



Exploring Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

Dr. Ashok Dayal

Assistant Professor, English
Government Girls Degree College, Dhindhui, Patti, Pratapgarh

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ABSTRACT:

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a profound exploration of the marginalization and oppression faced by India's hijra (transgender) community. This article examines how Dattani uses the play to shed light on the intersecting social hierarchies of gender, caste, and class that marginalize non-normative identities. Through character analysis and the critique of societal institutions, this article argues that Dattani's play provides a significant commentary on the exclusion of the hijra community while offering a larger critique of societal norms.

KEYWORDS: Marginalization, Hijra, Gender, Mahesh Dattani, Intersectionality, Power, Caste

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of India's most prominent playwrights, known for tackling socially taboo subjects in his work. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998) brings attention to the plight of the hijra community—an often ignored and marginalized group in Indian society. The play is centered on a murder investigation that reveals the deep-seated prejudices and systemic injustices that hijras face in a society governed by strict gender, caste, and class hierarchies. Through this lens, the play examines how societal structures silence and oppress marginalized groups.

This article focuses on the depiction of marginalization in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, analyzing how Dattani uses the characters and the narrative to critique the social exclusion of the hijra community, the intersectionality of caste and gender, and the role of societal institutions in perpetuating such marginalization.

The play revolves around Uma Rao, a sociology professor and the wife of the Superintendent of Police, who becomes involved in the investigation of Kamla's murder. Kamla, a hijra, had a clandestine relationship with Subbu, the son of a powerful politician. Her murder is revealed to be a

deliberate act to protect Subbu's family from social disgrace. As Uma investigates, she uncovers not only the truth about Kamla's death but also the everyday violence and discrimination that hijras experience.

Through this murder mystery, Dattani creates a narrative that critiques the power dynamics in Indian society, especially how the political elite use violence and manipulation to maintain social order and control over marginalized communities. The hijra community, comprising transgender individuals, has historically been treated with a mixture of reverence and discrimination in India. While they are invited to offer blessings at auspicious events like weddings and childbirth, their everyday existence is marked by alienation and economic hardship. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani explores these dual realities, using Kamla and Anarkali (another hijra character) to represent the marginalized voices within Indian society.

Kamla, despite being at the center of the plot, is absent physically from the stage, as her murder occurs before the events of the play. Her absence symbolizes the social invisibility of hijras, who are often excluded from mainstream narratives. Anarkali, who is alive but marginalized and oppressed by the legal and social systems, highlights the daily struggles of hijras. The play shows how their gender identity not only leads to societal rejection but also legal discrimination, rendering them vulnerable to abuse by law enforcement and other state institutions.

The play presents the marginalization of the hijra community as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the intersections of gender, caste, and class. Kamla's romantic relationship with Subbu, a man from a high-caste family, challenges the societal norms of both caste and gender. Subbu's family, unwilling to accept a hijra as a part of their family, resorts to violence to maintain their social status and uphold caste purity. The murder of Kamla is not just a gendered act of violence; it also reflects the caste-based anxieties of the Indian elite.



Dattani's depiction of these intersecting identities—hijra identity compounded by caste and class—underscores the complexity of social exclusion. The play highlights how the hijras, already marginalized because of their gender identity, are further oppressed by the caste system and their lack of economic opportunities. They are trapped in a cycle of exclusion, often resorting to begging or sex work for survival, which further stigmatizes them in society.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani critiques the role of societal institutions—especially the police, the judiciary, and the family—in reinforcing the marginalization of hijras. The police, rather than investigating Kamla's murder with integrity, are portrayed as complicit in protecting the powerful and oppressing the marginalized. The arrest of Anarkali, who is tortured in custody, reveals the extent of police brutality against the hijra community. This depiction points to the institutionalized discrimination that hijras face, where the law is used not to protect them but to maintain their subjugation.

The family, too, is depicted as a site of oppression. Subbu's father, a politician, exerts his authority to erase Kamla from his son's life, forcing Subbu into a heterosexual marriage. The family, as an institution, upholds the heteronormative and caste-based norms of society, often at the expense of individual desires and identities. By emphasizing the violence exerted by the family, Dattani critiques the traditional Indian family structure as a key player in enforcing societal conformity.

Dattani uses a variety of theatrical techniques to amplify the voices of the marginalized in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Kamla, despite being the central character, never appears on stage, symbolizing the invisibility of hijras in mainstream society. Her story is told through others, especially Uma, who acts as an intermediary between the privileged and the marginalized. By placing Kamla's story at the heart of the narrative while keeping her physically absent, Dattani forces the audience to reflect on how marginalized communities are often silenced and erased.

Uma, as a privileged upper-class woman, serves as a bridge between the hijra community and mainstream society. Her determination to uncover the truth about Kamla's murder represents the potential for allyship. However, her privileged position also limits her ability to enact real change, as she operates within the same structures that oppress the hijras. This tension between privilege and marginalization is a key aspect of the play's social critique.

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* provides a powerful commentary on the

marginalization of the hijra community in India, highlighting the systemic discrimination they face due to their gender identity, caste, and class. The play critiques the role of societal institutions in maintaining this marginalization, pointing to the complicity of the police, the judiciary, and the family in enforcing societal norms that exclude and oppress non-conforming identities. Through its nuanced exploration of intersectionality and the use of theatrical techniques that emphasize the silenced voices of the hijra community, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* challenges the audience to reflect on the structures of power that govern Indian society. By bringing the marginalized voices to the center of the narrative, Dattani calls for greater recognition of their humanity and for social change that addresses the deep-rooted inequalities in Indian society.

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