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Claiming Space: The Third Gender and Marginalization in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract: On 15th April 2014, the Supreme Court of India recognized the third gender, marking a significant legal shift. Despite this, the hijra community continues to face marginalization. Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* critiques the social, political, and cultural mechanisms that deny the third gender a legitimate space in both public and private life. This paper argues that the play emphasizes the tension between legal recognition and ongoing social exclusion, particularly through the lens of 'claiming space' in terms of both physical presence and social belonging. The play centers on the murder of Kamla, a hijra who marries the son of a political figure, revealing how societal norms and power structures prevent the third gender from accessing legitimate spaces, such as relationships and family. Through its portrayal of the hijra experience, the play critiques the rigidity of gender boundaries and the failure of social institutions to accommodate the third gender, despite formal recognition.

Key Words: Claiming Space, Third Gender, Marginalization, Hijra.

Introduction

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani explores the murder of a transgender person, revealing societal tensions around sexual identity. The play critiques the rigid gender norms and power structures that shape societal perceptions of gender and sexuality. This paper argues that the 2014 Supreme Court verdict recognizing the third gender marks a significant legal shift, yet social acceptance remains absent. Despite legal recognition, the hijra community continues to face exclusion from key social institutions such as marriage, family, and justice. The play highlights how cultural and religious norms marginalize the hijra community, denying them a space in social life. Through the portrayal of the hijras' struggle, the play critiques the gap between legal recognition and social legitimacy, demonstrating how societal power structures sustain marginalization, even after legal progress.

Building on the discussion of legal recognition, it is important to note that on 15th April 2014, the Supreme Court of India passed a historic verdict. The highest judicial body in India officially recognized the third sex,

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establishing it as a visible category beyond the biologically polarized distinctions of male and female. As a necessary corrective toward ensuring social justice for all, the Supreme Court of India pointed out: "By recognizing TGs (transgenders) as third gender, this Court is not only upholding the rule of law but also advancing justice to the class, so far deprived of their legitimate natural and constitutional rights. It is, therefore, the only just solution which ensures justice not only to TGs but also justice to the society as well" (Petition 106). This judgment is significant not only for recognizing the third sex but also for reflecting the pluralistic nature of contemporary India. The Supreme Court's decision challenges the male-female binary, representing a crucial step toward acknowledging the diversity of sexual identities in India.

Despite the legal recognition hijra community in India continues to face marginalization, particularly in terms of sexual identity. They are often denied full participation in society and lack access to basic rights and services. The myth that hijras can bestow blessings or curses during celebrations is a key interaction they have with mainstream society. At other times, they are seen performing for money. These stereotypes contribute to their negative portrayal. Despite the 2014 Supreme Court ruling, social acceptance of the transgender community remains a distant goal. The writ petition filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NLSA), representing the transgender community, emphasizes the need for both social and constitutional recognition, pointing to the ongoing struggle for equality:

> Seldom, our society realizes or cares to realize the trauma, agony and pain which the members of Transgender community undergo, nor appreciates the innate feelings of the members of the Transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their biological sex. Our society often ridicules and abuses the Transgender community and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals, they are sidelined and treated as untouchables, forgetting the fact that the moral failure lies in the society's unwillingness to contain or embrace different gender identities and expressions, a mindset which we have to change. (Petition 1–2)

While advocating for a shift in social and moral attitudes toward transgender individuals, the petition calls for "a legal declaration of their gender identity than the one assigned to them, male or female, at the time of birth" (Petition 2). It further asserts "every person of that community has a legal right to decide their sex

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orientation and to espouse and determine their identity" (Petition 3). The petition also seeks to define gender identity, stating:

> Gender identity refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body which may involve a freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or functions by medical, surgical or other means and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms. Gender identity, therefore, refers to an individual's self-identification as a man, woman, transgender or other identified category. (15–16)

