
Redefining Identities of Eunuchs in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around The Fire*

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Abstract:

Identity signifies the status of an individual or a group of people having specific features. Confining someone's identity is an outdated practice now-a-days. In psychological terms, 'identity' means the 'qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person (self-identity) or group (particular social category or social group).' It include self identity and social identity which is clarified by Weinreich, "A person's identity is defined as how oneself expresses in past, present and future relating with the self and the society." (www.identity/definition)

In cognitive psychology, the term 'identity' refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self. Identity negotiation is a process in which a person negotiates with society at large regarding the meaning of his or her identity. Meanwhile, sociologists often use the term to describe social identity, or the collection of group memberships that define the individual. Sociologists have identified different types of identities. They are: individual identity, social identity and the third is multiple identities. Generally, individual identity constitutes self image regarding with hormone, genes, sexual category, EQ, IQ etc. The social identity is formed through a way of behavior imposed by the laws, customs, rituals, traditions of any social groups. It also formulates through class, caste, religion, creed etc. And the third type of identity, multiple identity is a mixed up of hybrid life style. It is made up with an impact of how, where, in which circumstances an individual live life. The sociologists argue that the formation of identity is far more complex as issues surrounding things like social-class, gender, ethnicity age, nationality, status-social, political, religious, financial are all very influential factors, which formulate any type of identity. The play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* primarily focuses on individual and social identity of eunuchs in Indian context. Dattani takes the two sides of argument in the play. First, the apathy of nature – their inability to fulfill sex assigned roles and second, their misfortune to develop the bonds of human relationship. It is an irony of life that the hijras who are welcome on two occasions – one, at the time of marriage and two, at the time of childbirth – to sing and dance, are themselves deprived of marriage and childbirth. He has made the public to take note of the life and problems of the *hijras*. He is not only advocating their cause but also underlying the fact that what they need is not pity or sympathy but understanding and concern. Dattani sensitises the audience with the issue without being

didactic and the audience is made to think of the state of affairs of the *hijras*. The play portrays not the tragedy of the *hijras* alone but the tragedy of the whole political, legal and social system of India. It is attributed: “Mahesh’s plays often feature characters who are questioning their identity and who feel isolated in some way.” (Mortimer, Jeremy CP 4)

Eunuchs in India have practically no respectable public identity. They have no acceptance and no protection from prejudice and abuse. The discrimination against them is often resulted into violence. The main factor behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that eunuchs do not conform to the accepted gender divisions. Male and female are the only sexual categories which have secured society’s approval. Individuals, who do not fit into these two classes, have to bear social ostracism, isolation and contempt. Therefore the community of eunuch is marginalized and victimized Politically, legally and socially. The invisible clutches of social forces do not permit them to carve their own design beyond the patterns recommended and accepted by society. It’s an age-old custom in the country to have eunuchs to bless at the occasions of childbirths, weddings, housewarmings and other auspicious occasions. The eunuchs are believed to possess secret powers, and their blessings and curses are both considered as potent. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999), Mahesh Dattani, one of the leading Indian English Dramatist focuses on the plight and problems of eunuchs. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari observes that Dattani’s plays deal with “fringe issues” and with taboo subjects that are not generally heard and spoken in traditional Indian families. (47) Mahesh Dattani adopted different forms of drama as a medium to represent various shades of human experiences and taboo issues in the society. Dattani has added a new dimension to the theatre by taking up invisible issues in his plays. He has been heralded as a beacon of hope for modern Indian theatre in English. His attempt is to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order and have been dragged in darkness. The issues his plays deal with have rarely been discussed and recognized earlier. He deals with the themes like, gender identity, patriarchal domination in the family, communalism, homosexuality and issue of eunuchs.

Dattani explains the term eunuch in this play. One of the character, Uma explains it with the help of an Indian myth from *The Ramayana* : “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 in the forest to cross the river and go into exile. 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 10) Dattani underlines the fact that other than the social customs and bindings, the *eunuchs* have a ‘self’ that longs for dignity and when they are denied, they protest. However, most of the times their voice is suppressed by the established order that prevails in the society. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* was first

