
Exploring Karuna Rasa in Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

Deepika¹, Dr. Kavita²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak.

² Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak.

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Abstract

This paper analyses Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* through the aesthetic framework of *Karuna Rasa* as articulated in Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra*. While existing criticism primarily emphasises Dattani's social concerns, this study foregrounds the emotional architecture of the play and its sustained evocation of compassion and grief. Focusing on key episodes such as Kamla's murder, Anarkali's wrongful imprisonment, and Subbu's suicide, the paper examines how *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas*, and *vyābhicāribhāvas* operate collectively to generate *Karuna Rasa*. The analysis also considers Uma Rao's emotional transformation as a mediating consciousness that guides audience empathy, while exposing the structural limits imposed by patriarchy and institutional power. By integrating classical Indian aesthetic theory with contemporary socio-political realities, the paper argues that Dattani's play demonstrates the continued relevance of rasa theory in interpreting modern Indian drama and its ethical engagement with marginalised identities.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani; Seven Steps Around the Fire; Karuna Rasa; Rasa Theory; Hijra Community; Contemporary Indian Drama

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani occupies a significant position in contemporary Indian theatre for his sustained engagement with socially marginalised identities and contested cultural spaces. His plays interrogate issues such as gender nonconformity, sexuality, domestic violence, and institutional injustice, while simultaneously probing the emotional and psychological lives of his characters. A productive framework for examining the affective depth of Dattani's drama is rasa theory, a foundational principle of Indian aesthetics articulated in Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra*. Rasa, meaning aesthetic "flavour" or "essence," refers to the emotional response evoked in the spectator through a carefully orchestrated interaction of dramatic elements.

This paper examines *Seven Steps Around the Fire* through the lens of *Karuna Rasa* (the sentiment of compassion or pathos). The play foregrounds the lived realities of the hijra community, exposing the violence, silencing, and systemic discrimination they endure. By analysing pivotal moments such as Kamla's murder, Anarkali's imprisonment, and Subbu's suicide, this paper demonstrates how Dattani employs *Karuna Rasa* to elicit empathy and moral reflection. The play exemplifies how classical aesthetic theory can be meaningfully applied to contemporary drama to illuminate emotional and ethical dimensions of social critique.

Critical responses to Mahesh Dattani's drama have largely emphasised his thematic engagement with social issues, narrative strategies, and representations of marginality. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the emotional architecture of his plays through the framework of rasa theory. Applying rasa aesthetics allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Dattani mobilises affect to generate audience engagement and ethical awareness. This paper aims to address this gap by situating *Seven Steps Around the Fire* within the aesthetic paradigm of *Karuna Rasa*.

Karuna Rasa: Theoretical Framework

In the *Natyasastra*, Bharata Muni identifies eight primary rasa: *Śringāra* (love), *Hāsyā* (laughter), *Karuṇā* (compassion), *Raudra* (anger), *Vīra* (heroism), *Bhayānaka* (fear), *Bībhatsa* (disgust), and *Adbhuta* (wonder). Rasa is generated through the interaction of *sthāyibhāva* (dominant emotion), *vibhāvas* (determinants), *anubhāvas* (consequents), and *vyabhicāribhāvas* (transitory emotions), as articulated in the well-known rasa-sūtra: *vibhāvanubhāva-vyabhicārisaṃyogād rasa-nispattiḥ*. (Bharata Muni ch. 6).

Karuna Rasa arises from the *sthāyibhāva* of *śoka* (grief). Its determinants include calamity, separation, loss, and suffering, while its consequents manifest through tears, lamentation, pallor, and physical debility. Transitory emotions such as despair (*viṣāda*), anxiety (*cintā*), and exhaustion (*glāni*) further reinforce this rasa. Dattani draws upon these components to construct a layered and sustained evocation of *Karuṇā Rasa*, enabling the audience to experience both individual sorrow and collective grief.

Seven Steps Around the Fire: Evoking Karuna Rasa

The play unfolds through the perspective of Uma Rao, a sociology lecturer who investigates the murder of Kamla, a hijra burned alive for marrying Subbu, the son of a powerful minister. This act of violence becomes emblematic of the systemic oppression faced by the hijra community. Characters such as Anarkali, who is falsely imprisoned, and Champa, the community leader, articulate the shared anguish of a group denied justice and recognition. Anarkali's statement, "If I tell the truth, they will kill me. If I don't, I will die in jail", encapsulates the institutional entrapment and fear that define hijra existence (Dattani). Jeremy Mortimer's observation that Dattani's characters frequently grapple with isolation and identity is particularly relevant here, as *Karuna Rasa* emerges from this persistent condition of abandonment.

Kamla's murder functions as the central *vibhāva* of *Karuṇa Rasa*. Her death is not merely a personal tragedy but a symbol of the erasure of hijra identities within patriarchal and political power structures. The refusal of the police and political elite to pursue justice underscores the normalisation of violence against marginalised bodies. As Amar Nath Prasad observes, the play captures the hijras' "heartfelt longing for being treated as social beings" in an indifferent society (161). The haunting absence of Kamla, as noted by Asha Kuthari Chaudhari, permeates the entire play, intensifying its emotional impact (65).

Anarkali's wrongful imprisonment further amplifies *Karuṇa Rasa*. Subjected to abuse and coercion, she becomes a victim of institutional prejudice that criminalises hijras by default. The police's refusal to investigate Kamla's murder properly reflects a systemic failure of justice. Uma's interactions with Anarkali serve as conduits for the audience's emotional engagement, foregrounding the hijras' struggle for dignity and recognition.

Dattani also exposes how language operates as a mechanism of marginalisation. Hijras are repeatedly referred to using derogatory terms and dehumanising pronouns, reducing them to objects rather than persons. Suresh's insistence on calling Anarkali an "it" exemplifies this linguistic violence. Such discourse reinforces social exclusion and legitimises institutional neglect. Through these exchanges, *Karuṇa Rasa* is evoked not only through physical suffering but through symbolic and psychological erasure.

The play reaches its emotional climax with Subbu's suicide. Unable to reconcile his love for Kamla with his father's coercive authority and societal expectations, Subbu takes his own life. His death represents the destructive consequences of enforced heteronormativity and patriarchal control. As Komil Tyagi notes, the process of "straightening" results in the loss of two lives (174). This moment immerses the audience in profound grief, transforming passive spectatorship into ethical confrontation.

Uma's emotional transformation mirrors the audience's journey toward empathy. While she uncovers the truth, she remains constrained by patriarchal structures that limit her agency. As a gendered subaltern, Uma's silence at the end of the play reinforces the persistence of injustice. The unresolved conclusion sustains *Karuṇa Rasa*, ensuring that the audience carries the emotional weight of the hijras' suffering beyond the performance.

Conclusion

Seven Steps Around the Fire demonstrates the continued relevance of rasa theory in analysing contemporary drama. Through its sustained evocation of *Karuṇa Rasa*, the play exposes systemic violence, institutional apathy, and social prejudice while fostering empathy and moral reflection. Dattani's integration of classical aesthetics with modern social realities underscores the power of theatre as both an emotional and political medium, advocating compassion, inclusivity, and reform.

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