
Queer'ing of Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

Hirva Ashok Popat¹Research Scholar, Sardar Patel University Department of English, Vallabh Vidyanagar,
Anand, Gujarat

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Assistant Professor, Faculty of Engineering and Technology GLS University, Ahmedabad,
Gujarat

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Abstract: This research paper tries to scrutinise the hypocritical mindset of society. It questions the heteronormative societal structure that dominates and leads to gender bias by providing space only for two “so – called” ideal genders. The mainstream and the stereotypical society consciously objectifies transgenders and subjects them to social, cultural, and physical exploitation without moral consideration. Why do humans need society to decide whether they can be accepted? The researcher, through one of Mahesh Dattani's famous plays, unveils the burning social issue and manifests how the level of hypocrisy masks the destruction of humanity. This research is an attempt to deconstruct the de facto grand narrative that marginalises transgender.

Keywords: hypocritical mindset; heteronormative; gender bias; transgender; deconstruct; grand narrative; marginalise

Introduction: Transgenders belong to one of the marginalised classes of the society. From being ‘blessed’ by Lord Rama to facing exploitation in the society, hijras have started becoming a prey of ‘heteronormativity’¹. Assigned sex of the transgender is considered more real than the gender they want themselves to be identified as. Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* mentions that “sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate ‘constructivism’ with ‘the freedom of a subject to form her/his sexuality as s/he pleases’” (Butler 94). According to Butler, society tries to associate certain generalised qualities to people on the basis of their sex which categories sex as socially constructed. Hijras have always become a subject of accusation, suppression, and are considered de facto criminals. The constant objectification and victimisation of hijras in the mainstream society seems to increase insensitivity towards them among people.

¹ Heteronormativity is a belief that considers heterosexuality as the default and the only natural sexual orientation.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most prominent playwrights in Indian English literature. He is the first Indian playwright to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award, and is famous for his characterisation, language, and usage of themes, with great focus on human relationships. His plays break the demarcation between rich and poor, and majorly between upper and marginalised classes by his way of including LGBT community. Dattani's one of the most impactful plays is *Seven Steps Around the Fire* which focuses on the social status and sufferings of the transgender. The play shows how powerful classes of society try to modify the identity of the hijras. Therefore, I would argue that the mainstream society consciously objectifies the transgender and subjects them to social, cultural, and physical exploitation on them without moral consideration. The researcher believes that the social exploitation becomes a form of objectification for the transgender; cultural exploitation increases the physical exploitation of the transgender; and those who objectify the transgender escape any moral responsibility for it.

Social exploitation as a form of objectification for the transgender:

Vilification of the transgender in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*: Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the fire* appears to vilify the transgender in general. In society, hijras belongs to the marginalized class. The play objectifies the "third gender" by merely portraying them as an object of accusation, suppression, and hatred. They are treated like animals in the play and are shown as "castrated degenerate men" (Dattani 10)² who fight like dogs and kill each other. In the play, Anarkali one of the hijras has been accused and arrested for killing another hijra named Kamla without any proof. Here, the quote shows how hijras are objectified in the play by the characters representing the center who consider hijras as devoid of any human relationship.

UMA. Yes. Why did you arrest her?

SURESH (*off*). Didn't you go through the file? (*Sound of gargling.*)

UMA. Yes, I know she is arrested for the murder of her sister, but . . .

Collected Plays. All other quotes from this play will be abbreviated as *CP*.

Suresh chokes with laughter as he is gargling, and coughs.

SURESH. (*off*). What's that you said? Sister? (*Re-enters.*) There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day, that Anarkali and . . . (*CP 10*)

This negatively showcases the transgender by presenting them as "things" instead

² This quote is taken from Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, published in the book named

of humans. The play also shows that “hijras” are even marginalized in crimes which can be clearly seen from the following conversation.

UMA. Didn't the hijras report Kamla missing to the police?

MUNSWAMY. Hah! As if they care! After we found out the body was a man's without . . . that the body was a hijra's, we called them. Then they came. They were more interested in the jewellery.

UMA. Jewellery?

MUNSWAMY. So much jewellery she was wearing when she died! Even a bride does not wear so much. That too gold. All stolen, I am sure. How will hijras get so much gold if they can only beg for a few rupees? (*CP* 17)

With the character of constable Munswamy, Mahesh Dattani tries to reflect on what society thinks of the transgender and how it creates their negative image in the society by showing that they can kill anyone for money. Thus, the play socially objectifies the transgender by vilifying them as de facto criminals in the society.

