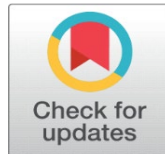
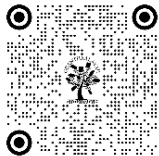


# THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: THIRD GENDER IN MAHESH DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE

M. Saravanan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. V.S. Shiny<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Reg. No. 19123154011017, Research Centre: S.T Hindu College, Nagercoil, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Associate Professor of English, Department of English and Research Centre, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil



## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.2472](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.2472)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

Indian playwrights like Mahesh Dattani emerged when the British sought to impose their culture and language. They blend English with native sensibilities to critique colonial dominance and address modern societal issues. Dattani's plays, particularly *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, explore themes of gender and class oppression, focusing on the marginalized hijra (transgender) community. Dattani portrays their societal exclusion and the violence they endure and exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that simultaneously seeks their blessings yet denies them fundamental rights. Through the character of Uma Rao, Dattani delves into the complex interplay between power, class, and gender. Uma, the voice of humanity and reason in the play, empathizes with the hijras and challenges oppressive societal norms. However, the powerful minister, representing the elite, uses his influence to hide the truth about a hijra's murder. It reflects the broader systemic oppression faced by marginalized communities. Dattani's work thus not only critiques the societal oppression of transgenders but advocates for compassion and understanding as pathways to meaningful change.

**Keywords:** Oppression, Hijra, Violence, Hypocrisy, Elite

The Indian audience has been enjoying the aesthetics of performing arts since Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra*. The colonial era witnessed a remarkable shift in Indian drama which is popularly known as the Anglicization of Indian drama. This paves the way for dual notions between Indian writers and Britishers. The British academicians introduced this with two purposes- the first to acculturate Indians in British culture to demean the native culture of India and the second to teach English through this translated work. But for Indians, the impact of colonization in drama and the spirit of decolonization boosted to reach beyond the boundaries. Bishun Kumar and Neha Arora illustrate the motive behind the birth of Indian English drama in "Mahesh Dattani: Themes, Techniques and Issues" as, "The Indian drama required the power for fighting against the colonial dominance and also to compete with the international stage which was possible only through acquiring international language that is English" (xii).

Mahesh Dattani was the first Indo-English playwright to receive the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. He is a renowned modern dramatist known for his plays that deal with sensitive issues. He is also a dramatist, director, writer, teacher and dancer, all rolled into one, Mahesh Dattani emerges as the most accomplished playwright of modern India. He addresses the global audience through his topical themes. His plays probe into the issues which are intentionally left

unnoticed. His characters are being dug out from the "low of the lowest" (*Collected Plays* 11). He is the champion of the muted group who are socially, culturally, economically and sexually oppressed.

Man is by nature a social animal. Every human deserves equal rights to lead a peaceful life on earth. However, the harmony in the society gets disturbed when there occurs an imbalance in the treatment of equality. This heinous discrimination that is being followed generation after generation is termed as oppression. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, oppression is described as "the unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power, especially through the imposition of burdens." It also refers to "the condition of being weighed down," and "an act of pressing down," conveying "a sense of heaviness or obstruction, whether in the body or the mind." (oppression). This definition highlights the extreme intensity of oppression and expresses how challenging it is to confront or eliminate it. Additionally, the term "oppression" is derived from the Latin root 'premere', meaning pressed down. It further emphasizes the weight and burden that accompany such an experience. Thus, oppression refers to the social act of imposing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or institution, limiting their freedom and rights. The objective of this paper is to explore the visible and invisible oppression bestowed upon the marginalized transgenders who belong to the hijra community in India, Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a narration of the agony of the hijra community in India due to multiple oppressions. A hijra, otherwise known as the transgender is a nowhere wo(man) in society throughout their life. They are treated like sinners and not allowed to mingle with the open society. In the Hindu tradition, they are allowed to access functions like marriage and childbirth. They are brought to bless, sing and dance on the auspicious occasions in the families; though by nature, they are denied the same privileges. Dattani portrays the plight of the hijra, their incurable mental wounds, and hideous scars and their inert responses towards the injustice caused by the affluent people in the society. Sarika Kanjila in her article, "Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*: Travails of the Third Sex" describes the dark side in the life of transgender as:

According to social conventions, they are not permitted to live in a respectable society. It is the horror of social convention that they are not even permitted to achieve professional skills to earn their breadbutter. The venues of education are closed for them. Many of them are obliged to die without proper medical care because doctors take it as their misfortune to attend them. (34)

