

MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE:

A CRITIQUE OF (HETERO) SEXISM

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani shot into fame quickly as an explorer of least celebrated issues in play writing. He by his plays awakened and sensitized mainstream people to invisible sexual minorities. Hijras belong to one of the subgroups of sexual minorities. They are exploited, harassed, and misbehaved at a stretch. How do they live their lives without sufficient provisions related to health, food, and shelter? They should be treated humanely. They are not without life or human aspirations. They ardently crave for social respect and security. They should be allowed to live their lives in their own ways. In the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Mahesh Dattani intersected gender politics and politics of sexuality. Normative position of heterosexuality plays foul with non-normative sexualities. The present paper is an expose of power politics through the analysis of a murder case of Kamla, a hijra. It evaluates people's attitude towards them also. They are treated as liars and criminals by mainstream men and cops. The play is an argument for having love and respect for hijras. Kamla lost her life simply for her association with hijra community. Hijras are unacceptable in heterosexual communities.

Keywords

sexism, sexuality, queer, Hijra

Most countries in the world today face the troubles tabled by the politics of heterosexism and sexism. By ambiguous norms and practices of sexism, females especially are discouraged, violated, and exploited; and by heterosexism, all sexual minorities are marginalized and suppressed, and many a time incriminated. Heterosexuals are those persons (male and female) who are sexually drawn towards opposite sex. Patriarchy sustains heterosexism as well as sexism. That is why it glorifies and pins its faith in the institutions of marriage (of opposite sex) and motherhood. The institution of sexuality exercises power encouraging heterosexuality and discriminates other of it. Hence sexuality is social and power construct. Heterosexist philosophies entertain love stories and romances as parts of natural order and system. Outside heterosexuality, there are a wide range of sexual practices which are unrecognized and invisible in most countries in the world. In order to bring about erotic justice to sexual subalterns, queer theory arose against normativeness of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality encourages and believes in reproductive potentials. So far so good and must be discouraged as it is invoked as norm to oppress and suppress sexual minorities like gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals etc.

The term queer is often used as hold-all to address multiple non-normative sexualities. Queer studies of western form largely concentrate upon lives of LGBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transsexual). However it holds great possibilities. Eve Sedgwick, drawing on the work of Derrida and Michel Foucault writes in her *Tendencies* (1994), queer can refer to ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of any one’s sexuality aren’t made (for can’t be made) to signify monolithically’ (quoted in Waugh 438). David Halperin understood queer in wider perspective. According to him: “Queer demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative – a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices” (quoted by Brenda Cossman 20). Ratna Kapur finds queer as one of the subgroups of sexual subalterns. She applied queer insights in postcolonial perspective. To her, the term queer is identitarian despite its largely anti-identitarian practices and claims. Her “sexual subalterns” include varied non-heteronormative sexualities and identities in India:

gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, khush, queer, hijra, kothis, panthis and many more. They have also included sexual practices and behaviours such as adult and consensual pre-marital, extra-marital, nonmarital, auto-erotic/ masturbatory, promiscuous, and paid-for sex, as well as MSM (men who have sex with men). It is this diversity of identities and range of practices that cannot be captured within the acronym 'LGBT,' and why there is a need to articulate the politics of sexual subgroups from within a postcolonial context rather than to borrow theories or politics from elsewhere, a move that is both decontextualised and dehistoricised (quoted by Brenda Cossman 31).

Discourses on sexualities justify heterosexuality as only valid and natural form of sexual behavior and practice. With the passage of time, heterosexuality achieves normative position in dealing with other sexual practices. Heterosexual demands and aspirations many a time facilitate inhuman treatment and even sometimes violence towards minority sexual. Studies on sexualities look for ways to understand power plays amongst various sexualities. Such studies at last are very keen to bring sexual minorities from darkness to light. They wish to float freely all types of sexualities without allowing precedence of one over other. To arrive at the projected end, queer theorists destabilize and problematize naturalized, normalized, and normative position of heterosexuality. Sexuality is definitely key theme of sexualities studies but gender issues cannot be bottled up squarely. In certain cases, heterosexual women also suffer discrimination and exploitation like that of other non-heterosexuals.

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright of his own type. For his plays he selected taboo matters (from heterosexual's point of view). Asha Kuthari Chaudhary writes: "The preoccupation with 'fringe issues' forms an important element in Dattani's work-issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage- quite literally. With Dattani, this becomes the only way to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence" (Chaudhary 47).

Mahesh Dattani in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998) boldly points at sexism (a conception of patriarchal origin) and precedence of heterosexual norms and principles. The play centrally focuses on the life and position of eunuchs (hijras) and heterosexual's behavior towards them. Eunuchs form one of the invisible sexual minorities. They no way can meet the aspirations of heterosexuality and get respect from it. By heterosexual politics, they are obliged to live a life of humiliation, abandonment, and isolation. And moreover, they are treated as criminals and object worth nothing. In this sense, the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a protest play. Beena Aggarwal writes: "Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure, tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order" (Aggarwal 34). The theme of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is unusual in the Indian play writing context. 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 hijra community" (CP 3).

