

THE MARGINALIZED:

A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS



*Rajasi Ray,
Assistant Professor
Department of English,
Narula Institute of Technology,
Kolkata, India.*

Abstract

In recent years, the country has produced some very talented playwrights, who have chosen English as their medium of writing and Mahesh Dattani is one among them, who has emerged as a “fresh arrival” in the domain of Indian English Drama, by acting as a spokesperson of all sexually subaltern people, thus giving them an identity in the milieu of Indian Drama in English. Dattani’s plays have transformed the face of Indian urbane theatre by speaking of “invisible issues” and challenges in postcolonial Indian society. The present paper aims at studying a few notable plays “Seven Steps Round the Fire” and “Dance like a Man” in the light of the marginalized in our society which in turn unravels the hypocrisy of the heterosexual society.

“Seven Steps Round the Fire” dwells round the theme of eunuchs, their identity and their connotation. Dance like a Man is another classic example of how institutionalized heterosexuality works. Jairaj’s father feels that his son is ‘unnatural’ because he does not perform bodily acts prescribed to the males. Jairaj must perform a gender to survive in a heteronormative society.

Dattani, thus, in a generalized sense speaks about the marginalized of our society in terms of gender and sex, who are forced to maintain silence against oppression and injustice in a society that promises more in the name of democracy and liberty.

Key words: Marginalized, heteronormative, gender performativity, postcolonial.



Literature other than British and American, require a categorization in the current socio-political context and the term “Post-Colonial” is required in order to homogenize commonwealth literature. The epithet “postcolonial Writing”, is a title coined by Spivak and interpreted by, Said in order to demark the host of literary output that emerged after the end of the colonial rule in many parts of the world. Postcolonial literature is built in large part around the concept of **otherness**. The concept of otherness, in postcolonial socio-political scenario created spaces to identify the invisible identities of the marginalized sections of society. The thinkers and creative writers were inspired to articulate the voice of those whose identity remain unacknowledged under the hegemonic and authoritative voice of the elitists for their superiority of caste, gender, race, religion, economic status or any other paradigm of the manifestation of power. Social and cultural marginalities are basically informal revolving around social prejudices, discriminations, hostilities and at times declining the participation in social institutions while sexual marginality has a legal back up. As the section 377 of the Indian Penal Code sets the law which says:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature, with any man, woman or animal shall be punishable with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine.

The entire terrain of postcolonial literary appreciation thus became an unpleasant label of subaltern voices/marginal identity. With the persistent annals of subordination, the marginalized groups were devoid of mental strength of self-affirmation. They were forced to lead the life of subalterns. Broadly speaking, the concept of marginality can be interpreted and used from two points of view- in the sense of ‘not integrated into’ and ‘excluded from’. The former applies to a dualist view of society and refers to the people who are moving from one sector to the other and not yet fully incorporated into the latter like the homosexuals. The latter refers to those as marginal who are driven away from, or prevented from participating in the dominant culture and its institutions which includes the hijras and the transsexuals.

Writing on the politics of the cultural practice in India, Rustom Barucha argues that a public discourse on sexuality is slowly emerging in the country. With the release of the *Bandit*



Queen and *Fire*, two landmark films that contributed to this discourse, led to a contentious debate on the representation of religion, caste and alternative sexuality in postcolonial India. In the postcolonial literature, the critics and writers directed their efforts to restore the humanity of those who are dehumanized and are subjected to all humiliations and injustice. Dattani launched his dramatic voyage to find out a way of “Decolonizing Theatre” escaping the shadows of “politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy.” (Mee 14) Deviating from the conventions of conventional morality within the pages of his plays, Dattani reconstructs the spaces for marginalized groups of society. With this in mind the present paper aims at examining the Mahesh Dattani’s *Seven Steps Round the Fire* and *Dance like a Man*. The first one is about the transsexuals and the second one is about manufactured identity. The two plays though of different kind speak about the marginalized in our society.

Dattani is the first playwright to extend the connotations of secularism beyond its cultural and religious significations to recognize the multiple sexualities comprising India’s diversity. His provocative statement in a dialogue with Lakshmi Subramanyam that “men and women are the biggest stereotypes in the whole world” can be connected to the exploration of masculinity and femininity beyond these stereotypes in his plays. The *hijras* defy normative constructions by embodying gender performativity. Their exaggerated feminine mannerisms, modes of dress and stigmatization owing to mixed gender attributes, comment on acceptable modes of gendered and sexual conduct in Indian society. Most of the available research on *hijras* focuses on their role as ritualistic performers on auspicious occasions, and discusses, almost as an embarrassed aside, that many earn their living as prostitutes. The title of Dattani’s play, *Seven Steps Round the Fire*, cites the Hindu marriage ceremony involving the bride’s and groom’s seven ritual circumbulations around the fire to the priest’s holy incantations. For many Indians- both upper and middle class - *hijras* exist (and to some extent have always existed) at the periphery of their imaginaries, making themselves visible only on certain circumscribed ritual occasions. They are



believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on newlyweds and a newborn child (“traditional” ritual power) as Uma confides:

Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love.

