

Looking at Marritocracy from an Other Window: A Reading of Mahesh Dattani's Play Seven Steps around the Fire

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It is no longer a classified conjecture that the institution of marriage is a powerful tool for perpetuating the prevalent powerstructure which reincarnates and reinforces the ideological framework by which community/authority maintains its hegemonic control, and therefore, is a reservoir of potential subversion as well despite its long-cherished romantic/divine association. The present paper will, however, limit its focus on the literary representation of the institution and the constitution of marritocracy by Mahesh Dattani, as he presents a powerful expropriation of the Hindu marriage (to be specific) in the play “Seven Steps Around the Fire” which, beneath all the glittering glamorous paraphernalia of marriage, exposes the flipside of the coveted institution. The play performs a circuitous journey, starting and terminating on marriage, unique in its kind that frustrates/fulfils union by the medium of death. The marginalized Hijra community is an unwelcome yet unavoidable presence in Indian society and the play complicates our conception of the Third gender in India by introducing them in the arena of “marriage”, and in the process, it exposes the paradoxical and superficial nature of the arguments forwarded on behalf of tradition, religion, law, family and other like institutions by which society keeps up its surveillance.

Marriage is one of those ideologies/institutions which do not allow any possibility of spacio temporal/socio cultural specificity (in sense of existence of human civilization) so far so that even the outsiders/outcasts crave frantically to enter into its arena. It is regarded less as an option than a most “normal”, therefore desirable and almost compulsory, phenomenon of life creating a sense of deviation about the non-members. Right to marriage becomes a cite for contestation among various radical groups and individuals subscribe their outsider status to a very individual reason – absence or impossibility to be united with her/his desired partner, financial insecurity and hundreds like. However, it has long been established that despite the deceptive disguises like that of divine intervention, of being the building block of society, legal contract/partnership, meritocracy is actually a tool to sustain the unequal power relation both among the outsiders and the insiders.

Consequently, Marriage has remained a powerful cite throughout the centuries for contestation for power between individual and society. Since this is held to be the foundation for building family, the primary unit of society which replicates and maintains its power structure as well as reproduces the replica of the species, it has always continued to be the prime interest of every society. From a very early

period, in almost every society the divine sanction has been recourse to its validation and legitimization. Christianity holds that marriages are made in Heaven; Islam believes in the prevalence of the practice in “Jannat” (heaven); Hinduism invokes gods and goddesses to bear witness to and authorize the bonding for seven life cycles. With the passing of time, religious authority was replaced by the law of state as the exerting authority of hegemonic control. The heteropatriarchal society with its exaggerated obsession with the domain of reproduction, exterminates any discontinuity or disruptive possibility in the regime of sexuality.

Any attempt obviously to challenge the fixity of the specific structure which validates the “outsider” status of hijra people or any act threatening to destabilize the discourse of marginality is countered with institutional violence. The play, “*Seven Steps Around the Fire*” exhibits how Subbu’s (a normal man’s) attempt to acknowledge the status of a Hijra as wife through marriage not only transgresses the boundary of gendered female identity but also destabilizes the concept of masculinity. It also puts under scanner the practice of freely exploiting an “invisible marginality” and dumping them as the “outsider”. Naturally, the young, beautiful hijra, Kamla, is burnt down to exterminate any possibility of disruption. The category of third sex was part of Indian world view from three thousand years. The mention of kliba, pandaka, tritiyaprakriti, most popularly napumsaka in Sanskrit and Pali, provides historical evidence of a pre-modern concept of sexuality and a sexual thirdness in Indian consciousness. A pan Indian acceptance of third sex and variety of sexuality is evident in abundance of transgender desire, same sex procreation and other non-normative fantasies in mythological, folk-lore, Vedic and Puranic literature and an extensive mythologic sanction of the origination and functions of the third gender. Apart from Brahminical and Buddhist literature, Jains offered most elaborate and thorough account about the third gender and transsexuals, accepting a difference between “dravyalinga” (biological sex) and “bhavalinga” (psychological sex). The mention of the figure of “sukumarika” and “kakkar” in *Kamasutra* and other ancient Indian literature and even the reference to male and female napumsaka -- depending upon penetrative (masculine) and receptive (feminine) role – in Jain exegetical literature bear witness to the affiliation of the erotic aspect of the third gender even more explicitly. The concept of “ardhanariswara”, the hermaphrodite, is the religious icon for their specific gender status. Sometimes they project themselves as both male and female – “adha-dic” (half-in-the-middle).