performed on the stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC Production & The Madras Players on 6th August 1999. The issue *Seven Steps Around the Fire* deals with unusual theme in the Indian context. As Jeremy Mortimer puts it, “For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. The murder victim Kamla, a beautiful hijra eunuch, had, it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young hijra burned to death, and hastily arranged for his son to marry an acceptable girl. But at the wedding – attended of course by the hijras who sing and dance at weddings and births – Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijra community.” (CP 3) Uma is an ideal to be followed by those women who wish to establish their individual identity in the male dominated society. She is a teacher from Bangalore University, who is wife of the Jail Superintendent, the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and daughter of a Vice-chancellor. She belongs to a reputed section of the society and she is writing her thesis on ‘class and gender related violence’(CP12). Instead of any conventional cases of domestic violence and dowry deaths, she is interested in a *hijra* (Kamala) murder case for which one of the *hijra* of her community, Anarkali, has been arrested. The police had no proof against Anarkali but as the police superintendant reports, there was no one to arrest, so they arrested Anarkali. He says, “There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of them.” (CP 33) There is no separate prisons for the *hijras* and she is put in the male cell. The play reveals the chain of injustices that a *hijra* has to encounter in the society that has inborn bias against them. Anarkali is physically, mentally, verbally and sexually abused in the lock up but nobody bothers about her. She herself is fed up with the false sympathies of the journalists who come to meet her to get a different type of news. She even refuses to meet Uma at first as she mistakes her as a journalist. At the refusal of meeting, Constable Munswami says, “ I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig.” (CP 08) It shows the inhuman treatment given to eunuchs in the prison. They are not considered as male or female and uttered out ‘it’ as they are animals or non-living things. Dattani attacks on the harsh reality of the double standard behavioral patterns of the very custodians of the society. But Uma wins Anarkali’s confidence and assures her of her release. It shows that inspite of negligence and disgust if someone provides solace to the marginalized sections, he/she gets love and co-operation in return. Uma is the spokesperson of the playwright to project an image of modern Indian woman who fights against the traditional useless values and raises questions on accepted norms of the society. She continues her research towards the cause of the plight of *eunuchs* and works tirelessly to provide solace to them. Gradually, Uma gets emotionally involved with the terrible reality of *eunuch* which pushes her research at the subordinate place on the contrary, eunuchs very well know temporary sympathy of the people like Uma from well to do Indian families who generally show their willingness to work for them but it out of selfish purpose / motives. Therefore, Anarkali refuses to cooperate and help Uma in concern with her research. Accordingly Uma thinks of leaving her research. She tells to her guide “I am wondering whether I could leave out the case study on the hijras... Well, it all seems a little too sordid and I find it more and more difficult to do thorough research...” (CP 28) This is the indication of the common approach of the society towards the eunuchs and vice versa. Then, Uma meets Champa, the head *hijra* and ponders over the nature of *hijra*

community and their isolation. Uma states that “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? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists? And why do they not take singing lessons?” (CP 16) These certain questions throw light on the existence of eunuchs. Dattani apply the fair approach to the victimized sections atleast bringing the issues on the stage. It seems that society doesn't bother of the plight of eunuchs also doesn't shoe any concern. Champa, is the only person who can bail Anarkali out because nobody else would care. She does not have enough money to get her released on bail. In such crucial situation, Uma finds a way demanding money from her father. At the outset she thinks for the amount to her husband but without firm grounds for money she prefers her father. Uma directly can't ask money for the real cause instead she borrows the amount fifty thousand rupees saying, “ It is to buy a present for Mr. Sharma's son's wedding.” (CP 19) She purposefully tells a lie to her father while borrowing money and gives it to Champa for Anarkali's release. It shows the mentality of not even offering helping hands in need of marginalized section of the society. Her visit to Champa's house reveals the remoteness of the *hijras* from the social stream. Dattani has exposed the multiple layers of realities that co-exist in the Indian society. The Existence of eunuchs is invisible to the society. Uma describes their place as, “The invisible minority. Behind Russel Market, everyone knew where to find them, although I couldn't see any hijara on the streets. They only come out in groups and make their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand clap.”(CP 21-22) Isolated and humiliated, they are considered as the lowest of the low, but they crave for love and family. Those who try to break free have to face dire consequences. They are tortured and even killed without any regret.

Thus, the characters in the play interact with various approaches to the *eunuch* community. They have their pre-established notions of hatred regarding the *eunuchs* and do not allow any progressive change. It is Uma alone who empathises with them and fights for their justice. Suresh, Uma's husband regards them all as 'castrated degenerated men.' (CP 10) He believes that they never speak the truth. Munuswami, Salim and Mr. Sharma have similar thoughts too. What makes the tragedy of the *eunuchs* more intense is that they are used to this hatred expressed towards them and have accepted and compromised with the plight of their lot. Their interaction with the general society does not lead to any kind of happiness. Instead scars, sorrows and pangs of their innermost desires.

Identities of Eunuchs :

1. Eunuchs are referred as 'it' occupies a gendered space that is neither male nor female.
2. Eunuchs are often referred as liars, horse, pig, criminals, abnormal and castrated males.
3. They are deprived of the rights to live with dignity, right to get married and having children.
4. Eunuchs are forced to live isolated and tortured life lacking financial sources to life self esteem.

5. Eunuchs have specific patterns of behavior. They are identified with their language, clapping, dancing and singing etc.
6. Eunuchs assume that they have special power of blessing and cursing the society.

Redefining Identities of Eunuchs :

1. Eunuchs are now recognized as the third gender or transgender category in the society and recently entered 'T' in any official documentation.
2. They have all the rights of living life with self esteem and respectful life in the society.
3. They have the fundamental rights of life, expression and active participation in politics.
4. They have established their own associations fighting for the good cause and empowerment.
5. They need enough power to decide their fortune.
6. They need to get suitable occupations to maintain a standard of living.

Conclusion :

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* redefines the identity of the *hijras*. It elaborates on identity, their constitution, connotations, their social acceptability and tolerability. They are the 'invisibles' in the society, the lowest of the low on the ladder of social hierarchy. They face a double hatred as they are the victims of the nature and the society. The bias against them is even worse than the class or caste or religious bias. They are not even recognized as the members of the society. There is an aura of disgust and dislike related to them. Their fears and frustrations are underlined in the play. They are human beings with no voice, no sympathies, no love, no consolations, no justice and probably no hope of acceptability in the society.

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