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Being 'It' in Mahesh Dattani's *Steps Around the Fire***Susan Lobo**

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a radio play first broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January 1999, is loosely crafted as a detective story. Uma, the protagonist, chances upon Anarkali, a hijra falsely implicated for a murder. Anarkali may consider herself female but the consistent references to her as 'this thing' or 'that thing' underscore her objectification. The parallels between Uma and Anarkali are not only striking but ironic seeing that for all her education and privileged economic status, Uma, is as much an 'it' as the Anarkali she sympathizes with but firmly distances herself from. Fully aware of and complicit in her own objectification, Uma is reluctant to sacrifice the social and economic advantages of being the wife of the police superintendent to align herself with a hijra like Anarkali. In rejecting Anarkali's attempt to co-opt her as a 'sister', and in aligning herself with the very forces that objectify them, Uma remains as much a 'hijra', as much an 'it', as the Anarkalis of this world.

Key Words: hijra, objectification, gender

Mahesh Dattani has been heralded as a beacon of hope for modern Indian theatre in English. In view of the solid body of work he has produced over the years, and the successful performances of his plays all over the world, it is an honour well-deserved. Though very different from playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad in terms of thematic and formal considerations, Dattani shares with them a concern for the marginalized groups of society, be they women, children or homosexuals. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari observes that Dattani's theatre deals with taboo subjects that should ideally not be heard or spoken about in traditional Indian families, highlighting such "fringe issues" in play after play (47), a fact the playwright has himself admitted: "I'm strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power play in class and gender. A lot of my plays deal

with them and they remain the leitmotifs of my plays." (Das 159).

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a radio play first broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January 1999, and performed later that year at the Museum Theatre at Chennai on 6 August, he puts the spotlight on yet another 'invisible' group, the hijras. The heroine of his play, Uma, finds her fate embroiled with the hijra community while investigating a murder. And while on the surface it may appear that they have very little in common, given that Uma belongs to the upper echelons of society, the play shows how hijras and women are not treated so very differently.

Loosely crafted as a detective story, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* has its female protagonist, Uma Rao, a Sociology teacher at Bangalore University, unofficially investigating a murder in the hijra community, something she stumbles upon while working on her thesis on caste and

gender-related violence. Her position as the wife of the Superintendent and daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner gives her easy access to the prison where Anarkali, a hijra, has been imprisoned for the murder of her 'sister' Kamala, a fellow hijra. Uma's quest for the truth (the identity of the real murderer) is ostensibly the focal point of the plot but Dattani appears to be particularly concerned with sensitizing viewers to the plight of hijras, an objective realised through Uma's voiceover which punctuates the narrative at regular intervals.

The objectification of hijras is perhaps best expressed through Suresh (Uma's husband) and his subordinate, Constable Munswamy's use of the pronoun 'it' or phrases like 'this thing' or 'that thing' to refer to Anarkali. As a castrated male, Anarkali occupies a gendered space that is neither here nor there. That the 'it' considers herself female does not deter the authorities from consigning her to the male section of the Central Jail in Bangalore. Her unstable gendered position coupled with the unfortunate circumstances in which she finds herself make her reach out to Uma as a 'sister', though Anarkali had herself mocked the notion of sisterhood initially because of the class divide that separates them. Nevertheless, it is the similarity in their situation as powerless gendered beings that allows us to consider them within the same frame of reference – both Anarkali and Uma are used by the forces of power; Anarkali by the police (who represent the state) and Uma by a dominating husband (who represents the centre of power within the family). Uma's stance as a woman of action is completely punctured when at the

end of this tragic tale, she learns that the truth she was seeking was a truth everyone except her had known all along. Discovering that it was Mr. Sharma, the minister, who was responsible for Kamla's death brings no consolation to anyone, least of all, to Uma. Kamla, the murdered hijra, and Subbu, the minister's son (who had secretly married her against his family's wishes, and who killed himself to escape the marriage 'arranged' by his father) are dismissed as minor collateral damage, casually sacrificed at the altar of tradition and society, Uma's quest is rendered futile, and nothing changes: the stereotypes persist, and the status quo, whether for women or for hijras, for herself or for the Anarkails, Kamalas and Subbus of this world, is maintained. This is the real truth, a bitter truth that Uma must accept. Unfortunately, it is a truth that does not set her free since, in the final reckoning, the class/caste/gender divisions continue to operate as before.

