

**THE UNSPOKEN OF: IN DATTANI'S DO THE NEEDFUL AND SEVEN STEPS ROUND THE FIRE**

**RAJASI RAY**

NARULA INSTITUTE OF  
TECHNOLOGY, W.B.U.T ,  
KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

**Abstract**

*The term Post Colonialism does not define a radically new historical era. Rather it recognizes both historical continuity and change. Celebrated Indian dramatist Mahesh Dattani, dares expose the agonizing reality of the gays, eunuchs, homosexuality, gender inequality, hypocrisy about marriage and "Compulsory Heterosexuality", in a Post Colonial society, through his dramas penned in a colonial language English. Dattani chooses the male homosexuality and the Hijras and gives the Indian marginalized class a strong voice to articulate, probably for the first time, through his two Radio Plays Do The Needful and Seven Steps Round The Fire. Gay presence in Dattani's work becomes intense with the play Do the Needful (1997). Written for BBC Radio 4, the plot centers on the negotiations for an arranged marriage between Alpesh, a homosexual Gujarati man, and Lata, a Kannada woman, in love with a Muslim boy. In spite of these differences, they decide to marry, so that they can lead separate sexual lives keeping up the fiasco of a happy couple: a common compromise in a society that has criminalized non-procreative sex since 1862! In another Radio play written for BBC, Seven Steps around the Fire (1999), Dattani centers round the the hijra community that involves the killing of a hijra because she was in love with a government minister's son. Representing the hijra community on stage underlines his abiding interest in non-normative, marginalized sexualities. Through these two plays he questions the shared spaces between the gay and the women in society and the Hijras who being pushed to the outer margin of society yet plays a very important role in the two major occasions of mainstream heterosexual society---birth and marriage. This paper intends to question the concept of Gender as opposed to Sex and about marriage and its hidden nuances.*

**Keywords:** - Mahesh Dattani, GLBT, democracy

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**M**ahesh Dattani is credited as a author who has portrayed “invisible issues” tabooed by society and long hidden in the societal closet. Dattani in his plays uncovered the repressive forces helping construct the notion of gender by social and cultural practices.

India is one of the biggest democracies, but its stance on the GLBT rights makes it one of the smallest. In December 2013, the Supreme Court of India upheld Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalizes homosexuality as “against the order of nature”. This law originated in the mores and imperatives of a colonising Britain and upheld Victorian morality. The former now features some of the most progressive human rights for GLBT people. For the millions of GLBT Indians, colonialism continues.”Therefore the Indian gays and lesbians are bust hiding their sexual identities rather than leading a life of their choice. They opt to hide their identity under the garb of patriarchy and practice their choice in a suppressed voice under the dominance of feudal pressure that takes away their freedom of choice. Two of Dattani’s such plays *Do The Needful* and *Seven Steps Round The Fire* are two such plays in discussion.

*Do the Needful* unveils the conflict between the social imperative to get married and an individual’s choice and inclination that makes him unfit for the heterosexual marriage. Marriage, outlaws the same sex relationship, procreation being its primary function, thus accepting hetero-sexuality as the norm. ‘Compulsory heterosexuality’, as Adrienne Rich defines it, is an important tool of patriarchy in maintaining its hegemonic authority and such a view is shared by others like Gayle Rubin who also stresses the “obligatory heterosexuality” that is built into male-dominated kinship systems and how homophobia is a necessary corollary of such institutions as the heterosexual marriage. She therefore concludes:

“The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is...a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women.”(1)

Thus, Aplesh instead of having a failed marriage because of his sexual choice, has to get married once again as per the social norms, to gain acceptability and acknowledgement into the mainstream heteronormative society.

Drama centres around a conflict. In *Do The Needful*, the conflict centres around the dichotomous forces of social values and traditions and the individual's struggle for emancipation. It hinges upon the conflict between the grand narrative of heterosexuality and parental authority and the mini narrative of homosexuality and the younger generation's desire to pursue its choices on its own. In the play, the younger generation (Alpesh and Lata) takes recourse to a negotiating strategy by circumventing the situations to their advantage. Just as in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, we see Bunny Singh who, in the fear of being 'outlawed' and 'tabooed', manufactures an identity of a straight hero. *Do The Needful* is built up on the idea of pushing forward the institution of conventional marriage system. Being a master dramatist, he interweaves the theme of homosexuality in the fabric of the play.

