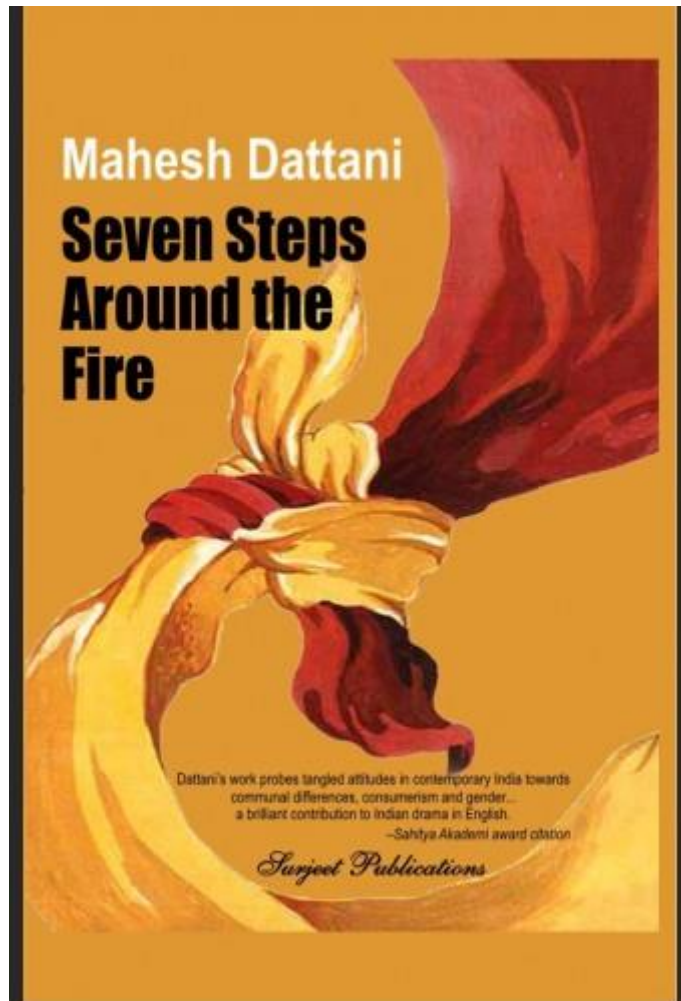


Teaching Drama to Undergraduate Students: Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract

Teaching literature in the 21st century has become a challenge as the students are glued to their technological devices rather than reading books. A teacher is confronted with a student group which is less receptive but more digital savvy. Students often acquire information from social media, which could lack veracity and humane finesse. Hence,

teaching drama in a traditional method with the help of technological devices in a way will help them understand the text better. In this context, Mahesh Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is taken up for study to analyse the teaching methodology with the aid of modern devices through which students can relate to human predicament, suffering and emotions. An important aspect of teaching the play is to make students aware of the social reality and the situations that repress the marginalised community and the economically weaker section. Further, it helps students become conscious of the theme, plot, and characterisation. Teaching such plays will make the students more sensitive to other's need and aspirations and expose them to forces that repress people in the realm of societal power play, politics, and interpersonal relationships. The teaching of the play will also help them develop sensibility and critical thinking, which contributes to their self-awareness, social awareness, and reality.

Key Words: Teaching of Literature, Teaching of Drama, Undergraduate students, digital natives, society, repression, marginalised, reality.

Digital Impact on Teaching Plays and Teachers' Role

Teaching literature to students of the 21st century assumes greater significance with the advent of intrusive technology which has invaded every sphere of a student. Technology is a double-edged sword with both positives and negatives. Today's technology has transcended that and has become more single edged as it influences the student community with such excessive force that the interplay of falsehoods in the guise of truth has greater influence than the literature one reads.

The students of present generation who are digital natives find their love for arts eroded with the disintegration of human interaction and human companions. The teachers who belong to both digital immigrant and digital native categories have a greater task to make the students read books, let alone making them aware of their own innate abilities of showing emotions and relating to each other as fellow human beings. In this scenario, teaching literature becomes a herculean task as students are addicted to social media and cinema related memes that caricature life and distorts reality.