The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence

Is acceptable- marriage and birth- ironically are the very same

Privileges denied to them by man and nature.

The play depicts the deplorable condition of hijra/transsexuals in our society. It is a gruesome tragedy in the life of a transsexual and also who loves and shows sympathy towards the marginalized eunuch community. The transsexuals dress themselves up in women’s costumes but they are not considered women. Transsexual is neither *he* nor *she*. It is neuter gender. So pronoun “it” is used for denoting their neuter gender. *Seven Steps around the Fire* represents the voice of eunuch community who are not even allowed to show their faces in public. The play express the identity crisis of the hijjras and their heart-felt longing for being treated as a social being in an indifferent society where people like the government minister seldom feel qualm of conscience in getting hijjra burnt to death. The play dwells on the theme of eunuchs, their identity, their constitution and their connotation.....

..... The heart-rending story about a hijjra murdered simply because she fell in love with Subbu, a young man with a status of importance in society, fills us with horror and sense of injustice. When the fact of her being a “hijjra” is revealed to people, she is mercilessly murdered. Her deprivation in terms of essential femininity instead of arousing sympathy and a feeling of compassion is looked down upon; she is discriminated against and ultimately murdered. A sense of horror and injustice prevails for it is not by choice but by sheer misfortune that she is what she is. For many Indians - both upper and middle class -hijjras exist at the periphery of their imaginaries, making themselves visible only on certain occasions. We feel somewhat uncomfortable when they emerge out of nowhere in a public space, especially in the trains and malls, and we combat the advancing uncomfortable situation with a meager amount forcing out of our disgusted



fingers. Do we repel due to their physical attributes or due to the mystery behind them? But why at all we feel repulsive of them? We claim to know about them, they are, as Uma says:

*. . . the invisible minority. Behind Russel Market,
everyone knew where to find them, although I
couldn't see any hijras on the streets. They only
came out in groups and made their presence felt
by their peculiar loud hand claps.*

Yet they make their presence felt residing in the closets with their loud hand claps accompanied by the dancing bells on their feet, an oxymoronic symbol (of liberation and confinement). The loud hand clap becomes their identity marker.....

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In the play, Dattani voices the plurality of subalternity. The two dimensions of marginalization-the one subaltern and the other gendered subaltern are explored dexterously in the play. Anarkali and Uma Rao represent these two facets of subalternity. If Anarkali is biological subaltern, Uma is the gendered subaltern. Uma wants to help and pay for the bail of Anarkali, but she has no money. She can't demand money from her husband for this purpose. She has no liberty as such. If we observe very minutely, we will find that both of them are sailing on the same boat swayed by the winds of social myth and pride. Uma while trying to unmask the real condition of Anarkali unveils her own subaltern hood before her husband. Dattani's plays do not end. They are simply preambles of the advancing complexities that are yet to be faced. His characters, as Handan says in Tara, are: *moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force.*

The next play in discussion ***Dance like a Man*** apparently does not deal with the transsexuals but does definitely deal with heteropatriarchy and raises question on gender construction (masculinity in ref. to the play). Jairaj the main character of the play has to pay



his price for not performing the role that he is supposed to play. He does not take up the manly path that his father thought he would and that is why he has to pay the ultimate price of sacrificing his dream. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that, “one is not born, but rather becomes a man”. This has become a catch line for the later feminists and they explored female exploitation in these terms. They have concentrated on how a woman’s gender is constructed. Indian texts like *Manusmriti* has also set codes of conduct not only for women but also for men and it is said that one is not born but rather becomes a man. The society has imposed gender stereotypes on both men and women and if anyone does not follow these stereotypes, they are considered as outcasts. This issue of gender construction has been explored in Dattani’s in *Dance like a Man*. Dattani is talking of gender construction; not of female but of male. He does this by portraying Jairaj, who wants to deviate away from his father’s wishes of fulfilling his dreams by pursuing his passion of dance. In the play Amritlal represents the patriarchal society and imposes manliness on his son. He comments, “a woman in a man’s world can be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.”⁸. Dancing is considered to be something meant only for women and according to Amritlal these men who want to dance are not man enough. John Beynon in “Understanding Masculinities” observes:

