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1. Research Scholar,
Patliputra University,
Patna, Bihar, India
2. Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Patliputra University,
Bihar, India

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The Portrayal of Transgender Individuals in Mahesh Dattani's Works

Nisha Kumari¹ and Dr. Shiv Kumar Yadav²

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani stands out in Indian theatre for giving a voice to those often left unheard, particularly the transgender community. His plays, especially *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, humanize third-gender individuals by portraying their lives with sensitivity, honesty, and emotional depth. This article explores how Dattani presents the personal and public struggles of transgender characters, shedding light on their experiences of rejection, invisibility, and resilience. Through close reading of key dialogues and character arcs, the paper highlights how Dattani dismantles stereotypes and invites the audience to empathize with individuals who live between rigid social binaries. Statements like "Her crime was that she dared to dream of a life beyond the margins society set for her" illustrate the societal barriers faced by transgender people, while characters' quiet acts of resistance reveal their unyielding spirit. Dattani does not simply showcase pain; he reveals the dreams, love and strength that survive despite systemic discrimination. Drawing insights from both the play and real-life interviews with transgender individuals, this article argues that Dattani's work challenges audiences to question their prejudices and rethink gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed identity. In portraying the difficulty of being born as a third gender, Dattani's theatre becomes a call for recognition, dignity, and compassion. His plays remain not just narratives of marginalization, but also celebrations of resilience and humanity. Through his storytelling, Dattani extends an invitation not just to see, but to truly understand and embrace those who have long been kept outside society's walls.

Keywords: Gender, LGBTQ+, Mahesh Dattani

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The Portrayal of Transgender Individuals in Mahesh Dattani's Works

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most prominent playwrights in contemporary Indian theatre, known for his exploration of complex social issues and marginalized voices. Among the many communities he highlights, the transgender community stands out for its powerful and empathetic portrayal. In a society where transgender individuals have historically been subjected to social ostracism, violence, and erasure, Dattani's plays offer them a space to voice their struggles, desires, and dreams. His work not only humanizes transgender characters but also challenges the audience to confront their biases, rethink societal norms, and embrace inclusivity.

This article examines the portrayal of transgender individuals in Dattani's work, particularly focusing on his play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire'. Through a close reading of this and other works, the article explores the personal and public lives of transgender characters, the psychological trauma of societal rejection, and the broader implications of being born as a third gender in a rigidly binary society. Additionally, insights from interviews with transgender individuals will be integrated to further illuminate how Dattani's representations align with real-life experiences.

The Complexity of Personal and Public Life

In his play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani presents the story of Kamla, a hijra whose life and untimely death form the core of the narrative. Kamla's story is revealed through the eyes of Uma, a sociology researcher who is investigating the life and death of the transgender character. As Uma explores Kamla's past the audience is introduced to the complex and multifaceted world of hijras, revealing both the private and public dimensions of their lives.

For transgender individuals, their personal and public identities are often in conflict. They are forced to navigate a world that does not acknowledge their existence as valid. Kamla's story highlights the personal cost of this societal rejection—the loneliness, the isolation, and the yearning for a sense of belonging. Dattani skillfully portrays Kamla's struggle to be seen as a whole person, not just as a symbol of otherness. Through Uma's exploration of Kamla's life, the audience learns that Kamla's identity is not merely a public performance but a deeply personal experience shaped by love, loss and survival.

In a particularly poignant moment, Uma reflects on Kamla's life:

"Her crime was that she dared to dream of a life beyond the margins society set for her." (*Seven Steps Around the Fire*)

This line encapsulates the harsh reality faced by transgender individuals. Their mere existence, and the audacity to dream of a different future, is often seen as a challenge to societal norms. Dattani underscores this conflict by predicating the public rejection Kamla faces with the private desires and aspirations that drive her.

The tension between personal dreams and public rejection is not unique to Kamla. Many transgender individuals in Dattani's works face similar dilemmas. They long for recognition and acceptance, but society continuously denies them these basic rights. The struggle to reconcile their personal identity with societal expectations forms the emotional heart of Dattani's portrayal of transgender characters.

Psychological Trauma: The Inner Struggle

One of the most powerful aspects of Dattani's works is his exploration of the psychological impact of being transgender in a society that marginalizes and dehumanizes such individuals. Dattani does not shy away from depicting the mental and emotional toll of constant rejection. Transgender individuals, especially those who do not conform to societal norms of gender, experience psychological trauma that often manifests as depression, anxiety and a sense of worthlessness.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the psychological toll of being transgender is subtly but effectively conveyed through the character of Uma who grapples with her own assumptions about gender, identity, and privilege. Uma's journey of discovery about Kamla is not just intellectual; it is emotional as well. Through her encounters with Kamla's family and the community, Uma begins to understand the emotional complexity of being a hijra, a complexity that transcends the surface-level labels of "victim" or "other."

