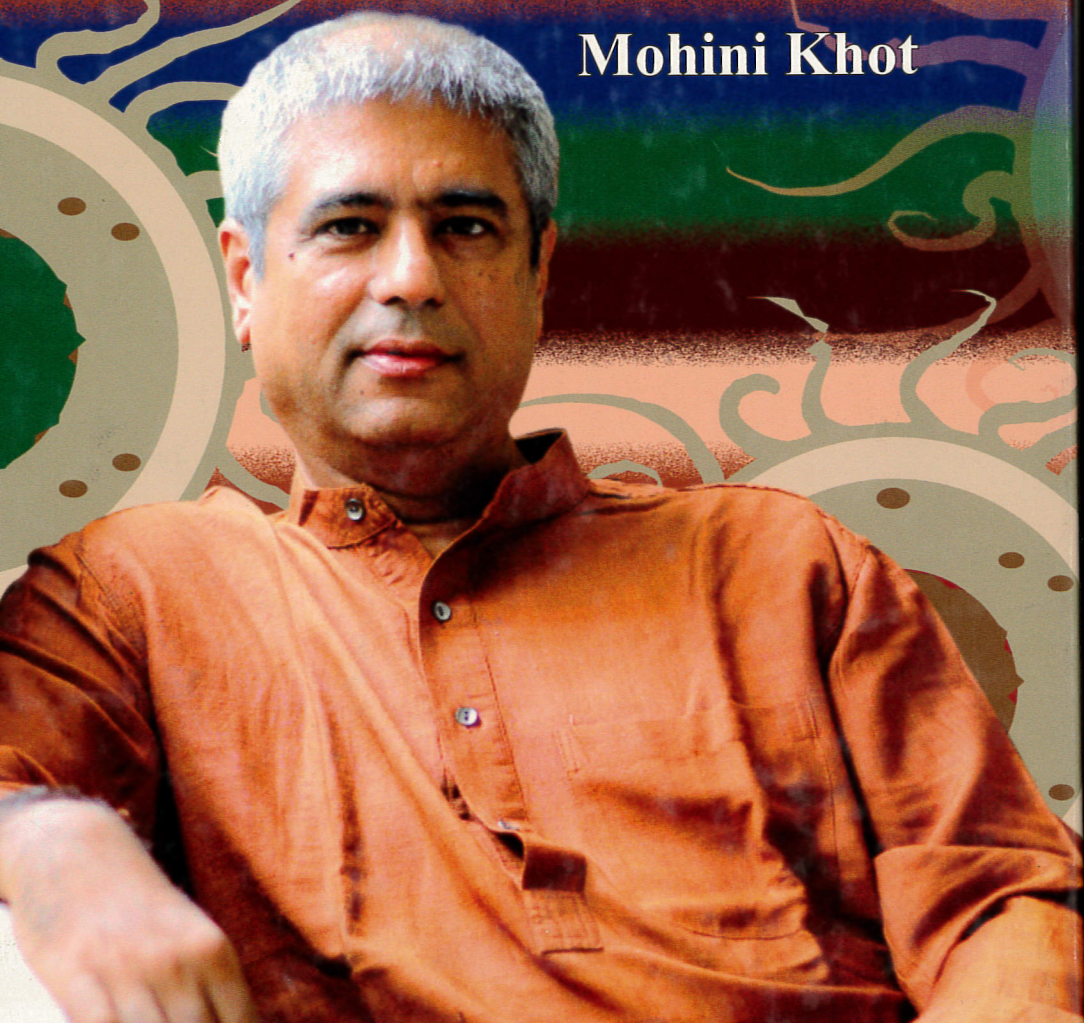


The Theatre of Mahesh Dattani

Mohini Khot



Dear Purnima
with best wishes
Mukh Datta

G. D. Datta

Love from
Shaila Kulkarni

Lots of love,
Rohini Kulkarni

First Published : 2015

ISBN : 978-93-82630-63-0

© Author

Price : Rs. 1095

Published by

Aadi Publications

F-11, S.S. Tower, Dhamani Street, Chaura Rasta, Jaipur-302003

Tel. 0141-2311900, 9414443132

• E-mail : aadipublications@gmail.com

Laser Typesetting by

Vikram Kumar Sharma, Jaipur

Printed at

Thomson Press (India) Ltd.