The reality as experienced by the students through their technological devices is deceptive than the veiled reality expressed in literature. Their grasp of reality is questionable in the post-truth era where information is overloaded on every aspect of human life but the veracity of such information can never be given in a verifiable form. The students may be made aware of the false sense of reality that engulfs and consumes them. Hence, a teacher has a greater role to play in bringing back undistorted reality, truth, humane qualities, and also make students understand, respect, and recognise the existence of others in the universe including nature through the appreciation of arts especially through literature.

Drama and Development of Communication Skills

In the present scenario teaching literature through drama may be a better choice as drama contributes directly to the development of communication skills. Ideas and issues can be easily brought to the students' attention directly. The dialogues will help the students assimilate the situation, and internalise the issues that confront the characters and in effect confront the readers and the audience. Elder Olson in his article "A Letter on Teaching Drama" says that "a play cannot be read in the sense in which fiction is read; for the reader must always construct the real performance in his mind. Unlike a novelist who elaborates his theme and characters and events, a dramatist has to stick to powerful or strong dialogues from which students learn to read between the lines and hear the play resonate with multiple meanings" (p.). Reading drama provides them with multiple perspectives, which make them think and understand the human relationships and conflicts much more directly and vividly by identifying the issues, incidents and characters. The human, social, religious, and political issues can be brought to the direct notice of the students to make them contemplate over the travails of life.

E-textbooks for Undergraduate Classroom

Now-a-days, in an undergraduate classroom, it is easier to make the students get copies of available e-books since they would like to have study materials in a digitised form and that too in their mobiles. Students are adept at reading text on their mobiles through mobile applications. Therefore, the academicians can insist on the publishers to provide digital versions of books included in the syllabi.

Providing e-text does not guarantee reading of the text by the students. Hence, a classroom exercise based on textual reading like conducting a quiz at the beginning of the class or a simple test to assess their familiarity of the text needs to be tried first. An introduction of the author may be given before starting the play.

Seven Steps Around the Fire

The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani is taken for study and analysed in the context of teaching drama to students. Students need to have a general background information on the significance of the characters and characterization including the title which, in the play under study, represents the sacred ritual associated with a marriage. The students may be asked to take up different characters and read the play with proper intonations, pauses and stress so the class could understand the significance of the dialogues.

Indefinite Gender and the Reality of Love

This is to make them understand the richness of literature where the theme, plot and dialogues portray the modern day woes of humans in urban India including the marginalised people who suffer at the hands of the powerful and the rich. In the play, the trauma of belonging to an indefinite gender and the reality of love and its vexation in the supposedly progressive world are aptly brought out by the regressive behaviour of the so-called educated and civilised people.

The play revolves around Uma, the wife of chief superintendent, who wants to study about *hijras* for her research work. In the course of her interviewing Anarkali, a *hijra* who is accused of murdering another *hijra* Kamla, discovers something sinister and diabolic in the murder. She unravels the mystery of the murder and realises that the so-called powerful people with the help of law enforcement agencies played an ugly part in crushing the rights of the marginalised. Uma brings out the general social apathy of the disadvantaged groups like *hijras*, who are also known as eunuchs or transgenders.

What the Teacher Needs to Know

Teaching this play requires the teacher to know the basic information about *hijras*, and how these people play a vital role in some of the communities during marriages and deaths. It also requires providing background information on the concept of *hijras*, their sexual orientation, and their occupation and their pathetic existence. Cross-reference may be given to known literary works such as Kamala Das' *Dance of the Eunuchs*. References could also be made to contemporary transgender issues and political activism which appear in print and other visual media which trace their social and cultural practices including the religious festival that takes place once a year in Koovagam, Villupuram district in Tamilnadu.

Discussion Points

Then the exposition can be discussed. The teacher can describe the need for Uma to meet Anarkali and the eventual request of Anarkali to be bailed out may be explained by quoting the appropriate lines from the text. During the exposition, we also get a glimpse of the pathetic condition of the *hijra* community and their treatment both inside and outside of the jail by the ruling class and the society at large. Uma's exposure to Champa and the *hijra*'s dwelling place in a non-descript locale of the city may be discussed. The teacher has to dwell on the life of *Hijras* and explain the treatment meted out to them by the society. The teacher might also discuss the physiological aspects and the psychological trauma that the *hijras* undergo in their life.

