

**CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S
*SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE***

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Step Around the Fire* presents miseries in the life of the eunuchs. They are treated in a way as social outcasts and nobody treats them like human beings. They are deprived of family and love. Only on two occasions their presence is acceptable- one is marriage and second is birth. Ironically these two privileges are forbidden to them by Nature. The discrimination against them is often translated into violence. The play moves around the murder mystery of Kamla, a beautiful eunuch investigated by Uma Rao. This paper exposes cruelty of the governing class and the pitiable state of the eunuch community.

Keywords: Discrimination, Crime, Eunuch, Violence, Marriage.

Mahesh Dattani has made a name in Anglo-Indian Drama. He is a versatile genius who has written dramas, radio plays, screen plays, acted in and directed many plays. He is director, actor, dancer, teacher and playwright, all in one. He has learnt western ballet dancing under Molly Andre and Bharat Natyam under Chandrabhanga Deir and Krishna Rao. He has directed radio plays, some of which have been aired on BBC radio as well. Dattani came to limelight and sought into fame with the winning of the first ever Sahitya Akadmi Award for a playwright in 1998 for his work 'Final Solutions' and 'Other Play'. His best known plays include 'Where There's A Will' (1988), 'Dance Like A Man' (1989), 'Tara' (1990), 'Bravely Fought The Queen' (1991), 'Do The Needful' (1997), 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' (1998), and 'The Swami and Winston' (2000).

Besides being a dramatic artist, Dattani is a sociologist of sorts as he portrays social problems in her plays. Therefore, his plays have been lustily applauded by the audience everywhere and have brought him praise. In his treatment of social problems Dattani goes to expose the vicious act even of the people of the highest echelon. In his play *Seven Step Around the Fire* he goes to expose the wickedness of the Minister, Mr. Sharma. The play also throws light on the history and profession of the hijra community. Dattani has exposed criminality of the governing class and the pitiable state of the hijra class.

The play *Seven Step Around the Fire* presents miseries in the life of the hijras. They are treated in a way as social outcasts and nobody treats them like human beings. The storyline of this play is not so common in the Indian context. It is gruesome tragedy in the life of transsexuals or hijras as they are not considered respectable and acceptable human beings. The discrimination against them is often translated into violence. The main factor behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that hijras do not conform to the accepted gender divisions. Male and female-these are the only sexual categories which have secured society's approval. Dattani observes the word 'hijra' is an Urdu word. "The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning- neither male nor female." (CP 10)

The plot of the play takes around the investigation of murder mystery of Kamla- a beautiful eunuch. Uma Rao, the daughter of Vice- Chancellor and wife of Superintendent of Police, Suresh Rao, is a student of sociology and doing her research on the life of the eunuchs. She has selected this topic for the study and intends to present their life in a different way and that her work will be something unique. While doing research she explores a legend from *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. (CP 11)

The transsexuals are considered the lowest of the low. They are deprived of family and love. Only on two occasions their presence is acceptable-one is marriage and second is birth. Ironically these two privileges are forbidden to them by Nature. Dattani makes a bold attempt to give central space in the mainstream drama to the transsexual community who are socially avoided and even humiliated.

The play discloses with the scene of the jail office where Uma Rao has come to talk Anarkali (hijra) who has been accused murdering her companion Kamla on the day of her marriage. After her first meeting with Anarkali, Uma realizes her innocence and decides to secure justice to her. In the jail Anarkali is beaten by other prisoners and when she cries, they enjoy and make fun of her. Even Munswamy, a constable does not like Uma's interest in Anarkali's case. He requests Uma to deal with some other case as this case will be insulting for her and her family.

Anarkali knows about Kamla's murder but she is afraid to tell it to Uma. She says, "They will kill me also if I tell the truth, I will die in jail." (CP 13) when she asks Uma to go to Champa and give money to know the truth, Uma thinks:

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? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these weddings?..... Could it be true what my mother used to say about them? Did they really put a curse on her because they did not allow them to sing and dance on their wedding? Or was that their explanation for not being able to have children

of their own? Ora reason to give to people for wanting to adopt me?
 (CP 16-17)

Uma's visit to Champa throws better light on the distressed life of these hijras. Champa is a very wise hijra and when she comes to know that Uma has a lot of money in her bag. She says to her, "Are you mad? Hold the bag tightly. You should not bring so much money into such placed." (CP 22) Their conversation discloses a fact that head hijra decides who will be her heir, and be head of the community. In the beginning Uma is in doubt that the cause of murder is competition between Kamla and Anarkali as Champa wanted to make Kamla the head of the community in her succession.

Uma- Wait a minute, you mean- Kamla was your first choice?

Champa- Kamla was everyone's first choice.