The play is centred around the protagonist Uma Rao's concern towards transgender individuals who are considered even worse than animals and her efforts to find out the actual murderer of an innocent hijra. The scene opens with a male section of a Police station which is a microcosm of the dominant male society. Uma Rao, the wife of the Superintendent of Police, daughter of the Vice- Chancellor and daughter-in-law of the City Commissioner of Police visits a hijra named Anarkali. She has been arrested for the murder of another fellow hijra named Kamla. The story progresses with Uma's investigation which leads her from Champa, the Head hijra, to the real culprit, Mr. Sharma, a wealthy Minister. Throughout her risky voyage, she witnesses the outcry of the hijra and the same is the message that Dattani wants to unveil and exhibit to the readers.

The issue of gender oppression prevails throughout the play. Gender oppression is instituted through gender norms that society has adopted. Mostly the gender norms suggest that masculinity and femininity are opposite genders. However, they form an unequal binary. The struggles for cultural, political, and economic equality have, to some extent, challenged this gender-based oppression. The male and female sections of society have achieved their adorable positions in the social structure. But the third gender male and female still suffer as a specially abandoned one in society. Dharmaraja and Bhaskaran, in their article "Transgender: The Real Deconstruction of Masculinity and Lively Form of Gender Equilibrium," argue that Dattani critiques the hypocrisy of Indian culture, which publicly "opposes" transgender individuals while privately "exploit" them (115). These individuals are neither identified as 'he' nor 'she'. Instead, the constable Munswamy and the Superintendent of Police refer to them using the third-person pronouns 'he' and 'they'.

UMA. Will she talk to me?

MUNSWAMY (chucking).

She! Of course, it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it does not

MUNSWAMY. If you don't mind me saying, What is the use of talking with it? It will bring only tell lies. I will bring it. (CP 7)

The transgender individuals are even identified with animals. Munswamy calls Anarkali as a pig whereas Suresh compares her to dogs, horses and also as an inanimate thing. He mocks at his wife when she addresses Anarkali as 'she'.

MUNSWAMY. I will come inside and beat you up, you worthless pig!

SURESH. They are as strong as horses.

UMA. Yes, I know she is arrested for the murder of her sister, but...

SURESH. What's that you said? Sister? There is no such thing for them. More lies.

They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day. (CP 10)

The act of exhorting oppression upon one group of people by another with fabricated lies is a good old bogus tradition in Indian society. This illusory truth is the tendency to believe [false information](#) to be correct after repeated exposure. It is ironical to associate the hijras with blessings as well as curses. They are allowed to access the family functions otherwise they will curse. This notion creates an aversion towards transgenders. Even Uma doubts the genuineness of this belief in the light of her own life experience and so she advises Mr. Sharma, the minister to allow hijras to sing and dance during his son's wedding. She recalls how her parents became childless after refusing to allow a transgender person to dance at their wedding, and how she was subsequently adopted by them.

UMA. Is it true? Could it be true what my mother used to say about them? Did they really put a curse on her because they did not allow them to sing and dance at their wedding? Or was that their explanation for not being able to have children of their own? Or... a reason to give to people for wanting to adopt me? (17)

The prejudiced lies gradually make Hijra believe that they are aliens in this world. They make up their minds that they are none in this Universe. Anarkali says Uma "One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband" (35). They doubt their life security. Anarkali says to Uma, "They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth. I will die in jail" (14). They are perceived as "the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love" (10-11). Anarkali says to Uma that the former would have been her sister if she had been a hijra, "If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister" (13). They have no position in society and there is none to listen to their painful utterance. Everyone in the community knows well that Kamla has been burnt to death by the minister for which Anarkali is arrested. Even Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of police knows very well that Anarkali is a fake offender. He shares this with Uma, "Anyway, we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her" (33). Dattani depicts the unfortunate and unarmed victimization of the transgender by painting their real sufferings such as murder, imprisonment, blackmailing, sexual assault and so on.

Dattani portrays the class oppression lashed out upon the transgenders. Class is an unspoken social ranking based on income, wealth, education, status, and power. It is also experienced differently depending on race, gender, ethnicity, global location, and disability. Anarkali asks Uma, "Where are you and where am I?" (13). Class oppression, of the marginalized by the centralized can lead to deprivation of basic needs and a feeling of inferiority to the other. In this Play, the hijra community is made to believe in the existence of a massive partition wall between them and the so-called civilized group. They are treated as untouchable and kept away from the mainstream. The conversation between Uma and Champa reveals this:

UMA. Champa, let me in. I want to talk to you.

