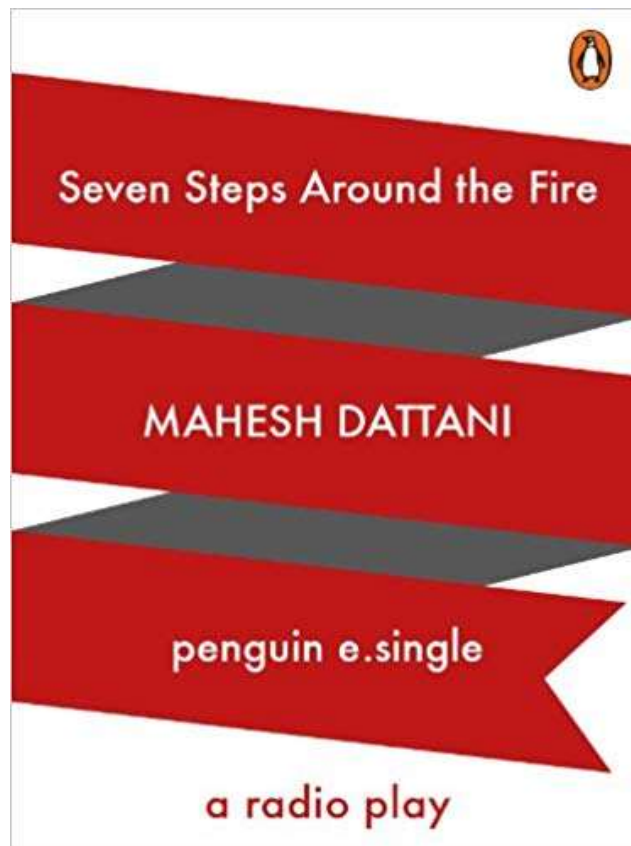


**From Periphery to Center: The Theme of the Marginalized in  
*Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani**

**Dr. Rahulkumar Bhogilal Panchal, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D.**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Seven-Steps-around-Fire-Penguin-ebook/dp/B06XYBJNVF>

**Abstracts**

In our country, the term *hijras* (transgender) has no respectable identity in public. They are on the margins of the society and not given much importance. They have no protection, no acceptance and no security from the prejudices of the people of the Society. They are discriminated all over the world and the term for them is 'It'. They are accepted in society on two occasions, invited to Child birth and Marriage to sing and dance. The discrimination against them is often turning into violence. In society, male and female- these are the only two categories which are approved by society, so there is no space for hijras. Those who do not fit into the two classes, have

to suffer from social exclusion, contempt and isolation from society. The community of Hijras is socially, legally and politically marginalized and victimized in society. They are on the periphery of society and trying to come in to the center. They are not permitted to carve their own way beyond the patterns recommended and accepted by society. Mahesh Dattani gives a chance to the hijras community to articulate their feelings and predicaments in the English theatre, through his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Mahesh Dattani presents the harsh reality and the status of the hijras community, presenting how they are placed on the margins of society. The whole play revolves around the mystery of the murder of a hijra named Kamla, who secretly married a minister's son. The role of the police, politicians and the society, is questioned.

**Keywords:** Periphery of society, Hijras (transgenders), The Marginalized, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, Mahesh Dattani

### **The Plight of The *Hijras* in Indian Society**

Mahesh Dattani, a well-known personality and a Sahitya Academy Award winner, needs no introduction in Indian English Drama. In his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* he has highlighted the plight of the *hijras* in Indian society. In our society, there are only two sexes recognized, male and female. The hijras are the neglected gender. It is an irony of life that the hijras who are welcome on two occasions – once, at the time of marriage and second, at the time of childbirth – to sing and dance, are themselves deprived of marriage and childbirth. Maybe homosexuality is one way for them to live. We have to accept the reality of life, however, painful that might be. People give them money, otherwise people are afraid they might put a curse on them. They are considered as the 'chosen of God' and the curse by them cannot be revoked. The author has ironically portrayed this aspect that would not have otherwise received any attention, for any matter related to the *hijras* is of no importance to anyone. For many Indians – both upper and middle class – *hijras* exist at the periphery of their concern, making themselves visible only on certain occasions. Dattani is probably the first playwright who has written a full-length play about them. For the very first time they get a depiction in the theatre as human beings with their individuality, craving for a space in the society.

