

# Unveiling the Lived Realities of Transgender Identity in Contemporary India through Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

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## **Abstract:**

In India, the transgender community (often referred to as Hijras, Aravanis, or Kothis, among other terms) occupies a unique and historically significant, yet often ostracized, position within the social fabric. Despite their ancient presence and spiritual reverence in some contexts, they frequently face systemic discrimination, prejudice and violence. To examine how Indian literary works represent transgender individuals, this paper analyses the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* and explains how the author, Mahesh Dattani, portrays their social, emotional, and psychological struggles. Additionally, the study examines the role of traditional institutions, particularly marriage and family, in shaping or hindering their lives, while investigating the societal prejudice, discrimination, and violence faced by the transgender community and contributes to the broader discourse on gender identity and human rights in India.

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The existence of the third gender has been identified from nearly three thousand years. The Vedic literature dating from 1500 BC to 500 BC divides sex and gender into three categories based on prakriti or nature-Pums-prakriti (male), stri-prakriti (female), and tritiya-prakriti (the third sex). It also connects the three genders with nine planets, like the tritya prakriti representing Mercury, Saturn and Ketu. The Buddhist or Brahmanical description of gender links it with presence or absence of certain characteristics and abilities which signifies napunsaka, the third gender. These people are also popularly termed as 'neutral gender'. Jains differentiate gender as dravyalinga, a biological mark, and bhavalinga, psychological-mental mark. The Manu Smriti, a historic work of the Hindus, dating from 200 BC to 200 AD explains the origin of the three genders. According to Manu Smriti, a child is born either male, female or third gender based on the quality of a particular seed. Patanjali, the great Indian linguist, has pointed the three genders as basis of Sanskrit's three grammatical genders in his work on Sanskrit grammar, *Mahabhaya* (200 BC). He mentions the third gender as kliba, pandaka and napunsaka. A similar observation is mentioned in the Tamil text, *Tolkappiyam* (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC). Besides, our ancient texts have identified three gods of dance and music, namely gandharvas, male, apsaras, female and kinnars, neutral. Vatsyayana describes his division of the third gender as strirupini, those who take form or dress like women, and purushrupini, those who dress like men.

With this historical introduction, one can see that literature serves as a powerful medium to bridge the gaps in understanding, offering a nuanced portrayal of experiences that are otherwise silenced or distorted. But what is the status of the third gender representation in contemporary India?

Mahesh Dattani, a prominent contemporary Indian playwright, has consistently explored sensitive social issues in his works, bringing marginalized voices to the forefront. His play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a seminal work that directly confronts the challenges faced by the transgender community, particularly within the context of marriage, sexuality, and the pervasive societal attitudes towards them. “Seven Steps around the Fire does hold up a mirror before the society. But what it reveals is something unusual.” (Joshiyura 32)

Being transgender is considered an outcome of sins committed in the past life, as, quite often, they are not accepted as normal. The soul profession declared for them is begging for money on pathways or public transport, and on the occasion of marriage and childbirth. The Hijra community has historically witnessed perpetual discrimination and exploitation. This is what Mahesh Dattani has pointed out in his radio play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, illustrating the existential problems in the lives of hijras. “Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love” (Dattani 10-11)

The name ‘Hijra’ was coined very later and was initially called ‘napunsakas’, ‘namansuh’ and the neuter gender. The term is from Urdu origin with a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic which literally means ‘neither male nor female’. They are considered as the male gender who have lost their male capacity in an accident. They are the sub-culture of LGBTQ who have their own structuralized community.

The play touches upon the public sentiments of the Hijras, eyeing on the unsupportive system of Indian society. In the drama, Champa, the head hijra in the play, with Anarkali, another hijra, have been accused of murdering their beautiful sister Kamala. Uma Rao, the daughter of the vice chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of the superintendent of police Suresh Rao, investigates this case as a part of her research on Hijras. The play shows the marriage ritual between Kamala and Subbu, the son of an influential minister Mr. Sharma, which was not accepted by the society. Therefore, to protect themselves from societal abuse and allegations of unethical marriage, they planned an evil plot to kill Kamala.\

To an average reader, Kamla-Subbu marriage seems to be improbable. This is because Kamla is a Hijra and Subbu is a ‘normal’ man. Initially, the reader may feel that Dattani is overstating the issue.” (Joshiyura 52)