While this paper does not aim to examine the specifics of the writ petition, it is important to note that the quoted phrases emphasize the individual's right to choose, rather than addressing the social constructs of sexual orientation and gender identity. This shift is significant, as it challenges the notion of a fixed, assigned sexual identity and advocates for personal agency in defining one's gender.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach, guided by gender theory, to analyse Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The primary focus is on textual and thematic analysis, examining how Dattani symbolically represents the exclusion of the hijra community. The analysis draws on theoretical positions on gender, particularly the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Joan Scott. These scholars have contributed to the understanding of gender as a socially constructed category, rather than a biologically determined identity. Scott, for instance, defines gender as "a social category imposed on a sexed body" (qtd. in Glover and Kaplan 15), while Beauvoir argued that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (Beauvoir 273).

Given the recognition of non-binary identities, especially in the context of the LGBTQIA+ movement, these theoretical frameworks allow for a more nuanced reading of the select play, where gender often exceeds biological distinctions. With the rise of sex reassignment surgeries (SRS), individuals have the agency to redefine their gender, irrespective of their biological sex. This evolving understanding of gender, which often challenges the male/female binary, provides the theoretical lens through which this article examines the plays depiction of the hijra community.

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The methodology involves a close reading of *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, focusing on key scenes, such as Kamla's marriage and murder, to analyse the hijras' negotiation of space within social institutions. The study critiques the failure of legal systems and social institutions to fully integrate the third gender, despite its legal recognition. It also examines the intersection of caste, class, and gender and how these factors contribute to the continued marginalization of the hijra community. The aim is to explore how the play highlights the gap between legal recognition and social acceptance of the third gender.

Discussion

1. Marriage as a Site of Hijra Exclusion

The play centers on the murder of Kamala, a hijra, and the investigation by Uma, a sociologist. As Uma delves into the case, she uncovers that Anarkali, another hijra accused of the murder, is not the culprit but rather a victim of hatred towards the transgender community. Her findings reveal uncomfortable realities; Kamala had fallen in love with a minister's son and secretly married him. Her pursuit of love and family was seen as a challenge to heteronormative norms, leading to her murder by the minister, who later arranged a conventional marriage for his son. The social exclusion of hijras, who are denied even basic human recognition in Indian society, is highlighted at the very start of the play: "Munswamy: You may see the hijra now if you wish, madam. Uma: Will she talk to me? Munswamy: (Chuckling): She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't" (Dattani 7). Munswamy's use of 'it' instead of a gendered pronoun not only denies Anarkali's identity but also reflects societal attitudes that reduce hijras to objects. This linguistic erasure emphasizes an issue: the binary construction of language itself, which is built around male and female identities. The absence of appropriate pronouns or terminology to address transgender individuals in many languages reveals a fundamental problem of inclusion. By not having a linguistic space that recognizes non-binary and transgender identities, society reinforces their marginalization. This lack of inclusive language complicates efforts to affirm the identities of individuals outside the male-female binary, forcing the transgender community into categories that do not reflect their reality. Munswamy's casual remark about beating Anarkali further reveals the normalized violence and lack of basic human rights they face. This interaction sets the tone for the play, emphasizing the social exclusion hijras endure, where they are denied recognition as individuals deserving respect and dignity.

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Munswamy dismisses the importance of speaking with the hijra, suggesting it holds no value. He labels them as liars and attempts to discourage Uma from pursuing the investigation further. "Munswamy: If you don't mind me saying, what is the use of talking with it? It will only tell you lies. I will bring it" (Dattani 7). His assumption that Anarkali will lie demonstrates the mistrust and bias against the hijra community, reinforcing their marginalization within social and legal structures. Such attitudes obstruct efforts toward justice and inclusion, limiting their ability to be heard or represented fairly.

