

The Role of Symbolism and Ritual in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is an exemplary play that weaves together emotional conflict, cultural expectations, and personal identity. One of the most significant aspects of the play is the use of symbolism and ritual, which Dattani employs to underline deeper societal issues, such as gender roles, marriage, and the struggle for personal freedom within traditional structures. This paper analyses how Dattani uses rituals, specifically the seven steps taken during a Hindu wedding ceremony, as a metaphor for the emotional and psychological journey of the central characters. The study examines how rituals in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* reflect the complexities of human relationships, particularly in the context of marriage, while simultaneously critiquing the pressures of tradition.

Keywords: Symbolism, Ritual, Emotional conflict, Cultural expectations, Personal identity, Gender roles.

Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a reflection of modern Indian society's conflict between tradition and individual desires. The play revolves around Aditi and Sandeep, a married couple, whose relationship is strained by emotional detachment, unfulfilled desires, and societal expectations. The play's title refers to the seven steps, or *Saat Phere*, that a couple takes during a traditional Hindu wedding ceremony, symbolizing vows of love, loyalty, and commitment. Dattani's clever use of this ritual not only brings out the traditional aspects of Indian marriage but also serves as a powerful metaphor for the characters' struggles with personal identity and marital fulfilment.

The paper explores the symbolic and ritualistic elements of the play, particularly focusing on the Hindu wedding ritual of taking seven steps around the sacred fire. By doing so, it uncovers how Dattani critiques social norms and the expectations placed on individuals, particularly women, in the institution of marriage.

Rituals and Symbolism in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*:

1. The Seven Steps Around the Fire: The seven steps in Hindu wedding ceremonies are significant as they symbolize the vows a couple makes to each other. Each step represents a different promise, from sustenance to mutual respect, love, and eternal companionship. Dattani, by referencing this ritual in the context of a modern marriage, brings into question how these vows are upheld—or violated—in a world that is constantly changing.

In the play, Aditi's and Sandeep's troubled marriage mirrors the unravelling of the promises made during the wedding ceremony. The seven steps, traditionally viewed as sacred and inviolable, become a symbol of the emotional and psychological distance between the characters. Aditi and Sandeep have failed to honour the vows they made during their wedding, and as a result, the symbolism of the *Saat Phere*

becomes a metaphor for broken promises, emotional alienation, and the disconnect between tradition and reality.

2. The Fire as a Symbol: The fire, an integral part of the Hindu wedding ritual, symbolizes purity, transformation, and the divine presence. In the context of the play, the fire represents not only the sacredness of marriage but also the burning desire for fulfilment and identity. Aditi's personal journey of self-realization is symbolized through the imagery of the fire. Throughout the play, fire becomes a double-edged sword—representing both the warmth and comfort of marital bonds as well as the destructive force of societal pressures.

Aditi's emotional journey is marked by her struggle to reconcile her desires with the demands of her marriage. The fire serves as both a place of ritualistic transformation and a site where Aditi is forced to confront her desires, fears, and disappointments. The fire symbolizes both the sanctity of marriage and the intense heat of unfulfilled desires that threaten to consume the couple's relationship.

3. Marriage as a Ritual and its Constraints: Marriage in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is not just an emotional bond but also a societal ritual, filled with expectations, pressures, and obligations. The play critiques how marriage, as a cultural and religious institution, often traps individuals in roles that stifle their emotional and sexual expression. The expectations placed on Aditi and Sandeep—particularly regarding their roles within the family and society—highlight the burden of maintaining the facade of a perfect marriage, even when the emotional connection is absent.

The ritual of marriage, as seen in the play, becomes a site of tension. Aditi's internal conflict stems from her recognition that the ritual of marriage is more than just a personal promise—it is a societal contract, a public display of conformity to social norms. Dattani uses this tension to critique how marriage rituals often suppress individual freedom, especially for women, who are expected to fulfil certain roles that serve the family's reputation rather than their own desires.

Symbolism of Gender and Identity:

In addition to the rituals of marriage, Dattani uses symbolic elements to explore themes of gender identity and empowerment. Aditi's struggle with her identity within her marriage is emblematic of the larger societal constraints placed on women. The play subtly critiques how women are expected to perform their roles within marriage, not for personal fulfilment but for the benefit of family and tradition.

- 1. Aditi's Struggle for Self-Identity:** Aditi's emotional journey is marked by her awakening to the realization that the rituals of marriage and the expectations of society no longer serve her. Her struggle is not just with Sandeep, but with the very idea of womanhood, which has been defined for her by tradition and society. Through her journey, Dattani highlights the internal conflict that women face in reconciling their personal desires with the roles they are expected to play in a patriarchal society.
- 2. The Role of Rituals in Defining Identity:** The rituals in the play are symbolic of how societal structures define and restrict individual identities, particularly those of women. The act of taking seven steps around the fire is not just a marriage ritual but a metaphor for the roles that women are expected to perform in society. Aditi's realization that these roles are suffocating her is a key turning point in the play. Dattani critiques the ways in which rituals often become a form of social control rather than an expression of individual choice.

Conclusion:

Seven Steps Around the Fire is a profound exploration of the tension between tradition and individual id-

entity. Through the use of symbolism and ritual, Dattani critiques the societal and familial expectations that shape the lives of his characters. The seven steps, the fire, and the marriage ritual all serve as powerful metaphors for the emotional and psychological struggles of the characters, especially Aditi, who must navigate the complexities of her identity within the constraints of traditional marriage. Dattani's nuanced use of these rituals not only critiques the institution of marriage but also highlights the need for personal fulfilment, freedom, and the redefinition of societal norms.

By examining these symbolic elements, this paper demonstrates how Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* serves as a poignant commentary on the intersections of culture, gender, and personal identity, offering a critique of the ways in which rituals both liberate and constrain individuals.

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Here are some key words for the abstract you provided:

- Mahesh Dattani
- Seven Steps Around the Fire
- Symbolism

- Ritual
- Emotional conflict
- Cultural expectations
- Personal identity
- Gender roles
- Marriage
- Personal freedom
- Hindu wedding ceremony
- Emotional journey
- Human relationships
- Tradition
- Societal issues

These key terms capture the essence of the themes and analysis presented in your abstract.