Thus, a place for the third gender in the cultural narrative the traditional Hindu society as ritual performers validated by the mythical sanction of their role as the giver of blessing in marriage and child birth apart, the acceptance of the erotic aspect of their specific gender role is evident in their mythic association with the process of reproduction, the blessing conferred on his devoted followers by lord Rama, of having the power of instilling fertility in spite of their genital impotence. The castrated lord Shiva representing the principle of progeny accords them an alternate reproductive roll. Interestingly, the image of hermaphrodite is an inclusive conceptual terrain which incorporates both the male and female principles, containing the potential of progeny (Gayatri Reddy, 117).

A paradigmatic shift came with the introduction of the concept of hijra during Islamic rule as neither male nor female -- a negation, unlike the hermaphrodite which includes both the creative principles. Now castration instead of incorporation became the defining structure. The practice of castrating the male slaves to make them the protectors of harems fostered the non-erotic aspect despite adding to their social prestige. In many Islamic literatures, however, offering of love to an idealized slave and

representation of a desire of a free male to become the slave of his beloved (slave controlling the ‘slave of love’, his master) is remarkable; it did not subvert the power structure though.

With colonial encounter Europeans rendered all sexual activities outside the dimorphic gender binary criminal and omitted the various topoi from social hierarchy. The pre-eighteenth century European interpretation held that it was the impotence of the eunuch which guaranteed their honesty; and afterwards their role was further sexualized and was proclaimed that their not-man aspect avails them to handle women without impropriety. Citizens were encoded in gendered sexuality and all the previous discourses of active and passive sexuality that were accorded free and slave status were uniformly reinterpreted as masculine and feminine or natural and unnatural propensities. As Indrani Chatterjee holds, gradually the lens of gender and sexuality “displace[d] the lens of slavery in the language of the colonized” (Chatterjee, 67). This secularization of the discourse of their religious responsibilities and criminalization of that of love of the eunuchs resulted in epistemic shift of understanding of homoeroticism, social hierarchy and embodied difference. Male impotence was categorized as defining feature of eunuchs, cross-dressing and performances like dancing of men in public place were prohibited, laws were passed criminalizing their body and proscribing their labour -- sexual or asexual work/occupation. The knowledge legitimized the moral condemnation and subjugation of the criminal castes by which these bodies must be servile, regulated and controlled, in effect, made docile (Reddy, 25-30).

The hegemonic allegiance to the sexual dualism in the sexist society of modern India dominated with neo-colonial forces, with the motif of enjoying its discursive privilege, tends to oppress the erotic aspect of hijra identity to the point of immorality and unnaturalness. Yet the sexual arousal and appeal of the sexual outcasts led to their sexual intimacy with so-called “normal” man. In this case, either the non-normative practice is kept under secrecy or the minority is cast out and even exterminated.

Judith Butler rightly observes that the disciplinary society in its production of normalized subject attempts to affect “a false stabilization” by making biological characteristics determinates of fixed gender role and situating gender in reproductive domain (Butler, 125). The uncomfortability of the mainstream in asserting the presence of another alternative in form of hijra people is evident in naming the category as “third gender” – the word “third” having a covert connotation of undesirable, transgressive, uncommon, unusual and abnormal. However, the word also carries potential resistance to the conceptual structure built upon the norm of duality.

