

Rationalistic and Humanistic Study of MD's Play: 'The Seven Steps Around the Fire': An Exploration of Marginalisation and Social Exclusion

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Abstract:

This research paper delves deeply into the socially marginalised sections and their social exclusion in Indian society, as highlighted in Mahesh Dattani's selected plays. The researcher will analyse the live situations critically, exploring the selected plays in the light of rational humanism. The purpose of the paper is to trace such blind age-long beliefs and prejudices that make the powerless and voiceless innocent human beings marginalised and socially excluded even in the modern, educated Indian society. Social, political and cultural powers collectively attack and deprive them of their basic human rights and identity. They are made to live a humiliated and depressed life, whereas they are in great need of our utmost sympathy and support. The researcher will use the close reading, critical and rational analysis and deep interpretation of the text. Primary and secondary sources as books, research articles and papers, will be taken into consideration.

Keywords: Marginalisation and social exclusion, rational humanism, blind beliefs, humiliated and depressed life, sympathy and support.

Introduction:

Indian society has a traditional multilayered structure and is based on age-old social and cultural beliefs, some of which have been irrelevant and harmful to human beings as well as society in the current scientific, democratic and digital era. Nonetheless, some old-fashioned people, even educated men and sections of the society, follow them blindly as if they were divinely created values and ideals and could never be violated. Going against them is supposed to go against God and religion. But when these values become the weapon of exploitation, violence, crimes, discrimination, untouchability, slavery, inequality and injustice in the hand of powerful politicians, police officers, public administrators and male dominated families; then society divides into two sects as central or main stream powerful section and other lower weaker section that has been pushed at boundary line or marginal area of the society.

In such a social reality, Mahesh Dattani emerges as a powerful voice of unvoiced people in the modern Indian English drama in the very last decade of the twentieth century and the starting quarter of twenty first century with his powerful humanistic and realistic dramas in which he unearths the illogical and dehumanised traditional social customs and ideologies that have not been voiced yet. His plays become the voice of the silent, marginalised and deprived people of Indian society. Such people are too weak, frightened and in the minority against deep-rooted illogical ideologies, customs and biased administration, well supported and represented by mainstreamed powerful sections of society. If they somehow protest against the repressive system, they are forced to be silent or crushed mercilessly. This social exercise is anti-humanistic and irrational; hence, it should be denounced and prevented. They have no option but to

suffer injustice and discrimination silently. In this way, they are deprived of basic human rights such as liberty, equality and justice that are a must for the well-being of human beings and betterment for society. His plays centre around the lives of individuals who are excluded from the social mainstream and those who have to bargain identity, dignity and survival in the oppressive structures. This paper takes into consideration Dattani's radio play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire' (1999) to interpret the marginalisation and social exclusion of the hijra community from the point of view of rational humanism.

Rationalism is a philosophical term which asserts that reason is the most important tool for acquiring and testing knowledge. The information perceived by our sense organs is unclear and chaotic. Imam Subekti stated that (2021), "Rationalism, reason is the main source of knowledge. Theoretically, he contradicts empiricism by refusing to consider the five senses as a source of knowledge." (mentioned Umi Afifah 2023, 47). It is the reason that processes the unclear information to produce the knowledge, which can be called the ultimate truth. A rational man is a man who thinks in a logical, reasonable way and trusts evidence-based ideas, things and knowledge. His understanding is deep, stable, non-emotional and scientific.

Umi Afifah (2023) explores the history of rationalism in her research article (2023), "Etymologically, rationalism comes from Latin ratio (reason), English Rationalism. Several important figures in 17th-century rationalism include René Descartes (1596-1650), W. G. Leibniz (1646-1716), Christian Wolff (1679-1754) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). Rationalism is considered continental philosophy because these figures mostly came from mainland Europe. Descartes is one of these many figures who is an important philosopher in the in-depth discussion of rationalism. The founder of rationalism was the French philosopher René Descartes, the "father of modern philosophy" (Umi Afifah 2023, 47).

