

## **Interrogating Human Identity in *Seven Steps Around the Fire***

**Neelam Srivastava**

Asst. Professor Dept. Of English, D.S. College, Aligarh  
Email: srivastava.neelam28@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The renewed social consciousness and the discourse on gender defined roles have been a major concern for the literary thinkers, social scientists as well as activists. The gender-centric roles cannot confine an individual to limitations and inhibitions of his ability and human sensibility. The present paper is focused to investigate the social and mental suffering of the community of eunuchs whose identity remains weak and unacknowledged. Several literary thinkers and writers have tried to bring on forth such concerns of the society wherein these unfortunate beings are deprived of emotions and feelings from the society. The researcher has earnestly tried to analyze Mahesh Dattani's immense conscious efforts to present the predicaments of this marginalized community through his plays with the message that the society must be responsible enough to give due spaces to such invisible minorities and acknowledge their existence.

### **KEYWORDS**

eunuchs, invisible minority, human sensibility, gender- consciousness

With the renewed social consciousness, the discourse on gender defined roles has been operated as a major concern for social scientists and literary thinkers. Gender determined roles are not the determinants either of nature or of destiny but a socially- constructed phenomena to discriminate the sex-based power politics and to carve out the patterns of the social behaviour for the better functioning of social system. Although gender roles are not absolute or ultimate, but they are the partial paradigm of human society. The fact cannot be denied that the gender consciousness as a part of social system has been instrumental in modifying human personality, human psyche and power centric roles.

In the modern Indian literature, the dramatist like Mahesh Dattani or the poetess like Kamla Das express their deep sympathy for the transsexuals or the third genders who are often known as eunuchs. They are thrown in the invisible spaces depriving them of their human potential, their dignified roles in human society, their craving for personal relationship and their tremendous potential to receive and to respond to human emotions.

“The preoccupation with ‘fringe’ issues forms an important element in Dattani's work-issues that remain latent and suppressed, or pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage quite literally.

With Dattani, this becomes the only way to actually push these 'invisible' issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence. [Kuthari 2005]

Mahesh Dattani chooses to work on extra ordinary, uncommon, non-traditional themes. Jeremy Mortiner is of the view that Dattani was a playwright who was not afraid to work within a relatively conventional dramatic structure to present a plot that was bold and powerful without ever melodramatic. His plays often include characters not given due space in the society, having no self identity and therefore feel isolated and insecure. It is therefore they unconsciously seem to struggle with the relentless forces of nature and society. This view has been supported by Dr. Beena Agarwal in the following observation: "The bias and discrimination towards the neuter gender, makes Dattani to explore the emotional crisis and human aspect of them." [Agarwal 2015]

The play 'Seven Steps Around The Fire' is a murder mystery of a beautiful hijra. The term 'Hijra' is a combination of Hindi, Arabic and Persian having originated from Urdu meaning 'neither male nor female'. Their ancestry can be traced from a legend in the Ramayana. According to the legend when Lord Rama was going into exile, the inhabitants of Ayodhya wanted to follow him. He ordered the men and women to turn back. But some of his male followers not knowing what to do, could not disobey him so sacrificed their masculinity and followed him to the forest. Being pleased with their devotion, Rama blessed his followers who were neither male nor female. There are transsexuals all over the world and India is no exception. In India, the hijra community is known as the third gender. Physiologically, they are males having adopted a feminine identity. They dress up like women. Thus, they do not conform to the social status of

male or female gender but are a mixture of the two and so the society labels them as transgenders. These people have to face a lot of harassment because of stigma attached to their lot. They are under-privileged and live a life of poverty. Generally, this class is not financially well-off, is looked down upon as unwanted lot. In the Indian society, the presence of hijras on two occasions is considered to be auspicious. Their presence on the birth of a baby or at a marriage seems to bring blessings for the baby or the newly wed couple. It is a pity that they are devoid of both of these pleasures, they themselves can never celebrate these two rituals during their lifetime, though they sing and dance on the birth of a baby or at the solemnization of marriage. They are underprivileged, neglected and are not even permitted to attain their full humanity by seeking spaces in the centre through their mental accomplishments. The venues of education and professional life are closed to them.