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Leading up to the Dattani Decades —Angelie Multani	17
2. Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's <i>Dance Like a Man</i> , <i>Seven Steps Around the Fire</i> , and <i>Final Solutions</i> —Miruna George	28
3. Game, Set and Match: The Use of Play in <i>Bravely Fought the Queen</i> —Mohini Khot	44
4. Mourning Raga : A Myth of Death and Resurrection —Snober Sataravala	57
5. <i>On a Muggy Night in Mumbai</i> – Writing Queer: an Act of Politics by Default —Anil Ashok Sonawane	66
6. The Suppressed Male Dancer in Mahesh Dattani's <i>Dance like a Man</i> —Hilda David	74
7. A Reconsideration of Mahesh Dattani's <i>Seven Steps Around the Fire</i> : Enthusing, Enlightening and Empowering Eunuchs —Purnima Kulkarni	86

A Reconsideration of Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*: Enthusing, Enlightening and Empowering Eunuchs

Purnima Kulkarni

Today, everyone is talking about 33% reservation for women and need for reservation for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Minority Communities. Silently, a group of people getting estranged from the view of the society are the Eunuchs, the transgenders, the 'third sex' or the Hijras. Mahesh Dattani's play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* makes a sincere endeavour to step towards recognition of a third gender for the eunuchs by providing them with individual identity and dignity that is necessary for them to be able to maximise their social and economic worth in society. Dattani's symbolic autonomy could only translate into a social gain for them by allowing them to avail of absolutely basic human rights in the form of sexual identity. Dattani claims that their status is not a source of embarrassment but is in fact much worthy of official recognition. As audience readers, we could pin our hopes on promoting the kind of progressive social change that we, as scattered individuals may be powerless or incapable of instigating.

The term *Verfremdungseffekt*¹ or distantiation can be applied to Dattani's plays like those of Brecht where readers come in the expectation that they will be informed. The pleasure which Dattani's theatre is now permitted to give is the pleasure we feel when we discover new truths, the exhilaration we experience while we enlarge our understanding. He keeps his readers receptive. The distance between the playwright and the readers enables us to look

into the action in a detached spirit and creates new understanding of the human situation.

Miruna George in her essay "Constructing the Self and the Other" claims that "Dattani pulls his audience out of their complacency, telling and showing them that we are the prejudiced ones. He does not want the audience to lose themselves in a performance. He encourages them to be self critical."² In order to revamp the tabooed social system, Dattani focuses on changing people's perception and give the deserved set of privileges to hijras.

Transgenders are alienated from the mainstream of society. Thus, Dattani's portrayal of the Hijra community prevents the readers from being emotionally involved with the characters. Eunuchs are the most vulnerable as they are publicly identifiable by their mannerisms. The word, derived from the Arabic root 'hijr' in its sense of leaving one's tribe' and now the philological notes say that it has traditionally been translated into English as 'Eunuch' or hermaphrodite³. There are a few issues that pester the ultimate existence of the transgenders. Dattani, in his play does not give his own private mood but also of the world. He treats people as intelligent not as simpletons when they hold a deep rooted grudge against the eunuchs. Identification with the characters would probably appear indecent to Dattani and so in my view, we as readers are not in a mood to feel but in a mood to think. He focuses on the plight of the transsexual community by fashioning a plot that involves the murder of a hijra called Kamla because she shared an intimate relationship with a minister's son Subbu.

Portrayal of the transgendered people adds to the spectrum of alienated characters created by Dattani, underlines his avid interest in marginalised people and alternate sexualities. We have the time and detachment to sit back and reflect in a truly critical spirit on the socio-political, moral and scientific implications of the play.

Social Implications

Language includes masculine gender, feminine gender and the neuter gender. Thus, it is dominated by three genders. The language constructed ages ago should be deconstructed by the neuter gender. There is absolutely no separate place or platform for the transgender to be addressed with dignity. Though they can be addressed as 'he' or 'she', they are nonchalantly addressed as 'it': the pronoun which is used to mark animals or inanimate things. Dattani compels us to

think of giving them a separate linguistic space. Let me justify my point through textual evidence from Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.