The play *Do the Needful* is apparently a romantic comedy set around the concept of arranged marriage in the traditional society of India. It begins with two set of families, one Gujrati (Patel family) and another Kannadigas (the Gowda family) who are negotiating on the marriage prospects. Alpesh, the son of Mr. Patel, is 'thirty plus and divorced' and Lata Gowda is 'twenty four and notorious'. Alpesh being a gay has his yearnings for Trilok, his companion while Lata is involved with a man who is a terrorist. To avoid the consequences of these two unnatural relationships, both the families are anxious for the hasty marriage. The gay hero and the notorious heroine get into a marriage of convenience with a secret understanding that they will be free to follow their natural inclinations. They resolve to marry just for the satisfaction of their parents and maintain a silence against relations that can't propagate in society. Lata thought only of 'Salim' and Alpesh thought of 'Trilok'. The conflict between Alpesh and Lata represents the conflict of the gay persons and women against the oppressive power of particular social setup. They are crushed under the burden of patriarchal forces. It is observed:

"Dattani once again points at the shared spaces between women and gay men, both under the tremendous hegemony of 'mainstream' patriarchal society that force to conform and live lives that are alien to their nature."(II)

Thus, the play *Do the Needful*, focuses on the shared spaces between women and the gay in the society which predominantly promotes the patriarchal family set up and discourages any change that challenges established and existing structure of it. Alpesh and Lata are compelled to marry each other by their parents. Parent's idealism is confronted with the

children's individualism through the exterior and interior dramatic decoding devices. Lata is craving for Salim and Alpesh is pining for Trilok. It is practically impossible for both of them to fulfill their dreams and desires. Socio cultural tradition prevents them from doing so. The play ends, like all successful love stories, with the marriage of Alpesh and Lata. They decide to marry each other as per their parent's desires under the hidden agenda of *teri bhi chup, meri bhi chup*. But it is a compromise against the burden of patriarchal social order.

In *Do the Needful*, the dramatist while expressing his sympathy for gays, exposes their struggle with their inner selves. The possibility of the shared spaces common to women and homosexuals, is put to active use here with the identities of its protagonists. The common oppressor is the patriarchal structure that refuses to allow any space for the growth of individual beyond a set pattern of gender determined roles.

Sexual orientation/instinct/desire is located in one's private domain which one is free to access publicly. A homosexual may not publicly acknowledge his orientation for the fear of being disintegrated. The complexity arises in the case of those who are easily identified by their physical attributes like the hijras who are simply excluded from the mainstream society. For many Indians- both upper and middle class- hijras exist (and to some extent have always existed) at the periphery of their imaginaries, making themselves visible only on certain circumscribed ritual occasions. They are believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on newly weds and a newborn child ("traditional" ritual power) as Uma confides in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*:

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. (III)

The play, depicts the deplorable condition of hijra/transsexuals in our society. The play begins with the chanting of Sanskrit mantras at the wedding ceremonies. It is a gruesome tragedy in the life of a transsexual and also who loves and shows sympathy towards the marginalized eunuch community. The transsexuals dress themselves up in women's costumes but they are not considered women. Transsexual is neither he nor she. It is neuter gender. So pronoun "it" is used for denoting their neuter gender.

It is not just Uma, who acknowledges the emotional upheavals in the hijras' interior domain; Dattani also makes them sexually attractive as Subbu, the minister's son, weds the 'beautiful' hijra Kamala. But this does not suffice as an identity marker rather it is but an incident captured in a photograph (taken after Subbu-Kamala's marriage) for the posterity..

The marginal is pushed to maintain the 'given' identity otherwise face they same fate as Kamala faced as she was burnt to death.

Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* represents the voice of eunuch community who are not even allowed to show their faces in public. The play deals with the violence inflicted on the hijjras, who are unseen and unheard in the society. The play express the identity crisis of the hijjras and their heart-felt longing for being treated as a social being in an indifferent society where people like the government minister seldom feel qualm of conscience in getting hijjra burnt to death. The play dwells on the theme of eunuchs, their identity, their constitution and their connotation. Uma Rao, the sociology scholar, emerges as the most powerful character of the play, who fights to establish the identity of a eunuch named Kamala, during her research on the class and gender-related violence and crime. It's justice in the nemesis of the play. A eunuch, a beautiful one, invited for marriage, and the final tragic death-all seem to be a misconstruct. But it happens. The mystery behind the death is in the police-politician-crime nexus. Uma Rao's research on this ancient tribe brings into focus the hypocrisy and repression that 'the big shots' are capable of because they are beyond the reach of law. The society accepts a hijjra for gracing the ceremonies of marriage and birth but would not allow him to partake of such ceremonies. The author has ironically portrayed this aspect that would not have otherwise received any attention, for any matter related to the hijjra is of no importance to anyone. The heart-rending story about a hijjra murdered simply because she fell in love with Subbu, a young man with a status of importance in society, fills us with horror and sense of injustice. When the fact of her being a "hijjra" is revealed to people, she is mercilessly murdered. Her deprivation in terms of essential femininity instead of arousing sympathy and a feeling of compassion is looked down upon; she is discriminated against and ultimately murdered. A sense of horror and injustice prevails for it is not by choice but by sheer misfortune that she is what she is. For many Indians - both upper and middle class-hijjras exist at the periphery of their imaginaries, making themselves visible only on certain occasions.

We feel somewhat uncomfortable when they emerge out of nowhere in a public space, especially in the trains and malls, and we combat the advancing uncomfortable situation with a meager amount forcing out of our disgusted fingers. Do we repel due to their physical attributes or due to the mystery behind them? But why at all we feel repulsive of them? We claim to know about them, they are, as Uma says:

"... the invisible minority. Behind Russel Market, everyone knew where to find them, although I couldn't see any hijjras on the streets. They only came out in groups and made their presence felt by their peculiar loud hand claps." (IV)

Yet they make their presence felt residing in the closets with their loud hand claps accompanied by the dancing bells on their feet, an oxymoronic symbol (of liberation and confinement). The loud hand clap becomes their identity marker. Again the notion of value comes in. That they are to be de-valued is the notion we grew up with, as if 'given' by the society. Yet there is a "yearn" as Uma says to be integrated into the society. This desire is partly actualized by their attributing mainstream relationships between themselves as Anarkali calls Kamal her "sister". Even they try to establish relationships with those supposedly located in the centre as the following conversation between Uma and Anarkali suggests:

Anarkali (sympathetically.) Oh. (Smokes.) If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister.

Uma. Oh. Thank you.

Anarkali. But you are not a hijra, no?

Uma. No.

Anarkali. So you will not be my sister.

Pause.

Uma. Of course we can be sisters!

Anarkali. Where are you and where am I? (V)

Knowing well their stand point, Anarkali could even feel the futility of Uma's desire which she herself acknowledges: "I don't have any power!" (VI)

In the play, Dattani portrays the plurality of subalternity. The two dimensions of marginalization-the one subaltern and the other gendered subaltern are explored dexterously in the play. Anarkali and Uma Rao represent these two facets of subalternity. If Anarkali is biological subaltern, Uma is the gendered subaltern. Uma wants to help and pay for the bail of Anarkali, but she has no money. She can't demand money from her husband for this purpose. She has no liberty as such. If we observe very minutely, we will find that both of them are sailing on the same boat swayed by the winds of social myth and pride. Uma while trying to unmask the real condition of Anarkali, unveils her own subalternhood before her husband.

Dattani's plays do not end. They are simply preambles of the advancing complexities that are yet to be faced. His characters, as Chandan says in Tara, are:

“moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force.”(VII)

The self-images that are constructed according to given circumstances are after all functional in nature. A self-image is created to survive in an otherwise hostile world. It leads one to a sort of a comfort zone around which resides the crisis zone. As, Ed speaks out from the core of his heart: “I didn’t mean to harm you. I only wanted to live.” (VIII)

Each one of us is marginal in a way, residing in a no man’s land- between crisis and comfort zone- trying to belong to the comfort level while the crisis pulls us back. We are all in a midst of some momentous change waiting for something that will remake the boundaries of human existence, which extends to the conception of sexual life. Whatever is lost, some new possibility opens up. The fragmentation of traditional social forms creates in which new innovations of intimacy can appear.

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