Uma Rao is the central character of the play. She is the daughter of Vice-chancellor, the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner, and the wife of Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of Police. The playwright endows her intelligence, kind heart, and strong will power. She is at the staff of Bangalore University. She teaches there sociology. Her area of interest is class-gender based violence. She is issueless. Despite her aristocratic origin and upbringing she also suffers pangs of sexism. At the very outset of the play, Anarkali is seen behind the bars of prison on the charge of killing Kamala, a fellow hijra. Who got her killed? To know its answer and to reach at

the real culprit, Uma Rao visits jail with Munswamy a policeman. The heterosexual police put her into male cell and there she is beaten by male prisoners. Munswamy bluntly talks to her. He calls her a “worthless pig”. According to Suresh Rao, hijras are liars, as strong as horses. “They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day...”(CP 10). He even warns Uma not to have “any compassion for them”. Suresh arrested Anarkali “because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of them” (CP 33). To heterosexual policing, hijras deserve no safety and security. As the matter of fact they are mostly oppressed for no reasons. Being other of heterosexuals, they cannot visit heterosexual communities out of their volition except at the occasions child-birth (especially male) and wedding. Uma Rao in her voice-over traces hijras’ origin and their current position vis-à-vis heterosexuals:

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. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case (Case 7) study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love (CP 10).

Uma Rao, as the matter of fact, does not get any financial support from her husband. She of course could not break the bars of sexism. When she asks Suresh for his sperm counting, he flatly denies. He feels his virility under threat. About hijra lives and communities “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?...” (CP 16). The heterosexist nature of our society, least knowledge do we have of course. About hijras she arrives at they form:

The invisible minority. Behind Russel Market, everyone knew where to find them, although I couldn't see any hijras on the streets. They only come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand clap (CP 21-22).

Though hijras are exploited by mainstream communities, the power struggle there too continues. Champa, the head hijra asserts: "I am the head hijra, and I will decide who the guru will be after me. Anarkali will never be the guru. I will burn this place down before she sits here" (CP 23). She takes heterosexual policing corrupt and money-drunk. She wishes whether she had money she would have Anarkali back. She calls policemen 'sons of whores'. Uma tries her best to bring Champa around. She even promises money for Anarkali's bail. Champa boldly asserted that they (between her and Anarkali) had of course feuds but were not killers of Kamla.

Subramanyam sobriquet Subbu, the son of Mr. Sharma, a minister married Kamla privately. Kamla had a snap of their secret marriage. She showed it to Anarkali. After Kamla died, Anarkali became the sole possessor of the snap. Salim, the bodyguard of the minister and Mr. Sharma badly needed it in order to destroy the proof of Subbu and Kamla's marriage. Perhaps for this reason Anarkali was arrested on the charge of killing Kamla. Uma who was looking for such an important document Anarkali had. Mr. Sharma managed Kamla's murder but he could not destroy evidence. Mr. Sharma got her killed to avoid possible infamy of his family. Uma Rao somehow manages Anarkali's release. Uma Rao with Suresh Rao attends Subbu's marriage. Mr. Sharma knows Uma very well that she is looking for some truth. Mr. Sharma ironically preaches her to quote the case of musk deer as he (musk deer) "searches everywhere for the source of the heavenly fragrance, not realizing it is contained within his own body" (CP 37). He in this way was fooling her. Mr. Sharma like some typical heterosexual appreciates the institution of marriage. He appears expressing his delight that his son Subbu is ready to start off household. At Uma's request, Anarkali and her party men turns up at Subbu's wedding. Mr. Sharma arranges Subbu's marriage with some girl (heterosexually acceptable). Mr. Sharma flusters to see them. Uma Rao persuades him that it is not fit to turn them away at such occasion. At the climax, Subbu appears declaring that he hates all such marriage preparations and don't like marriage. He

snatches Suresh's gun and aims at himself. Anarkali hands the wedding snap to Subbu. Subbu accuses Mr. Sharma for killing Kamla. Taking gun Subbu sobs and finally shoots himself dead.

Anarkali told Uma that she tried best to dissuade Subbu from her. She fought with her and scratched even her face so that Subbu stop pursuing her. Mr. Sharma got the snap "of Kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him"(CP 41) only at the cost of his son's life. Mystery finally got into light and Mr. Sharma will be arrested and tried for murder. To keep the real story and truth hidden, Mr. Sharma played with power tricks. Uma Rao finally arrives at:

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 (CP 42).

To the conclusion it can be said that the normative aspirations of heterosexuality claimed two innocent lives- Kamla and Subbu. The case of Kamla is worse than Subbu for her non-normative sexual status. Hijras are definitely biological sexual subalterns and Uma is gender subaltern and in some way sexual too. They suffer social boycott for their sexual incompetency. Non-normative events and cases get words seldom and after doctored. To doctor the matter, power plays crucially. The power of normative institutions does not tolerate non-normative issues.

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Bio

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