Munswamy: She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. (233)

Munswamy: If you don't mind me saying, what is the use of talking with it?

Munswamy: It will only tell you lies. (234)

Hijra Anarkali is addressed in the most derogatory terms.

Munswamy: I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig! (235)

Munswamy: Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!

Characters like Munswamy and Suresh consistently violate the group of hijras and look away with a grimace.

As readers, we are given the chance to criticise human behaviour from the social point of view. The playwright's idea is that the reader should be put in a position where he can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave.

The play prompts me to raise some thought provoking questions as under:

1. Do we know the travails of the neglected community?
2. Whom will these disempowered people marry?

I quote:

Munswamy: Marry? Who would want to marry...? Tchee! What kind of people are there in this world? (263)

3. Who would perform their last rites?

Munswamy: The temple priest complained about the stench. It was thrown into the pond after being burned. (247)

4. How would they escape severe harassment by the police?

Anarkali, one of the characters in the play becomes a victim of police entrapment.

Political Implications

The play shows that the social prejudice in connection with the transgendered people is often translated into violence of a brutal nature in police stations, prisons and even on the political front. The

main factor behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that hijras do not conform to the accepted gender divisions.

The play transports us to the area of Modern law in colonial India. The enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which was an extraordinary legislation that even departed from the principles on which the Indian Penal Code was based. To establish an offence under the Indian Penal Code, the accusations against the accused have to be proved beyond reasonable doubt in a court of law. But, certain tribes and communities were perceived criminals by birth, with criminality being passed from one generation to another. It fitted in well with the hierarchial Indian social order, in which some communities were perceived as unclean and polluted by birth. The link between criminality and sexual non-conformity was made more explicit in the 1897 amendment to the Criminal Tribes Act which was subtitled "An Act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs". Under this law, the local government was required to keep a register of the names and residences of all eunuchs who were suspected of committing offences under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Any eunuch so registered could be arrested without warrant and punished with imprisonment up to two years or with a fine or both. The law also decreed eunuchs as incapable of acting as a guardian, making a gift, drawing up a will or adopting a son.⁴

Dattani tries to showcase the discrimination and violence that hijras face at the hands of the police and the Minister.

Suresh: May be. Who knows, "if she runs away to another town? Who can trace these people?" Anyway, we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. These hijras....they cut off their balls...they kill. It could be any one of them". (270)

Instead of supporting his son and taking up cudgels against the society, Mr. Sharma, the Minister feels that a eunuch like Kamla should live a ghetto like existence in her own community and has no right to marry his son Subbu. The minister gives commands and gets Kamla brutally murdered.

Champa: No. Not Salim. There are others more dangerous than he...not even your father-in-law can put them in jail. (272)

Again, I present textual evidence to justify my stand:

Mr. Sharma: Yes. My son is getting a wife from a fine family. I am happy to see that he is entering the phase of the householder.

Uma: And you feel the truth lies in that?

Mr. Sharma: For him yes. My truth is in ensuring he is on the right path. (276)

I ask, do antiquated and regressive people like Mr. Sharma deserve to be catapulted to high positions? Don't we want our ministers to make people aware of the prerogatives of the underprivileged? Shouldn't the ministers create awareness about potential endocrine treatment among eunuchs like Anarkali, Champa, especially Kamla? The acute communication gap and lack of understanding between Mr. Sharma and his son Subbu generates catastrophe in Dattani's play, when Subbu commits suicide and unites with Kamla forever. If the society has to change its perception, Dattani's Minister in the play needs to play a pivotal role by ably communicating with his son. The minister and the society are against the controversial marriage as they probably feel that Kamla is intersexed, emasculated, impotent, transgendered, and sexually anomalous.

Scientific Implications

In order to corroborate my point, I interviewed a renowned Gynaecologist of the city, Dr. Vaishali Biniwale (M.D., D.G.O.) on 10 January, 2013 at 1.30 pm (Venue: Biniwale Clinic, Dinkar Baug Apts, Bhandarkar Road, Pune), to know the endocrine status of the eunuchs.

Purnima: How is a transgender baby born?

