A Study of Marginalization of the Hijra Community in Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

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Abstract: As a contemporary Indian writer, Mahesh Dattani makes people aware of the struggles faced by the marginalized community, social exclusion of hijras and gender discrimination through his works. His play Seven Steps Around the Fire was first broadcast by BBC Radio on January 9, 1999 as Seven Circles Around the Fire. Later it was first staged on August 6, 1999 at the Museum Theatre by MTC production and The Madras Players. The title highlights the ritual of marriage where the Bride and Groom takes seven steps around the fire and it also indicates the fact that Hijra (Transgender) are denied to get married. As the play uncovers the truth behind the murder of Kamala, the Eunuch who is murdered for taking the seven sacred steps around the fire, it highly portrays that Eunuch are not permitted to get married but their presence is highly considered in a wedding. This paper focuses on the exploitation of the weak by the powerful people, how hijras have been treated in the society and denial of their identity.

IndexTerms: Discrimination,Marginalization,Brutality,Questforidentity

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani focus on the problems of the sexually marginalized hijras in the play Seven Steps Around the Fire. The main plot moves by the enquiry of Uma Rao who reveals the murder mystery of Kamala, a hijra who is burnt to death mercilessly. Many works of Mahesh Dattani reflects the contemporary issues in the society. It speaks about the problem and takes the problem worldwide to get a solution. The play insists the main theme as hijras are not given respect and treated equally in the society. They are denied to get married and to be parents but it is considered as a ritual to get their blessings only in two occasions like child birth and wedding. Except these two occasions hijras are seen as a sin in this world. This concept is highly shown in this story plot.

II. NEGLECTION OF HIJRAS IN THIS SOCIETY

The point that eunuchs are not treated equally in this society, hits the reality. Most of the times they were exploited by the powerful people, neglected for their rights. In this play, Kamala is married secretly to her love Subbu who is the son of a Minister Mr.Sharma. Mr.Sharma burnt Kamala to death and with his political power he turned the case towards Anarkali, a friend of Kamala who is also a hijra. This clearly shows that poor people are exploited by the powerful. Even Anarkali and Police knew who is the criminal in Kamala's murder case but they can't take any action against the powerful people. Anarkali is arrested by the Police and she faces many discrimination in the prison. She is kept in the prison with male prisoners and experienced sexual harassment by them. Here the marginalization of hijra community is taken place. When Uma goes to prison to meet Anarkali she was stated as 'it' by the constable Munswamy. "Munswamy : She! Of course, it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it does not" (Dattani 7). Hijras are not respected even as a human being and they undergoes lots of pain and discrimination. Munswamy laughs at Uma when she calls Champa as 'Madam' and Anarkali as 'She' because hijras are refered as 'it' by some people. They were also punished sometimes for the crime in which they were not actually a reason for it. The ill treatment of Anarkali is shown in these line.

Anarkali : I don't want to meet any journalist.

Munswamy : I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig! (Dattani 8).

The hijras are called as 'dogs', 'worthless pig', and addressed using the pronoun 'it'.

The question 'Why hijras are denied for marriage?' is the main concept of this novel. The title itself represents the holy seven steps that is taken around the fire by the Groom and Bride. Hijras presence and their blessings is matters in the wedding but they are denied for marriage. If they get married then their result will be like Kamala, destroyed in a second. All the love and feelings she had towards Subbu is vanished suddenly by her death. Is it really said anywhere that hijras are not allowed to marry? They sing and dance in the wedding but refused to marry and give birth to children.

In the great epic Mahabharata, the great warrior Arjuna is transformed as a eunuch and wear a saree and dance along with the women. It is in the mythology itself the concept of hijras were spoken and it was not considered as a sin of being a hijra in those times. They were treated equally and given respect. But in the contemporary society, Hijras were not treated equally with same respect and this is depicted in this play by Dattani.

Here the hijras in the play Kamala, Anarkali and Champa were dressed up like women and named as women but they were not identified as woman to get ready for marriage. This situation of marginalisation still prevails in the society where many hijras are not considered as women. They are neglected from everything.

The play narrates the plight of hijra community who are halfway from men and women. They are not recognised by the society. They crave for family and love but receives only isolation and humiliated. This is what happens to Kamala when she craves for love and married to Subbu. Anarkali's words express her feelings towards a family and for what all the hijras were longing.

Anarkali : If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister.
Uma : I would love to be your sister, if you will be mine.
Anarkali : Oh! My sister! You are my sister, no? (Dattani 24)

III. CONCLUSION

Anarkali is oppressed only because she is a hijra. In fact everybody knows the real murderer of Kamala but they refuse to reveal the truth because here the weak are exploited by the powerful people. "Anarkali : They will kill me if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail" (Dattani 14). Because Anarkali, Champa and all the other who knew the truth can't open their mouth, if they reveals the truth the result will be more tragic as they all know. The reality is no one can reveal the truth in the public and stand bravely against the man who have high political powers, mainly hijras can't even imagine that because they get easily rejected only because they belongs to the hijra community.

This paper analysed and represents the plight and problems faced by hijras in this society. Dattani worked on the problems of hijras and presented it to worldwide study. Hijras suppression and cravings for love and family is displayed through the characters Kamala, Anarkali and Champa. There are some humans like Uma and Subbu who love and respects the hijras and also some people like Mr.Sharma, Munswamya and Suresh who marginalize and criticize hijras.

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