

Marginalisation, Gender and Social Freedom in Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani holds a prominent position in contemporary Indian English drama due to his commitment to portraying social realities that are routinely suppressed, overlooked, or deemed uncomfortable within mainstream discourse. His play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* examines the lives of hijras, a socially marginalized community whose existence has historically been marked by prejudice, silence, and misrepresentation. Through the inquiry into Kamala's murder, Dattani foregrounds the convergence of gender discrimination, social exclusion, class stratification, political authority, and institutional violence. The play is especially noteworthy because it does not simply depict the hijra community as subjects of pity; instead, it interrogates the social structures that withhold from them dignity, liberty, education, employment, and acknowledgment. The figure of Uma Rao, an educated university researcher, offers a crucial vantage point through which the concealed realities of the hijra community are progressively disclosed. Her investigation brings her into contact with figures such as Anarkali, Champa, and Kamala, enabling the audience to engage with lives that dominant society seeks to render invisible. The play's title alludes to the traditional Hindu matrimonial ritual of circumambulating the sacred fire seven times, thereby signifying union, social validation, and marital legitimacy. By juxtaposing this ritual with the proscribed relationship between Kamala and Subbu, Dattani accentuates the disjunction between cultural ideals and social practice. This article analyzes *Seven Steps Around the Fire* through the lenses of gender, marginalization, liberty, social identity, power, silence, and cultural duplicity. It contends that Dattani employs theatre as a medium for interrogating conventional conceptions of gender and for revealing the constraints of a society that endorses diversity symbolically while denying liberty and dignity to marginalized individuals.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, hijra community, gender, marginalization, liberty, identity, patriarchy, social discrimination, Indian drama.

Introduction

Indian English drama has emerged as a vital literary domain for representing social conflicts that are frequently excluded from conventional narratives. Among contemporary Indian dramatists, Mahesh Dattani has secured a distinctive place through his engagement with issues such as gender discrimination, sexuality, communal discord, familial oppression, child abuse, social prejudice, and marginalization. His plays consistently compel the audience to look beyond the respectable veneer of middle-class society and acknowledge the suppressed realities

that lie beneath. Dattani's dramatic universe is therefore intimately linked with questions of identity and liberty. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is among Dattani's most consequential plays in this respect. Initially composed as a radio play under the title *_Seven Circles Round the Fire_*, it was subsequently adapted for the stage. The play focuses on the murder of Kamala, a hijra, and the ensuing investigation undertaken by Uma Rao, a sociologist researching the lives of hijras. The investigation gradually transcends a mere pursuit of a perpetrator. It evolves into an examination of the social structures that generate marginalization and deny certain individuals the liberties enjoyed by others.

The play is significant because Dattani does not treat the hijra community merely as an aberrant social phenomenon. Rather, he investigates the mechanisms through which society constructs categories of normality and abnormality. Hijras are relegated to the margins because they do not adhere to dominant expectations regarding gender. Their peripheral status is reinforced by poverty, lack of education, social stigma, and political disenfranchisement. Simultaneously, Dattani reveals that members of privileged sections may engage privately with marginalized individuals while publicly refusing to acknowledge them. The play further interrogates the relationship between culture and liberty. Indian society is profoundly shaped by traditions, religious practices, familial structures, and social customs. Yet cultural traditions do not inherently ensure equality. The matrimonial ritual referenced in the title functions as a particularly potent symbol in the play. The seven circumambulations around the sacred fire conventionally denote marital union and social acceptance. However, the prospect of a hijra participating in such a socially sanctioned union is denied. Through this contradiction, Dattani questions whether cultural institutions dispense liberty equitably to all individuals.

Gender Identity and Social Marginalisation

A central preoccupation of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is the construction of gender identity. The play challenges the presumption that human beings can be comprehended solely through a rigid male-female binary. The hijra community embodies a gender identity that has existed in the Indian subcontinent for centuries, although its members have frequently endured discrimination and social exclusion. Dattani's portrayal of hijras is noteworthy because he represents them as individuals possessing emotions, aspirations, anxieties, relationships, and personal histories. They are not merely an undifferentiated social category. Kamala, Anarkali, and Champa exhibit distinct personalities, and their interactions affirm their humanity. Through these characters, Dattani contests the tendency of dominant society to regard marginalized communities as anonymous collectives.