The students can be made to understand rather subtly how Anarkali's has been abused sexually in the male prison and the refusal on the part of the jail authorities to lock them up in women's prison because she is of indeterminate sex. Discussion may dwell on the dialogue in the scene which clearly depicts how pitiable the existence of the third or the other sex is, and how even inmates, who spend time behind bars for their criminal actions treat them. Their treatment of the *hijra* goes unquestioned due to lack of awareness in the society.

Subbu, Son of a State Minister

The exposition may also discuss the character of Subbu, son of a state minister Mr. Sharma, who hopelessly falls in love with a *hijra*, Kamla. Subbu defies convention and the idea of marriage by secretly marrying the *hijra* Kamla. This results in the murder of Kamla.

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Though the marriage cannot be consummated, Subbu's emotions, concretised by his marriage to Kamla, tell us volumes of the emotional bonding between the two, irrespective of their sexual orientation. Anarkali, at one point of time, says, "We make our relations with our eyes. With our love..." (CP 11). The students have to understand that love for one another can transcend mere physical pleasures and create a strong bond between them that can last a lifetime.

The Role of the Conflict

Students may be made aware of the conflict which helps the story move on. Examples from real and reel life could be brought in to keep the students' interest alive. The student could be encouraged to identify the conflict in the play just to kindle their imagination and analytical thinking. The actual conflict in the play arises when Uma is hell-bent on solving the murder of Kamla. Uma, in pursuit of the truth, confronts the powerful minister Sharma and his aides, which further provides clues to the murder. The conflict leads to rising action where the suspicion is first focussed on Champa, then Anarkali and then on to the servant Salim, who is believed to have had an affair with Kamla and then finally on his wife for having a strong reason to kill Kamla due to jealousy.

The Climax

The climax comes as a shocker since not even once the suspicion is diverted to the minister's son. Subbu, who shoots himself to death, exposing the minister's role in the murder of Kamla. This heightens the pathetic condition of the lovers whose lives are lost just because of the social conventions and established moral norms which consider their relationship as immoral and out of sync with the perception of marriage which the society has been witnessing from time immemorial. A discussion on the need to follow tradition and culture could be initiated to get divergent views so that the learning process of the students is supplemented by critical thinking.

The denouement captures how rotten the system is as Suresh, Uma's husband, who has his future in mind, invariably helps in hushing up the suicide of Subbu as an accident. Kamla is forgotten, Anarkali becomes the leader of her community, Suresh hopes to become the commissioner of police, but Uma has to suppress the truth and bury her emotional

response for the sake of her husband, and she realises the futility of finding the truth since nothing happens at the end except the loss of two beautiful lives. Uma's voice-over at the end of the play aptly captures her predicament "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 young people..." (CP 42).

Social and Political Issues

The students may be made to understand how the government, media and the people ignore the travails of the marginalised people. They may be made aware also of the fact that prevalence of marginalisation is not restricted to caste alone as portrayed in the public discourse but it happens also due to lack of education, economic opportunities and inequality. The denouement clearly shows how the public machinery hushes up the murder and the suicide. The individuals concerned go about their way having their own self agenda suppressing their conscience, and this, to some extent, includes also Uma who is unable to break the shackles of the web finely woven by the morally corrupt system. The deprived live their existence without much ado as Anarkali becomes the head of the *hijras* continuing the path set by Champa. Uma resigns to her fate compelled by family and societal compulsions.

All Issues Should be Discussed

These issues have to be discussed with students on the need to set right the system which gets corrupted by people who want to serve their own interests first. The lack of empathy that affects the ailing system is due to the emotional drain of the people and the students are no better in understanding the existing depravation. They have to be aware that lack of social sensibility results in them growing up as adults and as part of the system instead of being the change to overhaul the system based on human values and responsibilities.

To a great extent the present predicament is borne out of sophistication and modernisation where the needs of students and people are more on material things. By

teaching plays like these, the teacher can make the students aware of the world around them which their technological devices fail to do so.

The onus of creating awareness and learning process can be shifted to the students if the teacher prepares or compiles textually and socially relevant digital videos or reading materials and use educational platforms like Edmodo <https://www.edmodo.com/> where students could be enrolled and the teacher can share materials. Using these platforms, the teacher can provide extra reading materials with cross references so that they can understand the text much better. Moving a step further, online submission of assignments and conduct of quiz could make the students spend at least some of their time reading instead of wasting on social networks and video games.

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