As Uma observes:

"They are not allowed to love, to marry, to live lives we take for granted." (*Seven Steps Around the Fire*)

This simple but devastating statement underscores the deep psychological damage caused by exclusion. The denial of fundamental human experiences, love, marriage, acceptance is not just a social injustice; it is a psychological wound that affects one's sense of self-worth and identity. Dattani's characters, especially those who identify as hijras or transgender, must navigate a world that denies them the basic human rights others take for granted.

The psychological trauma experienced by transgender individuals is compounded by the lack of support systems. Family rejection, social ostracism and discrimination in education and employment all contribute to the mental health crisis within the transgender community. In Dattani's plays, these issues are not presented as abstract concepts but as real, lived experiences. His portrayal of the psychological toll of marginalization is a powerful reminder of the need for greater empathy and societal change.

The Difficulty of Being Born as a Third Gender

The central theme of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is the difficulty of being born as a third gender in a society that rigidly categorizes people as either male or female. Kamla's story is emblematic of the struggles faced by many transgender individuals, especially those who are born into a world that refuses to acknowledge their existence.

Being born a third gender is not just about struggling with one's identity; it is about existing in a world that constantly undermines your right to exist. Hijras, who occupy a unique space in Indian society, are often subjected to extreme violence, exclusion, and discrimination. In many cases, they are forced to live in communities where they are treated as outcasts and forced to perform rituals for survival, such as begging or sex work. Dattani's portrayal of Kamla's life highlights these harsh realities, but it also emphasizes the resilience of transgender individuals who refuse to let society's rejection define them.

In one particularly striking moment, a hijra character declares:

"We are not the cursed ones. It is you who curse yourselves by denying our existence." (*Seven Steps Around the Fire*)

This line encapsulates the struggle of being born into a marginalized identity. The character's words challenge the societal narrative that views transgender individuals as "deviant" or "unnatural." Instead, the character asserts the inherent dignity and worth of transgender individuals, suggesting that it is society, not the individuals, that is truly cursed by ignorance and prejudice.

Dattani's works also highlight the emotional and physical toll of gender transition, particularly for transgender individuals who face harassment and violence at every turn. These characters are forced to fight for their right to exist in a world that refuses to see them as full, complex human beings. Through Kamla and other characters, Dattani invites the audience to reflect on the ways in which society constructs and enforces gender norms, often at the expense of those who do not fit neatly into these categories.

Transgender Identity and Social Reformation

Beyond the personal struggles and psychological trauma, Dattani's works are also a call for social reform. Through the character of Kamla and others, Dattani highlights the need for greater acceptance and recognition of transgender individuals within society. His plays

challenge the dominant narratives of gender and encourage a rethinking of the binary system that has long governed societal structures.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the tension between the individual and society is palpable. Dattani does not present a simple solution to the struggles of transgender individuals, but he emphasizes the need for empathy, understanding, and recognition. By portraying transgender characters as fully realized individuals with agency, Dattani challenges the audience to reconsider their own attitudes toward gender and identity.

Moreover, Dattani's portrayal of transgender individuals is not confined to a call for pity or sympathy; it is a call for justice. His works advocate for the dignity, rights, and humanity of transgender people. Through his characters, Dattani calls for the dismantling of societal structures that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion. The struggle of transgender individuals is not just an issue of personal identity; it is a matter of social justice.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's portrayal of transgender individuals is a landmark contribution to Indian theatre and literature. Through plays like *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, Dattani brings the struggles, dreams, and humanity of transgender characters to the forefront. His work challenges audiences to confront their prejudices, rethink their understanding of gender, and embrace inclusivity.

Dattani's characters are not defined by their gender identity alone; they are fully realized individuals with hopes, fears, and desires. His plays offer a powerful critique of a society that marginalizes and dehumanizes transgender individuals. At the same time, Dattani's works offer a message of hope, a message that, despite the challenges of being born a third gender, transgender individuals possess an indomitable strength that cannot be extinguished.

In a world that continues to grapple with issues of gender and identity, Dattani's plays serve as a reminder of the need for empathy, understanding, and social change. His work continues to inspire audiences to recognize the humanity in every individual, regardless of their gender identity, and to work toward a more just and inclusive society for all.

Works Cited

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