Uma gets aware of the secret behind the murder of Kamala through a photograph in Champa’s residence. She also visits Sharma’s residence to uncover the identity of Salim and his connection with the case. Later incidents like the release of Anarkali, marriage of Subbu, etc. help to solve the case. Subbu at the end kills himself out of grievance and guilt. This resolved the mystery of Kamla’s murder. This story reveals the harshness of the subaltern transgender community who can’t raise their voice against humiliation and injustice. Uma expresses, “They have no voice. The case was hushed up and it was not even reported in the newspaper. Subbu’s suicide was written as an accident.” (Dattani 42)

Besides the protagonist Uma, Mr. Suresh Rao, Munnuswamy, a constable, and Mr. Sharma depicts the stereotypical mindset of Indian society about the transgenders. This is proven when they address hijras as ‘dogs’ and use the pronoun ‘it’. On the other side, Uma feels love, care and affection for Anarkali, Kamala and Champa, and decides to help them get justice.

The play opens up with Sanskrit mantras on marriage. In the same manner, the title *Seven Steps Around the Fire* defines the cultural ritual of Saptapadi where the bride and groom take seven steps revolving around the sacred fire to solemnize their marriage. It resembles the central viewpoint of exclusion and

tragedy giving social commentary. It is an element of richness in diverse cultures, problems, and dark sides of human society. The play reveals the trauma faced everyday by an unconsidered gender, and the reality of love paradox in this progressive world is highlighted by the so-called educated and civilized people's regressive behavior.

This play by Mahesh Dattani conceptualizes the main theme of 'Why are hijras denied for marriage?'. Similarly, the title of the play highlights the central sacred ritual of marriage. The play portrays the institution of marriage to highlight the hypocritical mind-set of the society where transgenders are not allowed to marry and attend the function, but they are called to bless the newly married couple for their good life. The play also describes how this hatred results in honor killing just to avoid the conventionally unacceptable marriage, which might lead to social disgrace of the family.

The historic Supreme Court judgement defining transgender as the Third Gender serves as the backdrop of the study. Besides, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) also monitors and protects the rights of all the citizens, including transgender communities, and the violations may amount to punishment for the perpetrators, be it an institution or an individual. Continuing with the spirit of the SC judgement, three gender options— male, female, and eunuch were introduced in passport applications from 2005. At the same time, it is also observed that application forms for admission and employment also reflect the option of a third gender. Encouraged by the judicial intervention and subsequent favourable legislative measures, the participation of transgender individuals in politics and public life is also increasing.

According to the data collected by Home Science Journal, Indian Supreme Court has recognized transgender people as The Third Gender in April 2024. The apex court also allowed transgender to have admission in educational institution and attain employment. The transgender people are diversely known as Hijras and Kinnars in most parts of North India, Aravanis or Thirunangai in Tamil Nadu, Yellamma in Karnataka, Shiv-Shakthi in Andhra Pradesh, and Jogappa in Maharashtra.

According to the Indian census of 2011, total population of transgender is around 4.88 lakh including the total of 8422 in Haryana. Also, this census reported 55,000 children as transgender, as identified by their parents. In addition to that, trans individuals got their voting rights in 1944 but the task of issuing them voter identity cards got stuck in the male and female question.

Today several individuals from the transgender community have become prominent in their respective fields. For example, Dr. Manabi Bandyopadhyay, author of A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi, served as the first transgender Principal of a college, and Living Smile Vidya, author of I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey, turned out to be a professional artist.

The paper has delved upon a multidisciplinary understanding of the societal challenges faced by transgender people, developing better awareness and sensitivity towards the transgender community and the legal frameworks favouring them. Portraying societal hypocrisy and problems of transgenders through literary perspective, it establishes a link between literature and socio-cultural issues concerning transgender. The research exposes the underlying hypocrisy prevailing in the society and presents the irony of transgender people who bless the married couple, the privilege they are socially denied. Similarly, they bless the new-born babies but paradoxically they are biologically deprived of the pleasure to reproduce. The study spreads awareness and resonates as a wake-up call for mankind to not hold onto conventional beliefs of heteronormativity and has pointed out the progress of society in accepting transgender individuals as a part of itself.

Besides all this, the present world is full of opportunities for them as government and private institutions are now accepting the commissioning of transgender employees. Currently an esteemed college of

Southern India, Loyola College, has appointed a transgender professor in the shift-1 of the Department of English. This is an epistle of revolution in a sovereign country where people as well as institutions are presenting humanity and equal representation to transgender.

With all this being said, the study is optimistic about the future of the transgender community in the Indian context, characterised by democratic institutional framework, transforming public perception and societal change. Visibility and voice of transgender individuals through literature and public discourse shall further hasten the process of the desired democratic space for the transgender community in the near future.

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