Following the earlier discussion on exclusion, Dattani, through Uma's first voice-over, emphasizes the hijras' longing for love, something society denies to those on the sexual margins:

> 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. 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. (Dattani 10–11)

In Indian society, marriage is essential for social legitimacy, and the hijra community's exclusion from it marks their marginalization. Kamla's marriage to Subbu represents an attempt to claim space in mainstream society, but it ends in violence and death. The secrecy of the marriage and the family's reaction emphasizes how rooted social norms perpetuate the exclusion of the third gender. The title *Seven Steps Around the Fire* references the traditional Hindu marriage ritual, where the bride and groom encircle the fire seven times to sanctify their union. In the context of the play, however, it highlights the exclusion of the hijra community, as Kamala, being a hijra, is forced to perform this ritual in secrecy, an act that cannot be recognized or legitimized by society. The play uses this irony to critique the systemic marginalization of hijras within the institution of marriage. He points out, "Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god eternally binding man and woman in matrimony…" (Dattani 11).

2. Institutional Failure and Marginalization

The play reflects on the gap between legal recognition and social practice. While the Supreme Court's 2014 ruling acknowledges the existence of a third gender, this recognition does not translate into social acceptance. The institutional mechanisms that should include the hijra community such as family, marriage, and law enforcement remain complicit in their exclusion. The play uses Uma, the protagonist investigating

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Kamla's death, to expose this institutional failure and draws a parallel between her powerlessness as a woman and Anarkali's marginalization as a hijra.

Anarkali, falsely accused of Kamla's murder, articulates the peril she faces: "They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail" (Dattani 14). Despite knowing the truth, Uma cannot help Anarkali. This highlights the broader unwillingness to incorporate hijras into the legal system, as seen when Uma confronts her husband, Suresh, asking: "What is the evidence against Anarkali?" (Dattani 10). His response reveals the arbitrary nature of Anarkali's arrest: "We only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of them" (Dattani 33). This unjust legal process demonstrates how bias against hijras is institutionalized.

The lack of proper facilities for hijras further compounds their marginalization, as seen in Anarkali's imprisonment in a male cell. She pleads for help: "Get me out of here. (Pause) Sister, I did not kill Kamla. You believe me, No? (Pause) You don't believe me? You doubt your own sister?" (Dattani 13). Anarkali hopes that Uma's wealth and power could help her, but Uma reveals her own lack of agency within patriarchal structures when she says, "I don't have any power!" (Dattani 13). Both characters, though from different social positions, are constrained by systems that deny them power and voice.

The play further highlights how Anarkali and Uma symbolize different forms of marginalization Anarkali's stemming from her identity as a hijra, and Uma's from her position as a woman within a patriarchal and legal system. Their shared helplessness stresses how gender and institutional power work to perpetuate inequality. The biased system not only fails to protect hijras like Anarkali but also restricts Uma's ability to challenge these structures.

By presenting these overlapping forms of marginalization, the play critiques how gender and class hierarchies intersect. Kamla's exclusion from both family and legal protection due to her status as a hijra and her lack of political influence is emphasized by Subbu's family's ability to erase her existence without consequence. This reflects how marginalization is shaped not only by gender identity but also by social and class structures that maintain exclusion.

Conclusion

The play critiques the ongoing marginalization of the hijra community in India, emphasizing the gap between legal recognition and social inclusion. While the 2014 Supreme Court ruling granted legal recognition to a third gender, the play reveals that such recognition does not lead to meaningful change within societal and institutional structures. It demonstrates how the hijra community's efforts to claim space within mainstream institutions are met with violent resistance, reflecting deep-seated anxieties around non-normative identities in Indian society. Marriage, in particular, is portrayed as a site of exclusion, where hijras are denied legitimacy and humanity, not only through legal means but also through cultural and institutional practices. The play highlights the intersectionality of marginalization, showing how hijras' gender identity interacts with factors like class, politics, and legal structures, further compounding their social exclusion. By illustrating the failure of legal reforms to alter societal realities, the play argues that true inclusion for the hijra community requires not just legal recognition, but a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and power structures that sustain their marginalization.

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