The [still] widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as ‘Just like a man!’ or ‘Just like a woman!’..... (56)

Amritlal Parekh a self-proclaimed freedom fighter agreed to the marriage of Jairaj and Ratna because, according to Jairaj, it suited his “image – that of a liberal minded person – to have a daughter-in-law from outside your own community”. Liberal or not gender prototypes of a man remain fixed for Amritlal. Dance, remains for Amritlal, a craft of prostitutes and thus a man who learns dancing is not manly. In an article “Men will be men... stuck in patriarchal role”, Nandita Dasgupta writes, “She may have got rid of her meow, but he’s stuck with his alpha roar. For men there seems to be no other way to be.



Sure he may wax his chest and do the washing up today, but he's still trapped by patriarchal stereotypes and continues to play protector, procreator and provider." Dasgupta in her article quotes Roop Sen, who conducts workshops on gender imaging and roles, "We question the stereotype. Because if you're not in the mould, every part of you is questioned. If you're anything else, you're demasculinised."(Sen) Therefore alongside the 'demasculinised' Jairaj , or Alpesh we find the heteronormative portrayals of men like Amritlal Parekh and Hashmukh Mehta. Amritlal thought that dance was "just a fancy" for Jairaj. He would have happily made a cricket pitch for his son to play as because cricket epitomizes manliness. He resists his son from taking up dancing as his career because it does neither give him social status nor any income. He is baffled as Jairaj goes against social norms. "Why does he grow his hair long?" is the question that Amritlal asks his son about his guru as men are not supposed to wear his hair long. The underlying fear is obvious- it makes him womanly. To Amritlal, Jairaj's decision to grow long hair 'to enhance his *abhinaya*' (Dattani 416) is 'abnormal'. Amritlal's concern has always been to make his son a 'man'. In a question that he asks to Ratna (Jairaj's wife), 'Do you know where a man's happiness lies?' he immediately answers back 'In being a man'. But Dattani questions the norms/rules of being a man. If the question remains of social acceptance and strict adherence to the patriarchal gender construct then Jairaj's conversation with his daughter Lata regarding 'erotic numbers', reveals that Jairaj has hardly accepted his father's proposal of gender performativity.

LATA.

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Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* argues that phallogentricism is understood as regimes of power and hence Amritlal is afraid that his dancing son would loose power in the heterosexual society that he lives in. In a bourgeois society power is synonymous to earning money and Amritlal believes that dance cannot be a way of earning money for Jairaj because in a highly gendered society dancing can never be considered to be a man's profession. Thus Jairaj becomes an ideal symbol of gender trouble. The do's and dont's that society imposes on every gender, becomes a nemesis for Jairaj. The problem with



Jairaj is that he does not opt to perform gender. Jairaj does not appear to be natural because he is not like a true man. His body is not stylized like a man's body. He is rather womanly. Jairaj's 'acts' and 'gestures' are not manly and thus he cannot be considered intelligible as far as recognizable standards of intelligibility are concerned. Jairaj tries to defy the "expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity" but his defiance ends in a tragic note.

Writers like Dattani try to uncover the repressive forces behind the construction of the notion of gender by the media, the families, the courts, literature and art. His characters represent especially the marginalized sexualities who struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the oppressive weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire. In the two plays discussed above shows how certain subjectivities are marginalized within the heterosexual power structures and are trapped within its discourse, how these identities are both free and unfree, trying to subvert pre-existing gender norms. Whether it be an identity like a male dancer charting into a women's territory or a hijra, the Indian society does not accept them for what they are and instead tries to alienate these identities as ex-centric through a complex web of discourses. At a time when even after the decriminalization of homosexuality by the Delhi High Court's 2009 verdict, India continues to be reluctant to take a definite stand on the issue, fearing it would go against the country's cultural practices, a playwright like Dattani deserves kudos, for his works claim a place for marginalized people onstage and by extension in society. The plays of Mahesh Dattani can be seen as conversations between the writer and his audience on models of reality, and their performance can be interpreted as moments in subjectivization. Questions of gender, sexuality and identity are raised and the unspoken is voiced, the unseen made visible. In initiating an audience into redefining identity, Dattani provides the strictures within which problematizations may be re-examined and better understood. He also seeks to queer the debate on Indian middle-class morality, thereby challenging its privileged status and stressing the interconnection between repression and invisibility. The question for the audience is whether Dattani's plays can cue them into experiences of



resistance and encourage them to reinvent narratives that may then function as personal histories.

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