Uma- And Anarkali, your second? I mean. Now that Kamla is dead, Anarkali stands to gain from Kamla's death?

Champa- Yes but what can I do? There is nobody else who I can....

Uma- Can I have my money back?

Champa- Why? What is your problem now? Anarkali did not kill Champa, I am telling you.

Uma- But it seems like she may have. (CP 23)

Champa surrenders to Uma's repeated blames of Kamla's murder and tells her about the photograph.

Uma- Oh, I see.... What was he looking for now?

Champa- A photograph.

Uma- What kind? Of whom?

Champa- He says he wants a photograph that Kamla has of. Kamla and him together. (CP 25)

Uma becomes curious to know about the mystery of photograph. Champa loved Kamla very much like her own daughter and wanted to bail out Anarkali as well. It shows how responsible she is towards her community. She even warns Uma to keep out of the murder case as she (Uma) may be harmed by influential people.

Restless to meet Salim, Uma reveals the minister's house with Munswamy. She converses with Subbu in a friendly manner but his strange behavior further makes her confused. Uma's main motive is to expose the murderer of Kamla. Since Champa and Anarkali know who killed Kamla and how influential he is.

Anarkali- Don't put your own position in danger. Go home.

Champa- Madam, do as she says. Go home to your husband. (CP 35)

Uma attends the wedding of Mr. Sharma's son Subbu along with her husband. When she discusses with Mr. Sharma, the minister that she wants to search for the truth, he replies in a very symbolic way and tells that truth behind Kamla's murder will not come out.

Mr. Sharma- You know the saying about the musk deer? He searches everywhere of the source of the heavenly fragrance, not realizing it is contained within his own body.

Uma laughs.

You don't believe it is true?

Uma- And yourself? Have you found what you have searching for?

Mr. Sharma- Yes my son is getting a wife from a fine family. I am happy to see that he is entering the phase of the house holder." (CP37)

Mr. Sharma's happiness knows no bounds to see his son going to be married. When Subbu has taken seven steps around the fire with his bride, Munswamy informs Uma about the arrival of hijras. They started singing and dancing. They bless the whole family and newly married couple. Mr. Sharma becomes very angry and asks Suresh to call the guards and turn them all out but Uma intervenes, "No. it is bad luck to turn away hijra on a wedding or birthday.

Champa- Thank you my daughter! May you have a hundred sons! (CP 38)

In spite of the anger of Suresh, Mr. Sharma agrees to give them some money. While the hijras are dancing, Subbu sees a vision of Kamla dancing on another level. Suddenly he snatches Suresh's gun from his hand and asks his father to keep away. He declares that he can not live without Kamla so he is leaving them all. Anarkali says that she has a gift for Subbu and gives it to him. It is a photograph. Subbu laments that his father has killed Kamla but he still loves her. He points the gun at his father.

Subbu- you killed her!

Silence except for Subbu's sobs. Mr. Sharma backs away.

Mr. Sharma- Subbu, I did it for you! It was wrong. It was wrong. Forgive me!

Subbu- You cannot bring back Kamla. (CP 41)

Mr. Sharma requests Champa to stop his son and tell him to forget Kamla. But Champa says, "Even God does not listen to us! (CP 41) Subbu shows as if he is going to shoot his father but he suddenly shoots himself. Now Uma comes to know that Mr. Sharma wanted this photo. She takes this wedding photograph of Subbu and Kamla to her house and shows it to her husband.

Uma- The photograph was what Mr. Sharma was after. A polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamla had taken soon after their private wedding in some remote temple. A picture of Kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him. The poojari probably didn't know that Kamla was not a woman. Of course Mr. Sharma couldn't have it, totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have Kamla burnt to death. But Salim had to tell him about the picture. He sent Salim to threaten Anarkali and Champa...He did get the picture eventually...After losing his son. What a price to pay! And now he will be arrested and tried for murder. (CP 41)

But her husband is interested in saving the life of Mr. Sharma. The play ends with a pathetic note in words of Uma:

They Know. 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 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 play shows that injustice is done to the hijra community which represents the weaker section of the society. Mahesh Dattani has dealt with social problems which generally remain unnoticed. In an interview with Utpal K. Banerjee, he says:

I'm strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power-play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal with them and they remain the leitmotifs of my plays. I am, however, not a social activist. From my

long experience in theatre, I know what will work in a play, that is, what will be empowered writing. (Indian Literature 166)

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire* life has been presented from bi-sexual point of view. Dattani portrays the problems of hijras in our society and shows how the crime is committed to them. They are treated as untouchables and unacceptable but their services at the time of marriage and child birth are utilized by the cruel and selfish people. The playwright closes the play posing a challenge for the survival of hijra community.

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