Mahesh Dattani's play 'Seven Steps Around The Fire', a murder mystery revolves around the mystery of Kamla's death, a beautiful hijra, eunuch who had been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy minister, a representative of the government. The minister is not able to accept this relationship, therefore he conspires to burn Kamla to death. He even hastily arranges a fat, pompous wedding for his son Subbu with an acceptable girl. Another eunuch Anarkali is framed for Kamla's murder and put behind the bars, that too in a male prison. She was manhandled not only by the constable but also by the inmates. Uma, the wife of Suresh, the chief superintendent of police and daughter-in-law of a police deputy commissioner comes to meet Anarkali in the jail. Uma, a postgraduate in sociology is pursuing her research on "Class Gender based power implications". During the course of her research, she meets Anarkali, the eunuch and from there on her quest

to unravel the murder mystery of Kamla begins. In the due course she stumbles upon several startling realities which finally lead to the murderer of Kamla. Despite her sincere efforts, the criminal is left free without even being framed and the case is closed thereby proving that the 'invisible minority' has no voice of its own and the powerful lot both in terms of wealth and power politics even though unlawful, reign the society. Still son Subbu's suicide must have been a blow to the father, the wealthy, powerful politician and though he was not punished by the mortal beings- the society but was punished by God, the Almighty. Thus, gender consciousness and its afterthought are a socially constructed mechanism, and it is a burden for the growth, freedom, and self- actualization of human beings. This further holds true in the argument of Dr Beena Agarwal: "Uma in her helplessness shares the anguish of dramatist to establish that human identity is far above sex-determined social identities." [Agarwal2015]

It is radical rather revolutionary on the part of Dattani that he opened the stage inside the theatre for eunuchs who are deemed to be cursed and are even denied of their basic human identity. Breaking the barrier of social contemptuousness within the structure of the play 'Seven Steps Around The Fire' Dattani provides ample spaces to the representatives of eunuchs for the affirmation of their rational self in a conventional society. The transsexuals are also human beings though with a biological deficiency. They are unfortunate beings. Nature has denied them two major roles- nuptial knots and childbirth. Thus, nature has been unjust to them so is being the society. They have an innate tendency to promote human relationship inspite of contempt and negligence offered to them by the society. Suresh, the Chief superintendent of police as well as Mr. Sharma, the powerful minister try to exploit this

community of eunuchs in the best possible manner to realise the purpose beneficial for the realisation of their personal egos. Champa, the head hijra at the very outset of the play exhibits her resistance against the apathy of the society. Rationality and emotional identification with fellow beings is an integral part of human self. In the case of eunuchs, they are denied the social identity, but their emotional and rational behaviour consistently reflects in their observations, actions, and responses. As soon as Uma tries to win the confidence of Champa with her sympathy and identifies with her suffering, Champa rationalises the whole situation and shares her feelings for Kamla and Anarkali. She cries: "If I had the money, I would throw it on that superintendent's face and get her back....." [24]

Resistance and rationality give a sweep to the emotions and rational argumentative defence of eunuchs. It is to establish that the human consciousness is intact beyond the gender-centric conventions of the society and here lies the distinction and strength of the stage of Dattani. In 'Seven Steps Around The Fire' Champa, one among the lot of eunuchs who are constantly targeted with hatred and contempt exhibits her tenderness of heart while showing the picture of Kamla with her biological parents admits "these were his first father and mother, afterwards I am her father and mother..."[28] Champa even confesses that she did not want Kamla to get married not because she would lose an earning member 'but only because she will not be happy in the outside world' [28] Uma argues with Champa that she had a reason to kill Kamla as she defied her authority, Champa defends herself and says ". That is not true. We had fights, but Anarkali and me- we are not killers...She was my only daughter..."[28] As soon as she comes to know that Uma is childless, she feels sad for her and displays her sympathy

towards Uma, though just for a while “...oh poor woman...” [23] On knowing that Uma had come to help her to get Anarkali out of jail and that she had also brought money for Anarkali’s bail, Champa bestows her with blessings, ‘Oh, May you have a hundred children.’ [24] As a sensible human being she develops a kinship with Uma and feels a sort of confidence to release the pain of her heart in the company of Uma. She rationalizes the situation and reveals that Kamla was killed but Anarkali did not kill her. They are endowed with sublime human emotions and retain their commitment by blessing other human beings. ‘May God bless this house with many children’ ‘May God always smile upon this house’[38] From this it is evident that though they do not enjoy the pleasures of motherhood and family, they have an emotional side to their lives. They are also human beings under the cursed position acknowledged as eunuchs. Just because of the incompleteness rendered to them by nature, they cannot be refused an honourable identity and dignity. In spite of their identity as third gender, they are equally equipped human beings capable of retaining and expressing emotions. In the blessings and confessions of Champa, there are ample evidence of her generosity, immensity of spirit and rational understanding of human sensibility. This emotional side of the transsexuals finds its voice in the following observation:

Anarkali’s yearning for various relationships like brother, sister, mother and father suggest that they have equal desire for the protection of personal relationships. She is torn between the fear of social code and legal provisions but finds consolation in the love and sympathy of Uma. [Agarwal 2015]

In the light of the above observation, it is evident that the transsexuals survive with those values that are essential to retain

balance in society. Anarkali’s outburst ‘I did not do anything to Kamla. She was my sister.’[12] and her sympathy for Uma on learning that she has no sister is evident in her statement, ‘If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister’, [13] very well reflects the emotional quest of Anarkali.