G.E. Moore, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchen and Daniel Dennett are famous modern Western rationalists. In India, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Periyar EVR, Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Bai Phule, Narendra Achyut Dabholkar, Basava Premanand, H. Narasimhaih, Prabir Ghosh, Gopa Raju, Ramachandra Rao, Saraswathi Gora, Babu Gogineni, Shahu Maharaj, Sahodaran Ayyappan, and later on Dr B. R. Ambedkar were the famous Indian rationalists.

Humanism is also associated with rationalism as it applies reason and critical thinking. The meaning of humanism has always been adopted and changed from age to age. Nevertheless, it is undisputed that humanism is a philosophical term which keeps human beings at the centre and human dignity and human values are given paramount significance. The welfare of human beings is its ultimate goal. It advocates human rights as equality, liberty and justice for the betterment of human society and rejects all kinds of discrimination based on caste, gender, religion, birth, place and language.

The UDHR was announced by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948. "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms outlined in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made based on the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty." (UDHR, 1948, article 2)

Italian poet and philosopher, Francesco Petrarch, is called the father of humanism. The Renaissance period is known for the remarkable development of humanism. Karl Marx, Michael Foucault, Nietzsche and Charles Darwin are all Western modern humanists. Western humanism is basically materialistic and consumeristic, whereas Indian humanism is the perfect blending of both materialism and spiritualism. Tagore, Swami Vivekanand, M.K. Anand, M. N. Roy and Dr B. R. Ambedkar are also famous Indian humanists.

M. N. Roy believes that social morality should be the result of reason and human welfare instead of religious dogma or inherited power, since illogical beliefs often justify oppression and marginalisation (Roy 112).

Roy's statement brings out a fine blend of rationalism and humanism terms known as rational humanism. The illogical fears of religion, dogmas, disease, sexuality, and death in Indian society tend to dehumanise people. These bases of exclusion can be explored, and equality, compassion, and dignity as universal human values can be advocated through a critical approach to rational humanism, which pays attention to reason, human dignity, ethical responsibility, and scientific temperament. Rational humanism protests superstition, metaphysical determinism and discrimination based on illogical sociocultural dogmas and promotes the values based on human experience and rational inquiry.

The play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire', a radio play (1998), depicts the pathetic plight of the Hijra community in current Indian society. Playwright Dattani narrates the story of Kamala, a beautiful hijra and Subbu, a normal man and the lonely son of highly reputed minister Sunil Sharma, who get married secretly in a private temple. Mr Sharma doesn't accept it and considers it against his social and political reputation. Kamala is murdered secretly, and the crime of murder is charged on Anarkali, another innocent Hijra, who is later pushed into prison through the misuse of political power by Mr Sharma. The police and administration help him in this conspiracy. Even the fourth strong pillar of democracy, the press, also doesn't highlight this matter in newspapers. Subbu is unknown to it and his father's dehumanised planning. Other Hijras remain silent in fear, though they know everything about the murder case, yet they can't raise their voice against the powerful system. It is Uma Rao, a research scholar of sociology, who is working for doctoral research on "class and gender related violence". (CP12) She is the wife of Mr Suresh Kumar, the Superintendent of police and daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner of police. She takes this case under her investigation and tries to find out the real culprit of the murder. Though her husband Mr. Suresh, knows everything about this case, he doesn't help her. She talks with Anarkali in the prison and Champa, the head of the Hijra community, to find out the real culprit in the process of investigation. After that, she comes to know that Anarkali is innocent, and she is caught in a conspiracy of Kamala's murder. She arranges money to bring Anarkali out of prison. Champa helps her in this job. On the second wedding ceremony, when Subbu's marriage is going to take place, he loses his heart to see the photos of his and Kamala's private marriage given by Anarkali. He shoots himself in a crazy state of mind, charging his beloved's murder upon his father, Mr Sunil Sharma. Uma Rao wants to push the criminals into prison, but no action is taken against Mr Sharma by the police. Even the press remains silent.