That Uma, who is working on a paper on caste and gender-based violence, allows herself to be objectified in her own home makes for an interesting but tragic irony. She submits to Suresh's whims, lets herself be treated as a sex object, and does little to resist his attempts to control every aspect of her life, including deciding what lingerie she should wear to please him. But we must not be fooled by Uma's quiet acquiescence to Suresh's blatant attempts at appropriating her personhood, for she has learnt the rules of the game and ways to use them to her advantage. She has learnt when to give in to get what she wants. For instance, she secures Suresh's approval in pursuing her career by making him believe that she is at his mercy. She does not resist his attempts to dominate her

but looks for the little gaps through which she can sneak in and fulfill her needs. Using her position as Suresh's wife to get access to Anarkali, she plays the hapless constable Munswamy well enough to get the information she needs. She does not hesitate to lie through her teeth when the need arises, and is not above using threats or emotional blackmail in her quest, whether it involves a hijra, her father or her husband. Suresh, for one, is completely deluded into believing the story about the present for Subbu's wedding (which she actually intended to use to bail out Anarkali), while Champa finds herself threatened with arrest for Kamla's murder if she doesn't comply with Uma's wishes.

What we see in Uma, then, is an interesting combination of docility and assertiveness as she plays the dual roles of victim and victimiser, of a woman who knows she is powerless but who uses every trick in the book to appropriate power when she can. A street-smart survivor, she pragmatically accepts the downside of being married to a man like Suresh in exchange for the social advantages of being his wife, advantages she never hesitates to use. The Uma we see in the confined space of her bedroom is not the Uma we see outside it, at the prison, at Champa's house, at Mr. Sharma's home or at Subbu's wedding ceremony. And yet, for all her privileged background, her scholarly pursuits, or even her attempt at playing detective, Uma is a powerless individual, particularly disadvantaged as a 'barren' woman. We are given to understand that it is her husband who is most likely the cause of their childlessness but she is unable to convince him to get a sperm count done, or prevent herself from

being dragged to the doctor by her mother-in-law.

Sadly, as a woman, and a 'barren' one at that, Uma's life is painted with the same brush as that of the hijras in the play. Interestingly, hijras are commonly understood to be castrated males, and the word connotes a powerless man in everyday parlance. A cowardly male is often abused as a 'hijra', a particularly strong attack on his manhood. Suresh's inadequate sperm count and his cowardice in letting Uma take the flak for it, his selling out to his bosses, taking credit for his wife's solving of the murder, and hushing up the truth begs the question – Who is the real hijra? Those like Anarkali who are derided as liars, criminals, and abnormal, or men like Suresh and Mr. Sharma, the minister, who use their status and clout to cover up the truth instead of having the courage to stand up for love, for sister/brotherhood, for the weak, for the truth? The fact that the whole incident is hushed up so that Subbu's suicide is dismissed as an accident with not even a mention in the newspapers indicates how even the media is rendered impotent by the forces of patriarchy.

For Uma and Anarkali, their gender becomes their nemesis as the rather striking parallels between their lives show. In the opening scene of the play, when Uma visits Anarkali in prison the first time, Anarkali is mercilessly thrashed for being rude to Uma. The very next scene takes place in Uma's bedroom where she discusses her prison visit with Suresh. Uma may not be beaten up or forced to 'service' the inmates and policemen like Anarkali in prison but the immediate shift to the scene in her bedroom where her husband coldly dictates what she must

wear underscores the similarity between the positions of the two women. The clever use of “A Hindi movie fight scene blaring from a TV set in the next room.” (Dattani 9) in the background while Uma quietly consents to her husband’s desires is suggestive of a violence of its own kind, a violence that completely erases a woman’s right to choose, whether it is something as important as when she wants to make love or something as basic as the clothes she must wear to arouse her husband. The bedroom, and by extension, her marriage itself, then is just another kind of prison, where Uma must ‘service’ her husband whenever he wants her to. So much for being a Sociology teacher at the university and the wife of a police superintendent, or for pursuing a paper on class-and-gender related violence! Dattani’s plays are always critical of the institution of marriage as illustrative of how “It is within heterosexual relationships (prototypically, within marriage) that men’s power over women has been most directly affirmed by the law as well as by custom and practice.” (Cameron and Kulick 45), and Uma’s marriage reinforces this observation brilliantly.

We see then that Uma, by virtue of being (labeled as) a childless woman, and Anarkali by virtue of her ‘confused’ gender as a hijra, share a similar fate.

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While we might admire Uma’s spunk and drive, even her status as an educated woman from a privileged socio-economic class cannot prevent her from being treated much the same as a ‘hijra’, as much an ‘it’ as the Anarkali she tried to distance herself from. She too must dance to the tunes of male authority when required, just as hijras are expected to sing, clap and dance at the behest of respectable society, and then shunned at every turn.

In the end, there seems no hope for either of the two women given that Uma is not ready to turn her back on her marriage to free herself, let alone liberate the Anarkalis of the world. She remains firmly ensconced within her luxurious world where she is at least “allowed” to work and study, no matter if she must behave like a puppet to satisfy her husband’s status and ego. What’s more, as an adopted child who is now derided as ‘barren’, Uma is perhaps far more marginalized than the hijras she sometimes pities and sometimes distances herself from. The duality in her attitude makes it impossible for her to achieve a feminist utopia where she will join hands with hijras like Anarkali through the institution of ‘sisterhood’ to challenge the men who relegate their status as human beings, as individuals, to that of a ‘this thing’ or an ‘it’.

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