### ***Seven Steps Around the Fire***

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* was first broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9th January 1999. The play was first performed on stage at the Museum Theatre, Chennai, by MTC Production & The Madras Players on 6th August 1999. It is probably one of the best plays of Dattani that discusses the socio-psychological crisis of the *hijras* who are torn between the social taboos and their personal desires. The story of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is unusual in the Indian context. For the story he chooses to tell is no ordinary story. As Jeremy Mortimer puts it,

The murder victim Kamla, a beautiful hijra eunuch, had, it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young hijra burned to death, and hastily arranged for his son to marry an acceptable girl. But at the wedding – attended of course by the hijras who sing and dance at weddings and births – Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the

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suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijras community. (DM- 3)

### **Term *Hijras***

In order to discuss the play, Dattani takes care to explain the term *hijras* by giving the Indian myth from *The Ramayana* through Uma's *voice-over*,

A brief note on the popular myths on the origin of the hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications. The term hijras, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning "neither male nor female". Another legend traces their ancestry to the *Ramayana*. The legend has it that god Rama was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, "Men and women turn back." Some of his male followers did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So, they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. 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. (DM 10-11)

### **The Theme**

The theme of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is focused around the murder incident of Kamala, a hijra. Uma Rao, a daughter of a Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University, wife of the jail superintendent and the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner, with this mission, becomes curious to reveal the mystery of Kamala's murder. The hijra community usually occupies no honorable space in society and is often pushed back to the margins of society. Uma gets emotionally involved in the whole affair and identifies herself with their suffering.

The action in the play moves in the form of investigation of the case. Instead of studying any controversial case, she is interested in Kamala's murder case for which one of the hijras of her community, Anarkali, has been arrested. The police had no proof against Anarkali, but as Suresh puts it,

We only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of them. (DM 33)

### **Marginalized Section of the Society**

The above statement shows that there is no scope for hijras to escape from the reality of the society. They have to be on the margin created by society. They are treated as 'the other' and no one is there to support except Uma Rao. There is no separate jail for the hijras and Anarkali is put in the male cell. In society, if this kind of wrong imprisonment is done to any male or female,

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the relatives and the media would not allow the police to arrest him. Here, with his unique technique Dattani presents how the hijras community is devastated from the center of society. It truly presents them as the marginalized in society.

### **Uma Meeting the Hijra Head – Silence and Speech**

Uma decides to meet Anarkali's friend and the head of hijras, Champa who lives behind Russel Market in Shivajinagar; she is the only person who can bail Anarkali out because nobody else would care. She does not have enough money to get her released on bail. Uma borrows Fifty Thousand rupees from her father. She tells a lie to her father while borrowing the money and gives it to Champa for Anarkali's release. Her visit to Champa's house reveals the remoteness of the *hijras* from the social stream. Here, Dattani has exposed the multiple layers of realities that co-exist in the Indian society. The *hijras* in the society are marginalized and Dattani through his plays takes the initiative to present the suffering of the marginalized.

Uma is nervous and baffled because she is not sure of Champa's response. She offers the bail money to Champa for the bail of Anarkali. Uma suspects that the rivalry between Kamala and Anarkali was the cause of the murder. Salim's intervention brings a complication into the play because he is searching for one particular photograph. Champa's confession comes close to Spivak's thesis of *silence and speech*,

We cannot speak ... when we want to speak nobody listens. When we cannot speak ... (AB 40)

In the above statement the dilemma that Anarkali faces in jail is whether to tell the truth that none would believe or to bear everything silently. If she keeps silent, she will be convicted for Kamala's murder, a crime that she has not committed. But if she speaks out the names of the murderers, she will be surely killed by those influential people. Finding herself in a checkmated position, she resigns herself to fate till Uma turns up by chance in the jail. There is no one to support or to boost her spirits up to tell the truth except Uma Rao. This is how she is represented as the marginalized in the society.