The social identity of hijras is shaped not only by themselves but also by the perceptions of others. Society designates them as different and consequently denies them access to numerous ordinary social opportunities. Their exclusion from education and respectable employment fosters economic dependence, while economic dependence further entrenches social stigma. Thus, marginalization operates as a cyclical process. The play demonstrates that discrimination is not invariably manifested through overt physical hostility. It may also manifest as silence,

avoidance, ridicule, exclusion, and refusal of recognition. A society can curtail an individual's liberty without explicitly pronouncing that person inferior. The absence of opportunities itself functions as a mechanism of oppression. Dattani therefore frames gender as a social and political issue. The concern is not merely whether an individual is male, female, or transgender. The more fundamental question concerns how society responds to individuals whose identities do not conform to dominant expectations. The play urges the audience to reevaluate the meaning of normality and to recognize that what is termed "normal" is frequently determined by social power.

Uma Rao as an Observer and Researcher

Uma Rao is pivotal to the architecture of the play. As an educated woman conducting research on the lives of hijras, she initially occupies the role of an observer. Her scholarly interest provides the narrative framework through which the audience is introduced to the world of the hijra community. However, as the investigation advances, Uma's position undergoes transformation. Her research originates from an intellectual desire to comprehend a marginalized community. Gradually, she recognizes that the lives of those she studies are linked to broader questions of power and injustice. Her engagement with the hijras compels her to reassess the assumptions underpinning her research.

Uma's position is particularly significant because she herself encounters constraints within a patriarchal household. She is an educated woman, yet education does not automatically confer complete autonomy. Her relationship with her husband, Shiv Rao, illustrates the unequal distribution of authority within marriage. Shiv's social standing and political connections afford him power that Uma does not possess to the same extent. Consequently, Uma functions as a conduit between the socially privileged sphere and the marginalized sphere. She belongs to the mainstream social structure, yet her gender curtails her liberty within that structure. Her experience enables her to comprehend, at least partially, the oppression endured by the hijras.

The character of Uma thus complicates the dichotomy between observer and observed. She commences by studying the hijras, but ultimately their experiences alter her comprehension of society. Dattani suggests that authentic research cannot remain detached from human suffering. When knowledge exposes injustice, it also engenders an ethical obligation to challenge that injustice.

The Murder of Kamala and the Politics of Silence

Kamala's murder constitutes the central dramatic conflict of the play. However, the enigma surrounding her death is less significant than the social conditions that render justice difficult to attain. Kamala's death reveals the vulnerability of marginalized individuals when they lack social and institutional power. The investigation uncovers a network of silence. Individuals possess more information than they are willing to disclose. Fear, shame, political influence, and social prejudice inhibit the public acknowledgment of truth. Dattani therefore utilizes the structure of a criminal investigation to expose a broader social transgression: the systematic

denial of dignity to a marginalized community. Silence emerges as one of the most potent forms of oppression in the play. Those who wield authority possess the capacity to speak and be heard, while those at the margins struggle to render their voices socially consequential.

The issue is not merely who perpetrated the crime but whose testimony society deems credible. The contrast between the official investigation and the private realities of the hijras exposes the limitations of institutional justice. Institutions may profess to uphold equality, yet their efficacy depends upon the distribution of power within society. A marginalized person may formally possess rights while lacking the social resources required to exercise them. Kamala's narrative thus assumes symbolic significance. Her death epitomizes the vulnerability of individuals excluded from the protection of mainstream society. The play compels the audience to inquire why certain lives are accorded lesser value and why offenses against marginalized people can be disregarded or concealed.

Patriarchy and the Question of Freedom

Although the hijra community constitutes the primary focus of the play, Dattani's critique extends to patriarchy. Uma's experiences demonstrate that gender inequality impacts individuals within mainstream society as well. Uma is educated, intelligent, and professionally active, yet her autonomy is constrained by her marital and social position. Shiv Rao's authority within the family reflects the patriarchal assumption that the husband should exercise greater control. Uma's intellectual independence is therefore in tension with domestic expectations.

The comparison between Uma and the hijra characters is illuminating. They occupy markedly different social positions, yet both encounter restrictions imposed by dominant structures. Uma faces limitations because she is a woman, while the hijras encounter exclusion because their gender identities challenge conventional classifications. Dattani thus portrays oppression as multidimensional. Gender, class, social status, and political power intersect with one another.

An individual's liberty cannot be understood solely through gender because various forms of privilege and disadvantage overlap. The play consequently questions the notion that liberty is uniformly accessible to all. Legal or theoretical equality is inadequate if social institutions continue to discriminate. Genuine liberty necessitates recognition, dignity, education, economic opportunity, and the capacity to participate openly in social life.

Subbu and the Tragedy of Forbidden Love

Subbu's relationship with Kamala represents one of the most emotionally resonant dimensions of the play. Their relationship challenges conventional assumptions regarding love, marriage, gender, and social respectability. The tragedy arises not merely from personal circumstances but from society's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of their relationship. The play's title acquires particular significance in this context. The seven circumambulations around the sacred fire are associated with Hindu marriage. Marriage signifies not only personal affection but also social recognition and legitimacy. By invoking this ritual, Dattani draws attention to the distinction between relationships that society sanctions and those it repudiates.