Discursive practices followed in the treatment towards transgender: The play examines the transgender through the lens of ‘discursive practices’ that condemn objectification. The gender determined at birth is considered more real and natural, compared to the gender they try to identify themselves as. And it becomes the major issue. This assigned gender of the transgender is biologically determined which can be termed as ‘discursive’ according to the views of Judith Butler where she believes that sex of the person is also socially constructed. Societal notions regarding gender roles consider male and female as the only two natural identities. Warner's idea ‘heteronormativity’ can be applied to understand the exploitation of hijras. “Heteronormativity is an effort to theorize how power relations shape and normalize only certain types of sexualities...” (Iantaffi and Bockting 355). This discursive practice of the society where power lies only with certain class of people and tries to shape and rule others can be known through the theory of ‘heteronormativity’. Taking the theory into consideration, it is visible how both male and female, the two powerful, natural, and real genders of the society try to shape the identity of the hijras. Similarly, the play written by Mahesh Dattani reflects the society, where he articulated the identity of hijra which has been constantly suppressed by not considering them as the part of the society. Here we can observe how hijras have no access to civil rights. They are despised as liars. The silence of the transgender is quite phenomenal in the play that it also expressed their social exploitation.

Privileged genders reinforce the binary opposition in gender roles present in the society by creating threat to the marginal ones. If such discrepancy consistently goes on, it will become impossible with time to consider it as ‘unreal.’ Thus, the objectification of someone who is neither male nor female is thrown into relief in the play.

Depiction of transgender's inability to resist exploitation: The play highlights the inability

of the transgender to resist their exploitation. The word transgender has its roots in Greek which means 'keeper of the bed'. Also known as eunuch, transgender was traditionally considered to be castrated men who were employed to serve women in their quarters, and were recognized them with the term 'bed keeper.' Since ages transgender/ hijras are looked upon as unworthy objects living in the society being marginalized. They face identity crises since their childhood, fighting against societal suppression and own psyche. Living in the society by accepting one's own original identity is in itself a great challenge. The play shows how transgender's experience of the relationships is affected by heteronormativity. The idea of heteronormativity makes it clear how the identity of the transgender is shaped by the powerful classes of the society. Hijras have got accustomed with the inhumane treatment given by the society, which becomes a tragic plight. In the play through the character of a eunuch Anarkali one can notice that hijras neither change the dominant ideas prevalent in the society, nor want to. The following conversation between Uma and Anarkali shows hijras' acceptance of the societal treatment towards them.

ANARKALI. But you are not a hijra, no?

UMA. No.

ANARKALI. So you will not be my sister.

Pause.

UMA. Of course we can be sisters!

ANARKALI. Where are you and where am I? (CP 13)

Here Anarkali is seen as accepting the strong societal belief regarding hijras being unworthy of having human relationships. It only depicts incapability to resist against the suppression.

Cultural exploitation increases the physical exploitation of the transgender:

Evolution of the transgender identity through 'cultural history': The play traces the evolution of the transgender identity through 'cultural history.'

Cultural history allows one to look back and realise that something that we take for granted is very prominent, and something that we consider as constant is bound to be dynamic. Traditional society, as we know, considers male and female as the only two ideal genders. Transgender have always been marginalised as worthless in society. But when one talks about the cultural history of the transgender, it brings to life a past time and space. It shows how treatment towards the transgender has evolved. Uma, one of the main characters in the play, is working on the hijra community and is writing a thesis on it. Amidst of all the accusation made on Anarkali and her investigation regarding it, she talks about the myth related to the origin of hijras. She mentions that the word 'hijra' is originated from Urdu, with the combination of Hindi, Persian, and Arabic which literally means 'neither male nor

female'(CP 10). Another legend, she says traces this back to one of the greatest epics, Ramayana. According to the legend when Lord Rama was going on an exile in the forest, people followed him. To this he said, 'Men and women, turn back.' Some of the male followers didn't know what to do and sacrificed their masculinity to become neither male nor female as they could never disobey him and thus followed him. Lord Rama blessed them and said, that hijras will be worshiped all over the world.

"Hijras played a famous role in the royal courts of the Islamic world, particularly in the Ottoman empires and the Mughal rule in the Medieval India. They rose to well-known positions as political advisors, administrators, generals as well as guardians of the harems. Hijras were consider clever, trustworthy and fiercely loyal and had free access to all spaces and sections of population, thereby playing a crucial role in the politics of empire building in the Mughal era" (Michelraj 18).