### **Uma, Champa and Anarkali**

In her quest to reveal the mystery of Kamala's murder, Uma maintains the grace of a good human being. Her venture remains no more academic, but she develops an emotional relationship with Champa and Anarkali. Uma says,

All I know is that if I win their trust, I might get them to talk to me about themselves (DM 28)

She enquires about the identity of Salim and his relationship with Kamala at Mr. Sharma's place. The appearance of Subbu, the son of the Chief Minister who appears almost by the end of the play, adds complications to the play. Subbu is weak and nervous despite being born and brought up in luxury. Mr. Sharma does not allow his son to interact with Uma. In spite of the celebration of marriage he is unhappy,

I hate weddings. I don't want all this. I don't wish to go ahead with this. (DM 31)  
And simultaneously he says,  
Please, don't arrest Salim. He is a good man. (DM 31)

This contradiction creates doubt in Uma's mind. Subbu's condition becomes a mystery to her.

The last scene of the play is noteworthy for its touching intensity. Mr. Sharma, the Chief Minister doubts the intentions and purposes of Uma. He is in panic because he is tense about the horrors implied in the revelation of the truth. Champa appears for dance with her troop. Mr. Sharma doesn't want them to enter the main building. This again shows how they are marginalized in the society. Uma here intervenes,

No, it is a bad luck to turn away the hijras from a wedding or a birth (DM 38)

### **Subbu and the Revelation**

As the hijras begin dancing and singing, Subbu comes forward looking at them. The vision of dead Kamala starts haunting Subbu's mind with the dance of Anarkali. Subbu snatches the gun from Suresh in a state of frenzy. He becomes restless to compromise with the restrictions imposed upon him from outside. He becomes blind to all myths and conventions, in which he was forced to live,

I am leaving you all! You can't keep me away from Kamala. (DM 39)

Subbu forgets everything and demands the photograph. Champa gives him the photograph with sympathy. As he looks at the photograph, the present gets suspended and the past comes alive. In a state of extreme depression, Subbu aims the gun at his father and reveals the secret of Kamala's murder. Mr. Sharma killed Kamala because of her status, pathetically requests Champa to persuade his son to forget Kamala. Subbu takes the gun and shoots himself. With his death, the real mystery of the murder of Kamala starts echoing. The end of the play is little depressing, but it shows that the 'voice' against oppression is itself a great challenge of life,

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 young people. (DM 42)

### **From Margin to the Centre**

Dattani, by dedicating the whole play to the *hijras*' cause has brought the margin to the centre, the underdogs to the forefront. He has granted them an audience who never thinks or has no concern regarding the *hijras*. He is not only advocating their cause, but also underlining the fact that what they need is not only pity or sympathy, but also understanding and concern. The traditional rules and norms are challenged while the hypocritical social setup is exposed. Dattani sensitizes the audience with the issue, without being didactic and the audience is made to think of the state of affairs concerning the *hijras*.

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## To Conclude

To conclude, we can say that Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* raises many questions regarding the *hijras* identity as the marginalized, their community, connotations and their social acceptability. The bias against them could be even worse than the class or caste or religious bias. They are not even recognized as the members of society. There is an aura of disgust and dislike related to them. Their fears and frustrations are underlined in the play. They are human beings with no voice, no sympathies, no love, no consolations, no justice and probably no hope of acceptability in society. They are on the periphery of society, craving for their identity as members of the society, trying to come to the center of the society through this play by Mahesh Dattani.

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