As playwright mentions:

Uma (Voice over) "They knew, Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamala. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people..." (CP 42)

Humanistic and Rationalistic Analysis

The story reflects the true and real discriminative ideology of Indian elite society and the hollowness of its traditional societal customs. According to humanism, the life of every human being is important hence each human being has the right to lead a life with love, dignity, liberty, justice and equality. There is no place of discriminations based on gender, caste, community, language, region, or religion. All jobs of society find their end in the well-being of human beings. None has the right to interfere in the other's personal matters and kill to death. The dignity of a human being is an important aspect of humanism. If love of both Kamala and Subbu is true, why then are they made to be separated from each other and murdered or suicided directly and indirectly? It doesn't matter that they are not normal man or woman but both are ultimately human beings. May be difference in their physical structure or organs, but such differences are natural and not artificially made. On the grounds of physical natural dissimilarity, they can't be excluded from loving and living together, nor deprived of basic human rights. Everyone has the right to run their body, love and live free, provided it doesn't decrease others' freedom.

Humanist International highlights, “Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives.” (Byelaw 5.1 of the International Humanist and Ethical Union).

It doesn't matter that two lovers should belong to equal reputed families or social communities. The reputation of family and sociopolitical status is manmade and not natural. But human beings and love are natural. Love is a psychophysical need of human beings. It doesn't see discrimination among caste, creed, gender, region and religion. But if they find their true happiness in living and loving with each other, they and their wedlock should be respected and validated by society.

Dr Vipinkumar Parmar expresses his anger aptly at the dehumanising behaviour made by society with the Hijra community, “Their hearts are full of milk of human love and sympathy. It is a grave crime that they are denied human love and identity. Their hearts also throb with love and the joy of life. Nature curses them with denial of sexual competence, but society curses them more cruelly with their social boycott.” (Parmar, 149)

Hijras are ultimately human beings and pine for human love and social relationships like other people. Hence, they have a keen desire to get married and live a safe, social and happy life with dignity. But society and its stigmas don't allow them to lead such a joyful life with dignity. No one wants to touch them or make social bonds with them openly. They are considered less and lower categorised creatures. The attitude toward them is full of bias and cruelty. If someone dares to make any kind of relations with them, they are boycotted from civilised society and even murdered to death. Through the voice of Anarkali playwright highlights the ardent desire for social relationships of Hijras as well as the dehumanised social treatment of them.

Uma: Yes, I know she is arrested for the murder of her sister, but....

Suresh chokes with laughter as he is gargling and coughs.

Suresh: (off) What is that you said? Sister? (Re-enters.) There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day. (CP. 10)

ANARKALI. 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. Oh, brother, give me a cigarette, na.

MUNSWAMY. Shut up. And don't call me a brother (CP.11).

Anarkali: (Sympathetically). Oh, (smokes). If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister.

Uma: Oh, thank you. (CP.13)

Injustice with hijras is also highlighted in these lines in which Anarkali is caught in the murder case of Kamala and pushed into prison and maltreated by the police without giving her any chance to offer any justification in her defence. As

Anarkali. I didn't kill her. She was my sister!

Munswamy (hitting the bars). Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!

The other inmates begin to beat Anarkali up.

Anarkali (hitting back at first). Ai! Don't touch me!

The other inmates scream with pleasure as they beat up Anarkali.

Aaagh! Aaaagh! (CP. 9)

The above conversation clearly points out the irrational and dehumanised treatment of police administration of subalterns. The role of the police is biased and illogical. To save the real culprit, the police arrest innocent Anarkali without any solid evidence and torture her brutally as if she were a real murderer. Whereas police should have arrested Mr Sharma, the real conspirator and criminal of the murder of Kamala. It is the legal duty of the police to provide safety and justice to ordinary people.

