suffer from deep identity-crisis. While Anarkali and Champa silently suffer this humiliation, Kamla makes a bold attempt to establish her identity in the society by marrying Subbu knowing very well the dire consequences that she is likely to face. Her love for Subbu is not initiated by physical lust or greed for money or craving for social status but is purely driven by a deep sense of emotional bonding. The risk is worth taking because she gets everything that is denied to her—identity, love, respect, dignity, marital bliss and domestic life.

Nature has denied her the bliss of motherhood but Subbu's genuine love and concern for her can very well compensate this denial. Subbu too, on his part, can have used Kamla to satisfy his sexual desire like some men in society who sexually exploit *hijras* for sex. But his love for Kamla appears to be equally sincere and even stronger when he slips into depression after her murder. Eventually, he opposes the second marriage that his father arranges for him because he has completely lost faith in the very institution of marriage after the brutal murder of his beloved wife Kamla. Subbu detests marriage and expresses his frustrated state of mind, "I hate weddings. I don't want all this. I don't wish to go ahead with this" (CP 31).

Anarkali is more practical and worldly-wise than Kamla. She is not as brave and rebellious as Kamla is and does not dare to question and challenge the rigid diktats of society imposed on her. She believes that it is useless to fight a battle that can never be won. Continual exposure to physical violence, sexual abuse, social discrimination and ridicule has made her rock-hearted and drained her of human sentiment and emotion. She has utter disregard for human relationships that are not based on honesty, mutual love and respect. Manipulation and exploitation of human weakness is the only means by which she can sustain her life in a society that is extremely hostile and unkind to her. A conversation between Anarkali and Munswamy wherein she tries to exploit his male weakness for sex only to get a cigarette from him is mentioned below:

ANARKALI. We make our relations with our eyes. With our love. I look at him, he looks at me, and he is my brother. I look at you, you look at me, and we are mother and daughter. Oh, brother, give me a cigarette, na.

MUNSWAMY. Shut up. And don't call me brother.

ANARKALI. Just one, na. (*Very sexual.*) I will do anything for you, brother. Give, na. (CP 11)

At the same time, it may be wrong to assume that Anarkali is completely callous and insensitive to the human emotion 'love'. Behind her rock-like demeanor, is hidden a heart that is filled with compassion and love to the core. She and Kamla are not related by blood. She is aware that Kamla is a potential threat and stands a better chance to become the head *hijra* when Champa steps down. Yet for all, she treats Kamla as her own sister and warns her repeatedly against meeting Subbu. She even goes to the extent of disfiguring Kamla's face only to save her from danger. In fact it is she who later on presides over Kamla's marriage ceremony and is the only witness to their wed-lock:

ANARKALI.... So many times I warned her. First I thought Salim was taking her for his own pleasure. When she told me about Subbu, madam, I tried to stop her. I fought with her. I scratched her face, hoping she will become ugly and Subbu will forget her. He wanted to marry her... I was there at their wedding... She gave me that picture to show to Champa. (CP 41)

Though initially Anarkali behaves in a rude and vulgar manner with Uma Rao, she is quick and sharp enough to find a humanitarian in Uma Rao who is genuinely interested in her well-being and willing to help her by releasing her out on bail on a cash bond and is all set to prove her innocence in Kamla's murder plot. Anarkali is literally touched and moved by Uma's sisterly affection towards her and her abiding faith in her integrity. Anarkali expresses her concern for Uma's safety and advises her not to put her life in jeopardy for the sake of their community. Anarkali cautions Uma, "Don't put your own position in danger. Go home" (CP 35). It is quite clear from this fact that Anarkali is not an opportunist but an unselfish person who is capable of reciprocating love and concern just like any other normal human being.

The head of the *hijra* community in the play, Champa, is not at all happy about the falling reputation of their community. She is upset at the fact that *hijras* are treated as anti-social elements: thieves, kidnappers, extortionists and criminals. She is anxious about her community's deteriorating social and cultural image in the society. When Uma meets her for the first time she mistakes her for the mother of the boy Ramu who has come to see her voluntarily and says, "We did not kidnap your son. Ramu came to us of his own free will. If you want, you can take your son away" (CP 23).

As *hijras* are sexually sterile they cannot produce children and hence they are not eligible to marry according to the traditional belief of Indian society. Put out of domestic and social spheres, their chief cultural function in life now is to practice asceticism and sexual abstinence. Nanda says, "... sexual relations run counter to the cultural definitions of the *hijra* role, and are a source of conflict within the community. *Hijra* elders attempt to maintain control over those who would 'spoil the *hijras*' reputation by engaging in sexual activity" (245). As the head of the *hijra* community Champa is very much conscious of this regulation and hence it is her moral responsibility to protect the cultural values within her society. When she discovers that Kamla is in love with Subbu and desires to marry him she "did not want that to happen" because Champa is sure that Kamla "will not be happy in the outside world" (CP 28).

The two chief occasions in Indian household where their presence is permissible—marriage and birth—ironically, are the very same privileges denied to them by society and nature. They are neither fit for marital bliss, nor for motherhood. Yet, their blessings are essential for the couple to become parents. When Uma seeks to know about Anarkali's background she replies, "What is there to tell? I sing with other *hijras* at weddings and when a child is born" (CP 12).

Champa, Kamla and Anarkali develop a strong kinship bond amongst themselves. When Anarkali is arrested as the chief accused in Kamla's murder case, Champa is deeply aggrieved because she knows that Anarkali is framed for no fault of hers. The real culprits are at large freely moving in the society but she can never dare to expose their mischief as they belong to the elitist sections of society. The voices of the marginalized are never heard but crushed under the heavy weight of social elite's money power and political clout. The social justice is never rendered in their favour. Being aware of this sad historical truth Champa helplessly resigns herself to her fate silently lamenting the death of her beloved daughter Kamla.

At this crucial juncture, when the question of concern and possibility of support for the transgendered is raised Dattani introduces the character of Uma as an agent of social change. Her grit is characterized by an open mind, a consciousness that dares to think differently, reacting against social conditioning, questioning the existing social norms and their rationality and merit. By befriending Anarkali and Champa, Uma moves into the inner matrix of the transsexuals, bringing the margin to the centre. With her intelligence, sensitivity and determination, Uma successfully finishes her Herculean assignment by exposing the dark secret behind Kamla's mysterious murder. But, unfortunately, the play ends on a double sad note with the suicide of Subbu and the hushing up of the case without bringing the real culprit to book. Uma's valiant effort brings no justice to the subversives and as usual they are firmly pushed back to the margins and made 'invisible' again. Uma painfully makes her final remark:

UMA (*voice-over*). They knew. Anarkali, Champa and 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)

The cruel murder of Kamla raises the issue of an abandoned section of humanity without a legal system or a forum for redress to protect the lives and dignity of the transgendered. What is alarming is the total lack of accountability on the part of the police and the legal machinery. It is needless to say that Dattani's heart always goes out to the oppressed and repressed sections of the society. He makes an excellent use of theatre space available to him and by transforming it into a public platform he lets his audience face the transgendered and hear them recount their sad tales of physical abuse, sexual abuse, violence and other discriminations.

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