The play does not propose that love alone can transcend social structures. Instead, it illustrates the force of social expectations. Individuals may experience genuine affection while remaining unable to express that affection publicly without repercussions. Subbu's position also reveals the pressures exerted upon privileged individuals by social expectations. His relationship with Kamala conflicts with the role assigned to him by his family and social class. The tragedy demonstrates how rigid definitions of masculinity and respectability can annihilate individual autonomy. The significance of Subbu and Kamala's relationship therefore extends beyond the personal. It functions as a critique of a social order that grants legitimacy selectively. Dattani asks whether a society that venerates marriage as a sacred institution should also recognize the emotional and human needs of those it excludes.

Cultural Hypocrisy

A prominent feature of Dattani's drama is his exposure of contradictions within respectable society. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is particularly effective because it reveals the divergence between public morality and private conduct. Hijras are publicly marginalized, yet they remain integral to everyday social life. Their presence is visible in specific cultural and social contexts, but their broader social identity is denied. This contradiction exposes the selective nature of cultural acceptance. Dattani also illustrates how political and social power can determine which conduct is deemed respectable. Individuals from privileged groups may transgress moral expectations while remaining shielded by status and influence. Marginalized people, conversely, may be condemned even when they are victims of injustice.

The play therefore refuses to accept social respectability at face value. It urges the audience to examine the structures underlying respectable appearances. Family honor, political status, religious tradition, and social reputation may appear valuable, but when they are preserved at the cost of another person's liberty, they become instruments of oppression. This critique is especially pertinent to the title. The sacred ritual represented by the seven steps embodies an ideal of companionship and social unity. Yet the social system surrounding that ritual excludes those who do not conform to conventional gender categories. The irony is deliberate: a culture that celebrates union can simultaneously deny certain individuals the right to form recognized relationships.

Language and Dramatic Technique

Dattani's dramatic method contributes significantly to the play's efficacy. His language is generally accessible and conversational, yet beneath its apparent simplicity resides a complex critique of social structures. Dialogue reveals power relations, while pauses, silences, and indirect utterances often convey what characters are unwilling or unable to articulate openly. The deployment of dramatic irony is particularly crucial. The audience gradually apprehends that the investigation entails far more than an individual crime. Information is disclosed through conversations, interrogations, and observations, allowing the social reality to emerge progressively. Dattani also employs contrast effectively. The educated milieu of Uma and Shiv is juxtaposed with the marginalized world of the hijras. Public respectability is contrasted with

private prejudice. Academic research is contrasted with lived experience. Cultural ideals are contrasted with social practices.

The dramatic form further enables the audience to assume the role of observer of the investigation. This is significant because the audience occupies a position analogous to Uma's initial position: it begins by regarding the hijra community from an external perspective. As the play unfolds, however, the audience is encouraged to question the distance between "us" and "them." Theatre thus becomes a mode of social confrontation. Dattani does not simply inform the audience that discrimination exists; he places marginalized lives before the audience and renders their exclusion difficult to ignore.

Freedom and Human Dignity

Liberty constitutes one of the central concepts through which Seven Steps Around the Fire can be interpreted. Freedom in the play is not confined to political independence. It encompasses the freedom to form relationships, express identity, pursue education, work with dignity, and participate in society without fear. The hijra characters encounter restrictions at virtually every level. Their gender identity places them outside conventional social structures, while economic and educational disadvantages exacerbate their exclusion. Their liberty is therefore constrained by both social attitudes and institutional structures.

Dattani's treatment of liberty is intimately connected with dignity. An individual cannot be deemed genuinely free if society persistently humiliates or dehumanizes that person. Freedom necessitates recognition of one's humanity. Uma's trajectory reinforces this point. She begins as a researcher seeking information, but her encounters with the hijras gradually transform her perspective. The play suggests that comprehending another person's experience constitutes an important step toward challenging prejudice.

The concept of liberty also pertains to the family. The family is conventionally regarded as a protective institution, yet Dattani demonstrates that it can also reproduce social constraints. Family honor and expectations can function as mechanisms through which individual choices are regulated. Thus, freedom in the play is both personal and social. Individuals require personal agency, but personal agency cannot thrive without social structures that foster equality.