CHAMPA. Madam, you should not mix with people like us. (33)

Dattani focuses on the irony of women as a dependent class irrespective of their gender discrimination and social subjugation. In the male chauvinistic patriarchal society, women are being crushed down with the ego of men. Uma Rao is the partial victim of this oppression. Despite her sound family lucrative employment and high academic profile, she has to depend either on her father or husband for financial aid. She happens to tell lies to get money from her father to help Anarkali with bail. She doesn't expect that her father who is the Vice-Chancellor would reveal it to her husband. She feels embarrassed when Suresh asks about the need for such a huge amount. Both Suresh and his mother insist Uma consult herself with the doctor regarding the issue of impotency. When it is medically proven that Uma is fully competent, it is Suresh's turn to subject him to a medical checkup. Despite being aware of his impotency, his male ego does not allow him to admit it and visit a doctor.

UMA. I went to the doctor again. Your mother insisted she takes me.

SURESH. What did they say?

UMA. Nothing...They want to see you.

SURESH. I don't think so.

UMA. Just a test for your sperm count.

SURESH. I don't have to go. (32)

The domination of a powerful and wealthy group of society over the marginalized is one of the cruelest forms of oppression depicted in the Play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The oppressor strives hard to maintain the identity by paying any cost. Dattani tears the mask of the so-called daylight civility of the power mongers and exposes their filthy deeds under the shadow of darkness. Sharma, the minister can never accept a hijra as his daughter-in-law. With his authoritarian power, he sends a life threat to Champa and Anarkali through Salim to collect a photo. It is the sole proof of the betrothal of Subbu and Kamla. The minister who is elected to safeguard the minority becomes their murderer. Dattani portrays the common man's loss of trust in the government machinery which includes the police department. Suresh Rao, the Superintendent of Police craves for promotion for which, he offers legal protection to the minister who deserves capital punishment for murdering a deprived hijra. Thus, the play throws light on how oppression creeps into the innocent lives of the hijras and troubles them.

The main focus of an oppressor on the oppressed is to suppress their protest through any means by gauging them within man-made parameters of the society. Their voices are unheard and their problems remain unattended. They gradually become physically, mentally, intellectually culturally and economically handicapped. The play ends with an alarming assertion of the muteness of hijra's problems. Uma remarks:

UMA. They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two people. (42)

Uma, the protagonist of the play is the voice of Mahesh Dattani. She is the only one who shows love and concern for the transgender individuals. By addressing everyone as human beings and adopting a humanitarian approach, she wins the hearts of the hijras. She says; "There are no hijras. Children! Just children" (19). But her sympathy for the marginalized is neither entertained nor recognized by anyone in the society. Subbu Sharma, the son of the Minister too shows his love for Kamla. He wanted to marry her and the marriage took place in a temple. His lovemaking with a hijra is highly unacceptable to his family tradition and he happens to sacrifice the life of an innocent human being for this sake. Dattani firmly believes that meaningful transformation in the lives of marginalized communities is possible through love, compassion, and understanding. It gives them hope and confidence to realize their own selves and to reconstruct the inner strength of will to resist the anti-forces of oppression.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## WORK CITED

Dattani, Mahesh, *Collected Plays*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000.

Arora, Neha, and Bishun Kumar. Mahesh Dattani: Themes, Techniques and Issues. Atlantic Publishers, 2018.

Kanjilia, Sarika. "Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire: Travails of the Third Sex." *Mahesh Dattani: Themes, Techniques and Issues*, edited by Bishun Kumar and Neha Arora, Atlantic, 2018, pp. 32–42.

Dharmaraja, G., and G. Baskaran. "Transgender: The Real Deconstruction of Masculinity and Lively Form of Gender Equilibrium." *Indian Journal of Postcolonial Literature*, vol. 10, no. 1, June 2010, pp. 113–19.

"oppression." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppression#:~:text=%3A%20unjust%20or%20cruel%20exercise%20of,or%20excessive%20exercise%20of%20power](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppression#:~:text=%3A%20unjust%20or%20cruel%20exercise%20of,or%20excessive%20exercise%20of%20power).

Wikipedia contributors. "Illusory Truth Effect." *Wikipedia*, 28 Aug. 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory\\_truth\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_truth_effect).