

The Role of 'Marginalization' in Transgender and Female Characters in
Seven Steps around the Fire

N. Padmapriyadharshini,
Ph. D Scholar (full-time)
Department of English &
Comparative Literature,
Madurai Kamaraj University,
Madurai - 21 (TN) India.

An Abstract

This paper is an attempt to picturize the sufferings of transgenders and females in the society. This paper cries out the names of real subalterns in the society through the race happens between both transgender and the female characters in the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani. This paper finally comes out with the answer and announces the “superior subaltern” in the society. This paper analyses the female and transgender characters in the story and brings out how male characters dominates them in life. Thus, this paper tries it's best to portray the oppressions faced by 'other than males' in the society.

Keywords: Subaltern consciousness, sympathy, investigation, human relationships, sensibility, domination, social hatred.

Mahesh Dattani, a very famous playwright, actor, director and a courageous writer, always discusses about the themes that the other writers hesitate to write. He never feels any discomfort in exposing the different but existing problems in the society. Though he was an economist, his interest in writing made him a very popular writer. His *Seven Steps around the Fire* was published in 1999 as a play in the BBC Radio 4 on January 9th. This is a very interesting play, more or less like a detective play, tries it's level best in exposing the real subalterns in the society. This play starts with the death of a most beautiful eunuch and moves with a quest in every line.

Seven steps around the fire is the most famous work of Mahesh Dattani as it reveals the pains and sufferings of the marginalized people in the society. Dattani most often deals

with the untouched part of the society. But in this play he tries to compare the two genders based on their level of subalternity. Both the genders suffer a different kind of marginalization from the so called “society”. Kamala was the most beautiful eunuch, secretly married to Subbu, the son of a famous minister. As soon as the truth came into light, the minister kills her and puts another eunuch, Anarkali in prison. Anarkali, though she tries to prove her innocence, no one in the place tried to understand or even listen to her words. Anarkali was finally helped by Uma, the daughter of vice chancellor and the wife of the chief superintendent, Suresh Rao. Uma does research on the “class- and gender- related violence” for her doctorate. Her research was designed by Dattani in order to post many philosophical arguments to the readers and society. Leela Gandhi rightly says that,

“Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the ‘people’ finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voice of truly oppressed” (Gandhi 2).

The play revolves around these characters and this was the short introduction of them so that the relationship between each and everyone could be well understood. Everytime when Uma visits Anarkali, she wants her to befriend her and tell her all the truths about Kamala’s death. Kamala was an innocent victim who married Subbu unknowingly and suffers a lot. She was brutally murdered by someone in the beginning of the play. Uma runs and finds the real victim at the end of the play. Anyway, Anarkali was put in prison by the higher officials who do not even think transgender as human beings. One of the police men the prison addresses Anarkali as ‘it’ to Uma. The police man says that, “She! Of Course it will talk to you. We will beat it up, if it doesn’t” (7). Uma notices everything and calls her as ‘she’. This is where the courage of Uma stands. She goes directly to the prison and questions her husband about putting Anarkali in male prison. She becomes angry that Anarkali must

have been put in female prison instead. Infact, she has now become a different gender.

Dattani gives explanation for this gender through Uma's words. Uma says it from Ramayana thus,

“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. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable – marriage and birth – ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature (10-11).

Uma meets Anarkali in prison and also Champa, the head of their group in their place. Both of them spoke to her very normally. They actually wanted someone to help them out to come out of that shame. They loved Kamala very much. Both of them supported Kamala and they revealed that Kamala was like their daughter and they had no courage to kill her even. Eunuchs have the habit of dancing at all the ceremonies. So when they have gone to Mr.

Sharma, a famous minister's son's wedding, Subbu realizes everything and the secret about Kamala's death is revealed.

Dattani's title to this play has a very serious significance. Seven steps around the fire is called as "seven circles around the fire" previously. The seven circles around the fire was made on every Hindu wedding ceremonies. Each circle around the fire was made after taking vows by the bride and the groom. Starting from the first vow till the seventh vow, a groom should take his wife's hands and come across the fire. A girl born as a transgender will not get married in her life but Kamala being an eunuch, gets married and does all the seven promises. If she was a woman, she will be given chance to fulfil as her promises but unfortunately she was identified as eunuch so she was not given any chances. She was not even left alive. This is the significance of this title.