Hijras had great political hold in the time of Mughal era because of their loyalty and cleverness. Therefore, they used to enjoy positioning in political advisory, administration and guardianship of the harems. A great distinction can be seen after British colonialism in India. Compared to earlier times, hijras were made devoid of benefits related to land provision, food and money coming from agricultural sectors by British and they denied giving land ownership to those having no blood relations. The mentioned quote focuses on the drastic change seen in the treatment of hijras in the contemporary world.

"Through the onset of colonial rule from the 18th century onwards, the situation changed drastically. Accounts of early European travellers showed that they were repulsed by the sight of Hijras and could not comprehend why they were given so much respect in the royal courts and other institutions. In the second half of the 19th century, the British colonial administration vigorously sought to criminalize the hijra community and to deny them the civil rights. Hijras were considered to be separate caste or tribe in different parts of India by the colonial administration. The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, this included all hijra who were concerned in kidnapping and castrating children and dressed like women to dance in public places. The punishment for such activities was up to two years imprisonment and a fine or both. This pre-partition history influences the vulnerable circumstances of hijra in this contemporary world" (Michelraj 18).

It shows how during the time of colonial rule, hijras were criminalised and the same continued even in the post-independence period due to the old aged laws that continued until recent time. It caused a great loss to the lives of Hijra community as they were treated as criminals and outsider in the mainstream society. The play reflects how in present times hijras are considered worthless and are looked upon merely as an object. The writer shows how characters treat hijras according to their benefits. Uma is the one studying on the identity of hijras. But from the following quote it seems that her intention behind this study was totally conditioned.

UMA (*thought*). 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?

(*Pause.*) Is it true? 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 at their weddings? Or was that their explanation for not being able to have children of their own? Or . . . a reason to give to people for wanting to adopt me? (CP 17)

Here Uma thinks about the reality related to her adoption and remembers how her mother relates her bareness to the hijras' curse on her. She is in a dilemma whether hijras really gave curse to her mother or her mother used them just to cover their inability of not giving birth to a child. The answer of her mother increases her confusion regarding the origin of the transgender and the treatment towards them. In the play Mr. Sharma depicts the society's mentality about the transgender. Mr. Sharma vehemently objected to his son's relationship with a transgender and had Kamla (the hijra) killed. And he being a minister and belonging to one of the socially constructed natural identities is never questioned or accused. Anarkali another hijra is blamed for the death of Kamla and is put behind the bars. But at the time of his son's marriage, Mr. Sharma accepted to give 'baksheesh' to hijras, thus to avoid them from giving curse. With this the play shows how there is evolution in the identity of hijras and yet how they are constantly exploited by people.

Cultural stereotypes that promote the exploitation of the transgender: The play critiques the cultural stereotypes that promote the exploitation of the transgender. Every individual grows with one's own cultural identity. Every culture has its own way of treating individuals, especially those belonging to most vulnerable class. And these stereotypes hold a prominent place in the treatment towards others. Cultural stereotype is a generalised thinking about a particular group of people that is present in the society. And these affect one's behaviour. Here in the play we can observe that every character's way of behaving with the transgender is different. Munswamy who comparatively belongs to a lower class than other upper-class people such as Mr. Sharma, Suresh, and Uma. He is shown as the one with lesser knowledge about the way of behaving with individuals and he calls Anarkali a pig. He believes that such people are not worthy to be the part of the society. On the other hand, Uma who belongs to the upper class of the society desires to find the truth and frees Anarkali, a eunuch from false accusation. She is the one who talks about the origin of the transgender identity and believes in giving justice to every human being. But from this one gets to know that the culture from which Uma belongs affected her behaviour. Since her childhood, her mother kept on saying that because of the curse given by hijras, she couldn't give birth to a child.

And because of that Uma's parents adopted her. When she chose to write thesis on hijras, she came across the myth of Lord Rama's blessing on hijras. From it she could relate with what her mother said, and thus her treatment towards hijras got affected. Whereas in case of Munswamy and Mr. Sharma, one can notice that they got along with the generalised beliefs of the society towards hijras and could never consider them as humans. They could never accept hijras having any relationship with others. Thus, Dattani seems to suggest that it's the culture of an individual that throws impacts on one's way of treating humans.