Since heteropatriarchal society does not admit of male sterility in domain of reproduction (evident in the normally married relation of Uma and Suresh), their not-man aspect is based on the lack of virility- man minus man. Their not-woman aspect depends upon their exaggeration of the femininity to the point of “mimicry” and acting in sexually suggestive ways ‘which would be considered inappropriate, even outrageous, for the ordinary women in their significant traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers’ (Serena Nanda, 35). They move a step farther even to attract the attention to their specific hijra identity in following manners: loud and abusive manner of speech, exaggerated feminine gesture and movement, loud clapping and demonstration of shamelessness signified by potential exposure of genitals (Reddy, 202-10.) Thus they are reduced to the marginal mockery of men, stigmatized but

embodying the ambivalence of Indian sexuality and thereby presenting a portent and enduring identity in its cultural universe.

Apart from the threat to normate body, the sexual discourse of Hijra people disturbs the normative structure in another way: their sexual cartography differentiates gender depending on sexual or gender performativity rather than anatomy. Centered on penetration in sexual intercourse, pantis refer to the penetrative masculine men and kotis to the receptive feminized men as well as narans i.e., all women. It also refers to the complexity and specificity of the configuration of gender identity that varies with the spatial, temporal and life/history positioning and could be contested, negotiated and reconstructed. The cartographic understanding which positioned their self-definition against the koti-panti spectrum, challenges the hermeneutical theorization of gender difference by showing the embeddedness of sexual difference in other differences and problematizes the construct of hijras as personification of third sex (**Reddy, 74-7**). In a research among travestis in Salvador Brazil, Don Kulick observed, that they have changed the man/ woman schema into man/not-man -- penetrator and recipient “into which both biological females and males who enjoy anal penetration are culturally situated” (**Kulick, 579**).

A very effective instrument by which the mainstream marginalizes the sexual deviants is a shift of epistemic standard of prioritizing its own experience over the lived experience of the people concerned. Their desire for and sense of prestige associated with femininity amounting to repeated claim to be counted as women by non-hijra people was mocked and rejected. In order to augment femininity they undergo “nirvana” operation (emasculatation sometimes under Dayamma multiplying risk factor), to intensify womanliness and beauty they take hormone peals, less harmful but equally tortuous erasures like twitching facial hair and bleaching, use whitening cosmetics, acquire feminine markers like growing long hair -- a mark of identity and status distinguishing them from kada-catla kotis (**Reddy, 131**) and sex workers --wearing sari and jewelry (except “munda”), the widow, even to the extent of flashing of genitals proving at least the not-man aspect.

Their tailored identity accords prestige or “izzat” (respect) to them within. To echo Roland Barthes, if there is a difference between “innocent” and “intentional”, (**Quoted in Reddy, 132**) they try to elide the difference -- using hormones for example. Hebbdige observes while “innocent” is “expressive of normality as opposed to deviance, i.e. [ensembles which] are distinguished by their relative invisibility, their appropriateness, their ‘naturalness’, ... intentional communication is of a different order... it is a visible construction, a loaded choice” (**Quoted in Reddy, 132**). Yet they cannot unequivocally project themselves as women, their non-reproductibility virtually preventing the identification, in spite of their strong desire to nourish a baby that gets fantasized through different ritual performances. This is rather inevitable in a society where recognition of woman’s gender status depends upon her reproductive role and the third gender is easily precluded from their desired feminine role on the basis.

The duplicity of the discursive practice addressing Hijras -- denigrating them to animal, thereby, reducing them into the hyper-libidinous reservoir of animal/sexual instinct, and simultaneously, presenting them as hyper strong and too aggressive to be a woman -- accentuate their status as gender outcast. With a reversal of epistemic standard, as common with queer and disabled people, the heteropatriarchy refuses to register their sexual preference and always identifies them as “castrated

male” instead of their repeated claim to be identified with woman. The designation serves dual purpose: on one hand, with the castration of the phallus, any discontinuity does not disrupt the hegemony and autonomy of the male body; on the other, resisting them from entering the arena of female sexuality, it removes the threat to abnormalized dimorphic discourse of sexuality in which virility is dependent on desiring women as the object of sexual satisfaction. Dattani’s play exhibits the fearful impact the conjecture may have through the housing of Anarkali with male prisoners. Brutal consequence follows: “after servicing all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk” (*Seven Steps...*, 8). We may recall how we shuddered at Dopdi Mejhen’s predicament in Mahasweta Devi’s short story *Draupadi*, at once building up resistance against the frequently reported gang rapes by demanding more effective protection of law. But remain callous as the legal system finds a collusion with the larger society in a nexus of indifference and silence when it comes to the assault of a hijra by refusing to acknowledge the phenomenal existence of the horrible fact.