Pranav Joshipura remarks: “Suresh's attitude towards hijra is as Munswamy's. His superior education doesn't make him rational or reasonable or compassionate.” (Joshipura 2009. P.37)

In a prejudiced society, to speak or unveil the truth is risky and challenging to life. Fear plays an important role in concealing the truth. It doesn't allow one to reveal it openly, as the police and courts don't guarantee

the speaker's safety. One has to either suffer silently hidden the truth in fear, or be ready to die boldly in the consequence of revealing the truth. One finds oneself in a dilemma.

As Anarkali shares her fear with Uma, "They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail." (CP. 14)

Gender discrimination and patriarchy are the irrational tools in the hands of male-dominant families and society through which the innocent woman marginalised section, is exploited inhumanely. Women are considered the second sex and have no right to raise their voice against their atrocities. Though Uma is a research scholar and a well-educated lady belonged to a reputed family, yet she is ignored and laughed at by her husband, Suresh, shamefully. As she undertakes the investigation of the murder mystery of Kamala, a disreputable hijra. She is checked by her husband, Suresh, as well as Munswamy.

As Dattani describes the dominant position of man over woman:

Suresh: Look, it is one thing that I am allowing you to go through these cases for your thesis, but don't feel any compassion for them. They will take advantage.... Keep your soft heart for me. Munswamy:

Madam, if you don't mind me saying, why is a lady from a respectable family like yourself...? There are so many other cases. All murder cases. Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother. And that shelf is full of dowry death cases. Shall I ask the peon to dust all these files?" (CP Vol. I. p. 7)

Patriarchy is also anti humanistic and irrational social dogma, as can be seen in the behaviour of Minister, Sunil Sharma, who couldn't digest the arranged love marriage taken place between his son Subbu and Kamala, a beautiful hijra. It is against his social and political reputation. He takes it as an insult. In an arrogant bent of mind, he gets Kamala murdered secretly and arranges a second marriage to Subbu without knowing his son's choice. He doesn't care about his son's love feelings and gives importance to his social reputation. At last his own son commits suicide under the patriarchal pressure that is clearly an illogical and dehumanising crime.

Dattani describes this truth through Uma's voice to her husband, Suresh, at bedtime as

Uma: ... The photograph was what Mr Sharma was after. A Polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamala had taken soon after their private wedding in some remote temple... A picture of Kamala as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with a wedding garland around him. The Poojari didn't know that Kamala was not a woman. Of course, Mr Sharma couldn't have it- totally unacceptable. So, he arranged to have Kamala burned to death. But Salim had to tell him about the picture. He sent Salim to threaten Anarkali and Champa... He did get the picture eventually... after losing his son. What a price to pay! Now he will be arrested and tried for murder. Suresh: I don't know.... (CP. 41)

At the end of the play, we come to know through the over voice of Uma that even the fourth pillar of democracy Media remains silent and indifferent to this heartbreaking event, as it belongs to the Hijra community.

Neha Kumari unveils the diabolical face of society in her article Sex, gender and sexuality (2024): A study of Mahesh Dattani's play 'Seven Steps Around the Fire': "Society's unacceptability of gender variations has often led to a drastic outcome. Kamala's marriage to Subbu is evidence of the diabolical face of society. Hijra marriage is impermissible in the 1990s as well as in the present day." (IJHGS P. 93A.)

In nutshell, the present play Seven Steps Around the Fire unveils the irrational and anti-humanistic attitude of the well-educated elite Indian society towards the socially excluded, marginalised Hijra community. As the title suggests that seven steps around the fire are supposed to be the most important religious holy ritual that generally takes place during the Hindu marriage functions. Without it, no wedding is considered legal and socially acceptable. But it is an irony that if this holy ritual is exercised by the hijra community during their weddings, it turns into unreligious and unacceptable. The holy fire of seven circles around the fire becomes the fire of cremation. It is a totally irrational, dehumanised and prejudiced practice as true marriage is the meeting of two loving souls. In a democratic country just like India and in the age of

science such irrational prejudices and dehumanised cruelty towards marginalised sects is very shameful to us.

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