Dr. Vaishali: A transgender baby is born due to chromosomal abnormalities. We all know that there are 23 pairs of chromosomes in a human body. The 23rd of chromosome decides a baby's gender. We all know that XX is female and XY is male. Sometimes, an extra 'x' or 'y' chromosome adds itself with the supposed to be united chromosomes, then a neuter gender baby is born. When such a baby is born, it does not have any identity of the transgender but when it grows up, it dedicates itself to be called as a complete transgender.

Purnima: How early can USG (Ultrasonography) detect the gender of the baby?

Dr. Vaishali: By 12 to 14 weeks.

Purnima: Are transgenders born or made?

Dr. Vaishali: In India, prenatal determination of sex is illegal. However, when we detect chromosomal abnormalities through USG, we ask the parents to go in for 'Amniocentesis'. (Taking out the amniotic fluid to carry out tests concerning sex related abnormalities.) Depending upon the diagnosis, the problems can be treated at a later stage in life. However, this is prevalent only in urban areas. In rural areas, midwifery is still practiced on a large scale due to which chromosomal abnormalities fail to get detected. After growing up, some undergo an initiation rite into the Hijra Community called 'Nirwan' which refers to the removal of penis, testicles and scrotum.

Purnima: Does the irregularity of male genitalia: penis, scrotum or absence of vagina or clitoris central to the definition of a eunuch?

Dr. Vaishali: 'Eunuch' is a very general term. In many cases, due to poverty and other reasons people with normal genitalia are also forced to remove their genitals in absolutely unhygienic conditions and earn their living through Prostitution or Beggary. A new born baby is born without any manly or womanly behaviour. Only in the process of its growth, it inculcates the behaviour. Does the so called educated class of populace also think that the eunuchs deserve to go through such an excruciating pain or biological craziness?

Purnima: Is the female reproductive system of the eunuchs developed?

Dr. Vaishali: In most cases yes, but it is underdeveloped. They are not capable of menstruation or childbirth. However, with the latest technology like Vaginoplasty (insertion of Vagina), they can enjoy normal sexual activity.

Purnima: Is there any proof/ study to know the sexual orientation of the eunuchs?

Dr. Vaishali: Not really. In fact it is for them to decide what they actually feel about themselves and know their endocrine status. There is a vast difference between homosexuals and eunuchs. Most of the eunuchs clamour for female gender identities. Endocrinology has a treatment for eunuchs to minimise endogenous androgen levels and suppress masculine secondary

sexual characteristics by using exogenous female sex steroids to achieve feminine characteristics.

Purnima: Can Endocrine Management help them battle social stigmatisation?

Dr.Vaishali: Definitely. It would prevent masculinisation and help them achieve a female gender identity if they so desire.

Purnima: How does one minimise the lack of communication between Doctors and eunuchs?

Dr.Vaishali: Through counseling, through plays and movies which have tremendous influence on the lay people and the masses.

In the play, the relationship between Kamla and Subbu is looked down upon as sex in Indian society is acceptable only in heterogeneous terms. Kamla faces multiple obstacles and finally meets death primarily due to her gender identity and sexual orientation. She should not be misrepresented as a homosexual as there is no proof to assess the sexual orientation of the couple and the endocrine status of Kamla. It may appear a homogenous monolith to Dattani, however, Kamla's sexual orientation could be heterosexual. Suresh thinks eunuchs are all just "castrated, degenerated men".

Before passing a caustic and malignant comment of the sort, he fails to realise that he is impotent himself and has not been in a position to become a father.

Uma: Nothing....They want to see you.

Suresh: I don't think so.

Uma: Just a test for your sperm count.

The relationship between Kamla and Subbu is purely based on love. So as readers we want the characters to uplift themselves by broadening their minds and sharpening their intellect.

If Dattani's play aims at reformation of the society, I would want Uma Rao, the female protagonist to be a Doctor rather than a Professor of Sociology and Research Scholar. In the play, it is basically her research which coaxes her to interact with eunuchs and probably after her submission of the thesis the eunuchs will sink into the oblivion. We find Uma entering into a pessimistic telecall with her Professor.