The play explores how, in spite of all mythical and imperial sanction of the presence of hijra people in Indian society, our allegiance to the sexual duality makes us both scared and intolerant of any gender discontinuity and we learn to Otherize them to the extent of dehumanizing a section of humanity. The audacity to defy and mock their preference for feminine gender role is evident in the chuckle with which Munnuswami reacts to Uma’s calling the hijra Anarkali as “she”.:” She! of course...” (*Seven Steps...*, 7). Unable to categorize, he reduces the “she” into “it”, the neuter gender, robbing her of humanity itself: “I will bring it” (*Seven Steps...*, 7). Almost in the same vein we talk of taming down a disobedient animal, the constable decides to “beat it up if it doesn’t” (*Seven Steps...*, 7). This system of unhesitatingly associating them with animals is equally commonplace for Suresh -- the superintendent belonging to the blue-blooded bureaucracy. Suresh casually observes, “They are as strong as horses or easily says “They fought like dogs everyday” (*Seven Steps...*, 10).

To follow Butler, our identity is gendered but it is performatic and parody subverts both the category and the lived experience of the gender. The ambiguity of hijra people defies both the structure of mere subversion and resistance and the poetically flamboyant feminine surrogate. The people without “sharam” (shame) transgresses women’s domain by sheer shamelessness and mocks male power and procreative imperative (**Kira Hall, 435-8**). Moreover, these empowering stances encapsulate limitations of binary analysis by not taking into account imbrication of gender with or within the multiplicity of differences that constitutes an individual’s life nor adequately captures what M. Trawick calls “intentional ambiguity of Indian life” (**quoted in Reddy, 141**).

Quite naturally, the institution of Marriage which is the most powerful tool of attestation and perpetuation of the strict sexual binary securing unquestioned privilege of “man”, will never allow intrusion of hijra people in its fold. The third alternative expels procreative precondition from its arena and thus, critiques woman’s instrumentality in biological parenthood and man’s ownership of family line. Their craving for highlighting of the not-man aspect does not disturb the construct of manhood, but constant demand to be counted as woman poses serious threat to the legitimacy of man’s desire and thus destabilizes the foundation of heteropatriarchy itself. Resultantly, mainstream tries every means to guarantythe status of hijra people as gender outcasts and the very language of thelegitimizing apparatus of marriage obstinately expels them beyond the boundary.

The Hindu marriage act reads:

THE HINDU MARRIAGE ACT, 1955 ACT NO. 25 OF 1955 1* [18th May, 1955.]

Conditions for a Hindu marriage: A marriage may be solemnized between any two Hindus, if the following conditions are fulfilled, namely:- (i) neither party has a spouse living at the time of the marriage 1[(ii)at the time of the marriage, neither party- (a)is incapable of giving a valid consent to it in consequence of unsoundness of mind; or (b)though capable of giving a valid consent, has been suffering from mental disorder of such a kind or to such an extent as to be unfit for marriage and the procreation of children; or (c)has been subject to recurrent attacks of insanity or epilepsy;] (iii) the bridegroom has completed the age of 21 [twenty- one years] and the bride the age of 18 [eighteen years] at the time of the marriage; (iv.) the parties are not within the degrees of prohibited relationship unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two; (v) the parties are not sapindas of each other, unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two. (<http://indiankanoon.org/doc/590166/>)