There are millions and millions of colours in the rainbow but only seven are clearly visible to the viewers' eyes. Likewise, there are totally 48 genders in the world according to Queer theory but we could recognize only a few genders among them. Next to male and female genders, transgender ranks the highest in the list of population in India. But they were not even recognized as the human beings by the society. The society is not even ready to offer them jobs. This society treats them as something never to be touched with hands. But there are some eunuchs who gets well educated and finds a better place in the society but not all the people in the transgender community gets that chance. But there was a strong bond between Hijras and it was evidenced through the words of Champa. Champa says to Uma thus,

"You don't know how much we all loved her! You will not understand. I loved her more than you can love your daughter! You don't know" (28).

In this play, there are three main transgender characters. Among the three, Kamala was the cause of this story. The other two characters were Anarkali and Champa. Anarkali was accused for Kamala's death and was put into prison and Champa, who feels a lot for Kamala's death as she considers Kamala as her daughter. Every words spoken by them, exposes their disbelief for the society. They did not even believe Uma who went to their place to help them. Champa being an elderly woman, she recognizes Uma's needs and the goodness in telling the truth. So she shares all the truths she knew about Kamala. Champa became very kind to Uma and exposed her real innocent face to her. Uma recorded everything from the beginning till the end. Even though it was her educational research, it unveils the face of true criminal in the Kamala's murder case.

Anarkali befriended Uma on their very first meeting. She exposes her difficulties in staying in the males' prison. Her inconvenience made Uma to question her husband about this. Everytime when she meets Uma, she tells her to take her out of the prison so that both could work hard and find the real murderer. Anarkali was found much stronger when she was with Champa. This is because she feels comfortable only in their society. The outer world or the common society never understands their feelings and voices. Even though Anarkali cries aloud telling her innocence, no one is ready to hear her or understand her either. One police man at the police station, Munsamy calls her as "it". This is a fine example that people don't even consider them as human beings. But Uma gives her right respect and calls her as "she". This proves that the new generation is learning to treat everyone equally.

India is a place where women were considered as goddess and something to be praised. Dattani's female character, Uma, was very strong and courageous throughout the story but she too has many invisible obstacles and barriers created by the male characters around her. She was the professor of social studies at the Bangalore University but she was

always identified in the play as the daughter of a vice chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of superintendent of police. This itself shows that the women does not have a right self recognition no matter what she does and where she goes. Man gives his woman a freedom to go out of their home and do great research and if all is done and ready to be published, he tells her to destroy all those thinks she collected and orders her not to present it. This is actually like giving kitchen accessories to a child which cannot cook and even if the child tries cooking no one will taste it. Her father making her to do her research in Bangalore University and making her as a professor under his guidance was itself like a control over her. There are many such invisible subalternity in the story which are later shown to Uma and the readers through Anarkali.

Through out the play, the transgender characters faced discrimination and marginalization only in the society where they met other people who were not the part of their community. But in their home, they never faced any kind of discrimination. They behaved as themselves to others. They did not want to afraid for anyone and for anything. But the other gender, that is, the female gender, they were controlled both by the society and by the people in home. The female character loses all her freedom if she started doing something different. The people in her home would never allow her to go out with different revolutionary ideas. She does not even given rights to do what she wants. She is doubly controlled by her home and society as well. Uma finally at the end of her research on the case states that,

“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” (42).

Thus, for this reason she could be awarded with the title of “superior subaltern” in the society. Uma, the main female character in the play, suffers an invisible marginality and that too was shown to her through Anarkali. She was in a state that she herself could not understand her marginality. This was actually in the form of care and security but what Uma actually tasted was an invisible marginality. Every time when we try to draw distinction between the level of marginality faced by people we end up giving the first rank to the transgender. But Dattani carefully handled the story and came out with the answer that the women were the invisible subalterns in the society.

Works Cited:

1. Dattani, Mahesh. *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. UK: Penguin Publishers. 2013.
2. Eliot, T. S. *Introduction to Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*. London: Faber and Faber, 1945.
3. Gandhi, Leela. *Post Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1998.
4. Yadav, Suman. Book Review: '*Seven Steps around the Fire*' by Mahesh Dattani, ELT Weekly vol.5 Issue #43, Dec 30,2013, ISSN 0975-3036.