Uma: I know there is very little written about them (hijras), and now I understand why.... But there is no way I can win their trust!" (262)

Another instance:

Uma at her laptop,

Uma: There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love. (239)

Uma has doubtlessly spent a lot of time to help hijras gain social empowerment through her case study, however, in spite of being DCP Rao's daughter, she is powerless.

At one point, she is driven to despair in Act II.

Uma: Oh why did I get involved? (268)

Champa: Please excuse me, Madam, I did not know that...you see us also as society, no?

According to me, I would have appreciated it more had she delved deeper into their health and gender identity and created an opportunity to make them lead a considerably healthy normal life. Commenting on the status of hijras in Indian society is now dated, sounds clichéd and hackneyed. Instead of pitying them we need to find solutions for them through the miracles of Medical Science.

Uma: I am doing my paper on class gender related violence.

Uma: Look, I don't want to get involved....

Uma: Look I want to help you but I don't know how? (241)

As the play revolves around the theme of gender denial that defies all sense of common decency and humanism, we need a more powerful Uma, a Doctor with a rare specialisation who is expected to take initiatives to significantly improve life for transgendered people. Instead of people like Suresh, Munswamy and the Minister I would want the health professional to decide if eunuchs like Anarkali, Kamla and Champa fulfilled the criteria for gender identity disorder. The eunuchs in the play have typical female names and female gender identities. They are obsessed with ceremonies and childbirth as they are deprived of these familial pleasures.

We are told that Kamla was the most beautiful of them (the adjective is only appropriate for a woman): "She was beautiful, very beautiful". (245)

We are told that Kamla wore a lot of gold jewellery. We are informed that the elderly hijra Champa fans herself with a delicate punkah and reads the *Femina* Magazine.

Even Champa in conversation with Uma blurts out that a man used to come for Kamla and that a photograph was taken when she became her daughter. (259) Anarkali desperately wants to wear a red Ghagra for the minister's son's wedding.

Munswamy: So much jewellery she was wearing when she died! Even a bride will not wear so much. That too, gold. (247)

Even Munswamy, who once addressed her as 'it' accepts the female gender identity of Kamla.

Why should she be coerced to marry Subbu, a person with male gender identity? I would want Kamla and other eunuchs to play significantly progressive roles by demonstrating readiness for therapy of their female gender identities. I would want the minister to minimise the lack of communication between the Endocrinologist and people with alternate sexuality like Kamla and Subbu.

Brecht in his *Short Organum* for the theatre opined,

If we ensure that our characters on the stage are moved by social impulses and that these differ according to the period, then we make it harder for our spectator to identify himself with them. He cannot simply feel that how I would act but at the most would say "if I had lived under those circumstances".⁵

For Dattani, like Brecht, the purpose of drama is to teach us how to survive by familiarising them with the social problems and simultaneously distancing them from the emotions of the characters.

Endnotes

1. Gray, Ronald, *Brecht*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961: 63.
2. Angelie Multani (ed.) *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Pencraft, 2007: 145.
3. En.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Hijra_(South_ Asia)
4. www.legalserviceindia.com/ Article/1285- legal position of Eunuchs.html
5. Willett, John, *Brecht on Theatre: The Develeopment of an Aesthetic* (ed. & trans.) John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964: 194.

8

Mahesh Dattani's Experimentation with Time and Space in *Final Solutions*

Jayant R. Salve

The paper attempts to present and examine Mahesh Dattani's experimentation with time and space in the play *Final Solutions* and how he succeeds in using the same to bring out the theme effectively. Mahesh Dattani is basically known as a theatre personality. That is, he writes plays in order to stage them. He is greatly involved in stage production and direction of his plays. Drama for him is a performing art. Dramatic technique matters a lot in his plays. He writes,

"I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium". (Nair, 2001 quoted in Chaudhary, 98)

In *Final Solutions*, the stage has a structure suggesting the house of Ramnik Gandhi. On another level of the same stage is a room of the young bride Daksha suggesting that the period is late 1940s. Hardika, the grandmother in the Gandhi family and Daksha are the same persons portrayed by two artists. This skilful arrangement of two sections of the stage representing two periods separated by half a century is very innovative and serves many purposes. Things have not changed much. The incidence of communal disturbance presented in the play is one of the many like post Godhra and post-Babri Masjid happening today. The communal riots following the partition