The play opens with the utterance of holy “mantra” which sanctions/sanctifies a Hindu marriage. The incantation reaches an ominous crescendo, and contrary to our expectation of watching the holy fire/fire god bearing witness to the oath of eternal bonding, engulfs someone -- latter discovered to be the bride herself --, and the incantation drowns into the scream of death. What follows is a gradual unfolding of the layers of secrecy and falsehood by which society’s intolerance reduces any non-normative sexual practice into non-entity – both literally and metaphorically. Even after the affiliation is cancelled, the practice does not pass out of existence. The hijras are regularly used as sex object with or without their consent, in exchange of money or following mutual consent, and the practice is either kept veiled under secrecy and non-recognition or the tool of entertainment is dumped after utilizing its full potential. Complications arise as Subbu, the so-called “normal” man transgresses the boundary of accepted “moral standard” and marries the young beautiful hijra Kamla whom he loved and courted for some time.

The centre feels threatened at the possibility of any readjustment of its relation with margin. The rise of Kamla to the status of wifhood challenges the heteropatriarchal norms which fixes the position for a “normal” woman -- her womanhood certified by the reproductive potential. The social prestige of Mr. Sharma, the minister and his family, the validity of the “usage and custom” of the religio-cultural tradition of India and the concept of masculinity/virility which depends upon its sexual complementariness to female, come at stake. She is burnt to death and to “ensure him (Subbu) in a right track” (*Seven Steps...*, 37) his father arranges a proper marriage with a proper woman from a respectable family: “This is the happiest moment for any parent --watching their child perform this rites” (*Seven Steps...*, 37). This respect for “right” however assumes a dubious status as the previous rites , performed with similar piety, were de-affiliated straightway since one of the participants did not fit into the conceptual framework which gives meaning to the performance. The marriage taken place between Subbu and Kamla in a temple observing all ceremonies prior to this is violated violently. Ironically, a classic nemesis comes upon Mr. Sharma for disrespecting the “holy” laws and he loses his son at the very day of his second marriage, arranged by him, as Subbu commits suicide. The institution of marriage with its overt emphasis on reproduction/birth is hit back as it turns out to be the grave of both the bride and bridegroom, concretizing the promise to the letter: “You can’t keep me away from Kamla” (*Seven Steps...*, 39).

The play also explores the “normal” married life of Uma and Suresh. The gender domination is at work in subtle ways: Suresh loves Uma but in his own terms. He imposes his will on her in trivial matters like which night dress to wear, “allows” her to go on with her thesis and cares of course for her “soft heart” and tries to keep it under control and regulation (*Seven Steps...*, 10). Their incompatibility in intellectual sphere and area of sensitiveness is evident. Even after being a teacher at a university, Uma cannot mobilize enough money to pursue her wish to bell out Anarkali. She got to ask her father for it and the message is readily conveyed to her husband. The peculiar women’s sphere in which Suresh accepts Uma’s independence and even refuses to share the interest, is the domain of shopping, handling guests, playing hostess and other issues of maintaining social relation and decorum as opposed to the world of service, politics and finance. She is free to choose gift for Subbu. He even does not control her expense in this matter: and “Have I ever refused you any money?” (*Seven Steps...*, 32) but she has to account for her need for the money taken from her father.

The colonial code of sexuality held any man declared or medically impotent as eunuch and expelled any possibility of nonreproductibility from “male” domain. Hence, greater and subtler domination is effected in the domain of reproduction. Since the patriarchal society does not admit of sterility in “man”, the reproductive incapability is imposed on Uma instead of repeated clinical testimony on the contrary. She has to abide by the wish of her mother-in-law to accompany her to the doctor in order to authenticate her potency, while Suresh determinedly refuses to see the doctor to have a sperm count: “I don’t have to.” We may recall the movie “Mrityudand” where the barrenness was projected on the deplorable and pitiable “banjh” (impotent) wife whose pregnancy replaces her status with that of another outcast, the “vesshya” (infidel).