Rejection of transgender's treatment only from a bodily perspective: The play rejects treating the transgender only from a bodily perspective. To show itself as pure, society considers some people as criminals as well as deviant. To be a heterosexual is considered as a standard in society because of which the transgender people are looked upon as uncivilised. Hijras have always been considered objects and are denied the basic human rights such as dignity, right to live, right to livelihood, and freedom of expression. And the distance between hijras and other socially constructed natural identities started becoming worse from the moment society started generalising people on the basis of physical appearance. Transgender identity differs from one's assigned sex that is biologically constructed. Discursive practise of gender identification in accordance with the assigned sex that associates roles to people on the basis of their sex that turns into societal norms. The play is the reflection of the societal behaviour and its unacceptable way of generalising something that is different as objects. It even questions how the society that believes God as the creator and also the one who gave blessing to hijras, started considering them (hijras) as unworthy. Hijras are always misunderstood because of their acceptance to reality and by going diverse from societal norms. The play shows how they are merely looked upon as "things" because they chose to assign certain sex to themselves independently. Kamla a eunuch is killed because she marries Subbu, the son of minister who loved her. Transgender are de facto considered as the dirt of society and are treated mercilessly. Routinely treated unfairly, the hijras themselves accept such mindset of the society and categorise them accordingly. From the following quote, one can notice that transgender themselves feel that they are judged only from the bodily perspective and consider their body as a thing which can be harmed to get rid of societal exploitation.

UMA. Anarkali! (*Pause.*) If you loved your sister Kamla, why did you scar her face with a butcher's knife?

Pause.

ANARKALI. I would do it to you also. If it will save your life.

UMA. What do you mean?

Pause.

ANARKALI. She was beautiful. Very beautiful.

Footsteps.

That is why Salim's wife put fire to her beautiful skin and burned her to the other world. (CP 15)

It shows the mentality of society that is not to treat transgender as humans and to control them by physical exploitation. Even Anarkali here feels that Subbu got attracted towards Kamla just because of her beauty. And the only solution to save Kamla from exploitation was to destroy her face with which Subbu will not marry her and thus people from the upper class will set her free. With this Anarkali felt that a man falling in love with a hijra is not possible because the society has shaped their identity in such a way where they are not considered as humans and suitable for marriage. But at the end of the play, humanity wins. Some respect transgender remembering the myth where Lord Rama blessed them. There are people like Mr. Sharma who for his own benefits, gives baksheesh to hijras so that they give good blessing to the newly wedded couple. But on the other hand, he killed a hijra for his selfish motives. For such people hijras are unworthy of human relationships and just exploit them. The play thus rejects the exploitation of the transgender by using characters as the face of the society and making them aware of their inhumane nature.

Those who objectify the transgender escape any moral responsibility for it:

Systematic abuse of the transgender in the society: The play highlights the society's immorality in subjecting the transgender to systematic abuse. Moral responsibility of the society is to discern good from evil and not to entertain injustice towards individuals. It is the moral responsibility of the society to build itself in a way where individuals should not feel humiliated and are treated with equality. But somewhere it lacks in treating transgender equally. For the society transgender are not normal. Hijras face rejection from the moment they accept their sexuality and gender. They lose their relations and face the callous behaviour of others. The play here is the reflection of the society where hijras are not considered as its members. They are always subjected to mockery, abuse, suppression etc... Social rejection of transgender makes them to suffer various psychological and physical problems. They are considered as the temporary members of the society. Such constant humiliating treatment has made them calm because they know that it is impossible to raise their voice for it. The play includes characters from different strata of the society including hijras. At every level hijras strive to run away from a difficult situation rather than asking for justice in spite of being innocent. They have accepted the societal injustice and hardly trust anyone. When Uma goes to meet Anarkali, she hardly accepts that there are people who want to know the truth and want to save her. The following quote is of Uma and Anarkali's conversation, where Anarkali becomes a reflection of the hijras who believe that they have no identity of their own in the society, and their existence matters nothing to the world.

ANARKALI. Then what will you do knowing who killed Kamla? UMA. Tell my husband to make an arrest.

ANARKALI. One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband. (CP

35)

Portraying transgender Mahesh Dattani wants his readers to know about the consciousness of hijras. Here Uma who belongs to the upper class is not allowed to meet Anarkali. She wants to know the reality behind Kamla's death because she knows that transgender will never get justice in the society and will always remain unheard. Here the impact of society's immoral behaviour is seen from Anarkali's statement where she indirectly claims the society of being insensitive towards their existence. The next conversation clearly reflects the condition of hijras and their constant quest for identity which they never get.