The realisation of agony and anguish is also an integral part of human self. It further leads to the idea of guilt and shame and sometimes to remorse too. When Uma accuses Champa, the head hijra of murdering another hijra Kamla, Champa loses her temper and orders Uma to immediately leave her house. She cries: “She was my only daughter! [pause] Take your money and get out of my house! GO! This is my house [Pause] You don’t know! You don’t know!” [28]

Anarkali is overwhelmed with agony when she comes to know that Uma’s husband would not allow her to visit Anarkali which is evident from the following:

“Anarkali: Come closer... Does your husband know that you are here?

Uma: No

Anarkali: Why did you not tell him?

Uma [after a while]: He wouldn’t allow me to visit you.” [35]

Anarkali is well aware of the fact that the hijras are not considered to be a part of the society. Her pain is clearly visible in her thoughts, when she proclaims “One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband.” Anarkali and Champa knew about the killers of Kamla but unfortunately, they do not have a voice of their own. Nobody seems to take them seriously. When Uma questions Suresh about Anarkali’s arrest, he answers in a ruthless manner: “Suresh: Maybe. Who knows? If she runs away to another town, who can trace these people? Anyway, we only arrested her because there was no one else.

There is no real proof against her..." [33]

Uma quite rightly terms the hijra as 'invisible minority'. They are not accepted by the society and so are treated like degenerate humans. Uma when refers to Anarkali as 'she', 'Suresh chokes with laughter...' He mockingly retorts: "What's that you said? Sister...There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all castrated degenerate men..." [10]

Anarkali fills with remorse when Uma asks her why she did not tell her about Kamla's murderer. She cries for a while during her outburst. She is desperate to promote mother and daughter relationship for the better relationship based on human understanding. Anarkali was right. Nobody even cared to report the truth let alone arrest the culprit. Whatever the end may be but Champa and Anarkali went off the way to bring truth to the surface. They intentionally go to Subbu's wedding and make their presence felt. Subbu reacts and ultimately commits suicide. In a way it was a revenge for Kamla's murder. Thus, the last scene of the wedding of Subbu, exceptional of its own kind has been dramatized by Dattani as a mechanism to take revenge upon the entire community of power holders. Had Champa been weak and marginalized at the mental level she might have taken some barbarian or weak angle of revenge for the suppression of humanity. The resistance of Champa is to signify the fact that in spite of their marginalized position these eunuchs are endowed with infinite capacity to raise their voice against the accumulating injustice. The nerve stricken pent up emotions in this scene is to express the anarchy of human sensibility beyond gender-

centric conventions. The awakening of human sensibility is the ultimate mechanism to take revenge upon those who try to overpower human values without caring

for their fatal consequences. Subbu's death is tragic and painful but it is inevitable to expose the triumph of human sensibility that is the ultimate reflection of man's infinite potential against socially accepted man-made conventions. In the last scene the affirmation of human sensibility is not a surrender of the community of eunuchs but is the triumph of human sensibility that is neither male nor female. Dattani within the texture of the play 'Seven Steps Around The Fire' tries to establish that in the post-colonial era it is the need of the hour to break the human barriers of caste and creed to establish a society based on human values. [Young 2020] It will be a mechanism of redemption of the identity of invisible communities to establish a society where the sublimity of human self-reigns supreme.

In her social status Uma is an icon of power but in the heart of her hearts, she retains sympathy for the weaker sections of the society and therefore takes the responsibility to investigate the case of Kamla's murder, an innocent eunuch. The message of the play is that it is the duty of the society to construct and acknowledge the existence and human identity of the transsexuals. It is quite apparent that this 'invisible minority' though with a biological deficiency has adequate human values. The eunuchs like any other human beings have an innate tendency to promote emotional bonding and relationship. Rationalism and identification with other people's sufferings, their resistance, agony and anguish are all indicative that human consciousness surpasses every gender-centric conventions. The arguments analysed in this paper justifies Dattani's immense consciousness for the predicament of invisible communities. Marginality of eunuchs is the consequence of the treacherous dominance

of power-holders who remain indifferent to human emotions. The consistent resistance of the transsexuals enables them



to expose the veil of hypocrisy adopted by the politicians and bureaucrats. It is the humane appeal dramatised in the play 'Seven Steps Around The Fire' that impart a lasting effect on the audience to revolutionize existing frame-work of power mechanisms.

#### **WORKS CITED**

- Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Book Enclave, 2015.
- Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Mahesh Dattani*. Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2005.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected plays*. 2000.
- Young Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2020.

**Dr. Neelam Srivastava** is working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, D. S. College, Aligarh. Besides teaching Literature as a discipline her areas of interest are Indian English Literature, Feminist and Gender Studies.