Uma’s encounter with Anarkali and other hijras problematizes her superiority as a normal woman (Anarkali observes, “Maybe you are more unhappy than I am”, *Seven Steps...*, 14). Uma’s attempt to explain the unspoken laws of mainstream family which alleges any opposition to one’s husband as an act of transgression to someone unadept in the rhetoric like Anarkali (“You are the daughter-in-law of the DCP and you ask me what you can do to save your sister?”, *Seven Steps...*, 13), exposes the fiction of happiness and it also shows happiness in most cases depends upon subordination and compromise. Thus, the play seeks to expose the Indian customs, which enjoy the discursive privilege not by exterminating the other kinds, but in the way it encompasses within its ambience or naturalizes and thus fixes those practices as oppositional, reinforcing the centrality of the ethos accepted as ‘normal’ by India’s socio-cultural milieu and respected as ‘sacred’. However, the resistance gets build in both discursive/epistemic and practical level -- though on a minor scale. The constant denial of the hijra people’s capacity to be in any relationship apart from materialistic consideration, is countered by Anarkali’s explosive comments exposing the “immoral” and “abnormal” hidden pattern of sexual practice of which the outcasts like homosexuals and hijras are accused: “If you had a beautiful sister, you will give her a ciguarette for a fuck, no?” or “You are not a sister-fucker?” (*Seven Steps...*, 11) A more positive and potential resistance is promoted by building up a subculture promoting an alternative method of creating bonding other than reproduction. Precluded from the specific regime, they seek for other – We make our relations with our eyes. With our love. I look at him, he looks at me, and he is my brother. I look at you, You look at me, and we are mother and daughter” (*Seven Steps...*, 11). However,

Munnuswami anxiously rejects any possibility of any relation with a hijra, be it that of brother and sister. Otherwise “invisible” as individual, they are visible as a mass presence singing and dancing in a group. Lack of acceptance of their non-normate body makes their autonomous existence virtually impossible. This is the reason Champa feared Kamla will not be happy in the world outside and her fear materialized in most horrific way. Interestingly, while they are seen as neither male nor female, negativizing both genders, Champa -- the head hijra -- becomes both Kamla’s father and mother and challenges the fixity of the oppositional gender construct.

An ideological and emotional bond of sisterhood between the subjugated female and the degenerated male or Hijra develops beyond the society’s area of surveillance and the laws of marritocracy. Suresh’s repeated addressing Anarkali as “it” is orchestrated with Uma’s recognition of her as “she” which is a minor denial to inherit authority’s epistemic standard. A policy of subterfuge is at work as in front of the authority and allied margins hide their real rapport and instead of calling Uma sister, Anarkali salaams the Memsaab, the wife of superintendent saab (*Seven Steps...*, 16) in public. The alliance advances farther and Uma pays off the required money to bell out Anarkaliand, it is not at all a coincidence, along with escaping the marital policing over her pecuniary autonomy, Uma investigates into and finds out the “truth” of the matter while the state police under the superintendent arrange the truth to be buried forever. It also triggers off her journey from “I don’t have any power” (*Seven Steps...*, 13) to “I have my resources to verify all this” (*Seven Steps...*, 41). She tries to define her identity beyond wife of the superintendent: “I teach at Bangalore University ... I teach sociology” (*Seven Steps...*, 12). Uma uses the patriarchal misconception of the natural feminine preoccupation with shopping of women to bell out Annarkali. Her story of resistance includes developing a bonding of sisterhood with another marginalized section, an independent investigation of the case using her position in the hierarchical power structure as boss’ wife and preservation of the right to secrecy if not revelation. Truly, it is not simply the individual against the establishment since s/he is also the establishment, as says Dattani, but the individual pushing “the boundaries of what the establishment is” (“Of Page and Stage, “32). By the end of the play Suresh at least condescends to mention a hijra as “she”. The marriage does not dissolve, nor the respective position, but with these small changes, Uma curves a niche for herself. What transpires, as Ashis Sengupta puts it, “‘Relations of power’ remain, but waiting to be given ‘the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also (my emphasis) the [situational] ethics’ so that the games of power are played ‘with a minimum of domination’ and some communication, or transaction, established” (Sengupta, “Of Race/Religion...” 227).

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