The Hijra Community and Representation

The representation of hijras in the play is particularly significant within Indian literature and theatre. Historically, hijras have occupied a complex cultural position in South Asia. They have been acknowledged in certain traditional contexts while simultaneously enduring severe social exclusion. Dattani's play brings this contradiction to the forefront of dramatic representation. The hijras are neither romanticized nor depicted merely as objects of pity. Their lives encompass affection, conflict, humor, vulnerability, loyalty, and agency.

Champa, for instance, embodies the internal organization and protective structures of the hijra community. Her character demonstrates that the community possesses its own forms of kinship and authority. These structures can be understood partly as responses to exclusion from

mainstream institutions. Anarkali's presence also contributes to the play's exploration of identity and survival. Through these characters, Dattani illustrates that marginalized people construct their own communities when mainstream society denies them belonging.

This representation is significant because social prejudice often intensifies when people remain invisible. Literature and theatre can challenge invisibility by granting marginalized individuals narrative presence. Dattani's dramatic approach therefore possesses a political dimension: representation itself becomes an act of resistance.

Intersection of Gender, Class and Power

The social problems depicted in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* cannot be accounted for by gender alone. Dattani illustrates how gender converges with class and political authority. The hijras occupy a socially marginalized location, yet their precariousness is aggravated by economic dependency. In the absence of access to mainstream education and employment, their prospects remain severely constrained. This establishes a link between gender identity and class position.

Political authority introduces an additional layer. Individuals with political affiliations wield greater capacity to regulate information and to shape institutions. The disparity between those who exercise authority and those who strive to be heard reveals that justice is not invariably impartial. Uma's role once again becomes crucial because she holds educational and professional advantages while still being restricted by gender norms and familial structures. Her situation demonstrates that privilege is contextual. An individual may enjoy social benefits in one domain while encountering discrimination in another.

Dattani's drama thus foreshadows contemporary debates on intersectionality, even though the terminology itself emerged from a later theoretical paradigm. The play urges readers to perceive identity as a configuration of social locations rather than as a singular category.

Relevance to Contemporary Society

The concerns raised in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* continue to hold significance as debates surrounding gender identity, social acknowledgment, and equality persist. Contemporary India has experienced notable legal and social advancements regarding transgender rights, including the legal recognition of transgender persons. Nonetheless, legal acknowledgment by itself cannot eradicate social bias. Dattani's play retains its relevance because it differentiates between formal recognition and lived equity. A community may attain legal status while still facing discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, housing, and interpersonal relations.

The play also remains pertinent to discussions of representation. Who possesses the authority to narrate the stories of marginalized communities? In what manner are marginalized individuals portrayed? Are they granted the space to articulate their own experiences, or are they represented solely by external voices? These questions remain vital in literature, cinema, journalism, and scholarly research. For present-day readers, the play can therefore be interpreted not merely as a drama concerning hijras but as a broader examination of how

societies delineate insiders and outsiders. Its fundamental inquiry pertains to the circumstances under which an individual attains visibility, respect, and freedom.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* constitutes a compelling examination of gender, marginalization, social exclusion, cultural duplicity, and liberty. Through Kamala's murder and Uma Rao's inquiry, Dattani uncovers the structures that suppress individuals who exist beyond dominant gender norms. The play illustrates that discrimination is not generated solely by individual prejudice; it is perpetuated by familial expectations, social conventions, economic disparity, institutional constraints, and political power. The hijra figures stand at the core of this critique because their lives disclose the repercussions of being denied social recognition. Their marginalization demonstrates how identity can serve as a basis for exclusion. Simultaneously, Uma's experience reveals that patriarchal structures also impact members of mainstream society. The play thus establishes linkages among diverse forms of oppression.

The symbolism of the seven circumambulations around the fire is pivotal to Dattani's thesis. The ritual conventionally signifies marital union, social legitimacy, and shared existence. Yet the play brings to light the distressing contradiction between these ideals and the exclusion endured by individuals whose relationships do not align with conventional norms. The sacred rite is thereby transformed into a symbol through which Dattani interrogates the relationship between tradition and individual autonomy. Ultimately, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* advocates for an expanded conception of humanity and dignity. Liberty cannot be substantive when it is restricted to socially sanctioned identities. Equality demands more than legal recognition; it necessitates transformations in social attitudes and institutions. Dattani's theatre fulfills this critical role by foregrounding marginalized experiences within the public sphere.

The enduring importance of the play resides in its capacity to convert the audience from passive spectators into reflective witnesses. By confronting silence, prejudice, and cultural duplicity, Dattani illustrates that theatre can function as a vehicle for interrogating entrenched social assumptions. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* thus occupies a significant position in Indian English drama as a work that challenges conventional notions of gender, identity, family, morality, and freedom while affirming the inherent dignity of those who have historically been relegated to the periphery.

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