CHAMPA. Oh. So you are a social worker. Say that.

UMA. Yes . . . I am a social worker.

CHAMPA. Please excuse me, madam. I did not know that . . . You see us also as society, no? (*CP 23*)

The above conversation shows society's action that reflects the objectification of hijras and its immoral behaviour towards them.

Denouncement of gender differences in the Mainstream Society's General Moral Practices: The play denounces gender differences in morality. Human beings are the part of the society and should be treated with equality indifference of caste, class, and gender. Hijras are the part of the society and must be treated as humans. Morality should be free from gender discrimination. The below mentioned quote is about the judgement made by the Supreme Court regarding the rights and freedom of the transgender.

In the path breaking judgement of National Legal Services Authority versus Union of India, 2014, the Supreme Court has affirmed the constitutional rights and freedom of transgender persons including those who identify in a gender opposite to their biological sex i.e. persons assigned female sex at birth, identifying as male and vice-versa. By recognizing diverse gender identities, the court has broken the binary gender construct of 'man' and 'woman' that has pervaded Indian Law. The Supreme Court firmly secured the right to equality and equal protection of transgenders by prohibiting discrimination on the ground of gender identity. Significantly the court also declared that no one can be discriminated on the ground of sexual orientation (Phogat and Neha 57).

It shows how only by 2014, under a path breaking judgement Supreme Court of India had to say against any sort of discrimination based on biological sex in the reference to transgender. Mahesh Dattani has tried to put them at the centre and questioned the marginalised thinking of the society. Morality and ethics walk hand in hand when society is talked about. The play openly condemns the gendered biasness of the society. It shows how there are no equal rights for hijras. Society tries to generalise hijras under the category of

man and woman despite of them having their own identity. Uma is shocked to see how Anarkali is sent to the male section of the jail and is beaten mercilessly by Munswamy. Play depicts the real society where everything works according to discursive norms. Munswamy tries to explain Uma that it is vain to study the case of hijra. To get an interesting story, she should go for the case of a man who cut his wife's nose. The play by rejecting discrimination towards transgender By showing how society is always in search for an interesting story rather than focusing on truth and humanity, the play rejects discrimination towards transgender.

Warning against evading moral responsibility in gender bias against the transgender:

The play warns the audience against evading moral responsibility in gender bias against the transgender. Transgender belong to one of the most vulnerable populations of the society. Every individual has the right to attain justice. *A Theory of Justice* published in 1971 is a famous work written by an American philosopher John Rawls where firstly, he talks about the right of an individual to have the liberty like others. Secondly, he talks about the social and economic positions which should be equally open for all and avail an advantage to all. According to him everyone lives under the "veil of ignorance" and thus every player of the society should be placed in an "original position." Players only have general knowledge about "life and society" and thus, being at this position they should make "rationally prudent choice" to deal with the kind of society they want themselves to be in (Cavalier). It gives importance to the development of the moral point of view on an individual. The play here works with the same idea of warning the audience against gender biasness towards the transgender. Mahesh Dattani has given the central position to hijras by talking about them. The play is the reflection of the modern society. The characters such as Mr. Sharma and Munswamy represents the individuals of the society who are inhumane. At last truth triumphs and urges the audience to make prudent choice in the treatment towards hijras. One should be moral in their way of behaving and should treat others the way they expect themselves to be treated. Here Uma makes a prudent choice of treating the transgender with equality. Thus the play asks the audience to develop their moral point of view in their treatment towards others, especially towards the vulnerable class of the society like hijras because everyone has the right to acceptance.

Conclusion: Through *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Mahesh Dattani unveils the striking social issue present in society. It is related with the social, cultural, and physical exploitation of transgender; and the society exploits them by escaping from the moral responsibility towards them. Dattani tries to focus on the double standard of people present in the society who look down upon hijras with disrespect considering them unworthy of their existence in the society. On the other hand, they respect them just to escape from their curse as per mythology, forcing them to accept their socially constructed identity. There is a focus on the need to bring change in the inhumane attitude of people by accepting certain moral responsibilities towards the transgender. It becomes necessary for the society to have self-inquire whether transgender have their own individual identity or is it the society itself that destroys it. The research paper reflects upon as what can be done to bring change in the

societal behaviour. Such change can be possible either by producing more literary works like this play, that can create sensibility among heterosexuals or by reinterpreting or deconstructing myths on hijras.

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