



## Deconstructing Gender Binaries in Dattani's Indian Theatre

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Mahesh Dattani dismantles rigid gender categories through his radio play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a work that thrust hijra lives into the consciousness of mainstream Indian English theatre. Dattani does not simply portray hijras as exotic curiosities or pitiable victims—he constructs a dramatic architecture where their erasure from legal, medical, and social discourse becomes the very engine of the plot. Drawing on Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity alongside South Asian scholarship on third-gender traditions (particularly Gayatri Reddy and Serena Nanda), a close reading is undertaken that attends to what the play refuses to show as much as what it reveals. The murder mystery format, this paper argues, is not incidental but essential: it mirrors the investigative labor required to make visible what dominant society has rendered systematically invisible. The paper also engages with K. Prabha's recent work on feminist interventions in Dattani's drama, extending her analysis into territory she does not fully explore—namely, the specifically transgender and non-binary dimensions of the playwright's vision.

**Keywords:** - Gender Performativity, Hijra Identity, Mahesh Dattani, Indian English Drama, Queer Theory, *Seven Steps Around The Fire*

### Introduction

Indian English drama has always had an odd reputation or perhaps no reputation at all, depending on whom you ask. For decades, scholars treated it as the poor cousin of fiction and poetry, two genres that produced internationally celebrated figures from Narayan to Rushdie to Roy. Theatre, everyone seemed to agree, belonged to the regional languages: Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada. English was for novels. So when Mahesh Dattani arrived on the scene in the early 1990s, writing plays exclusively in English and staging them in Bangalore, the critical establishment was not quite sure where to file him. He did not fit.

And that, I want to suggest, is precisely the point. Dattani's refusal to fit into linguistic categories, into genre expectations, into polite thematic territory is what makes his work so important for thinking about gender. *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, written for BBC Radio 4 in 1999, takes on what may be the most radically marginalized community in South Asian society: hijras. These are individuals whom Serena Nanda famously described as occupying a space "neither man nor woman" (Nanda 15), though even that formulation is too neat, too binary in

its negation. What Dattani understood and what his play stages with considerable sophistication is that the problem is not simply that hijras fall between categories but that the categories themselves are instruments of violence.

My argument in what follows has three parts, and I want to be upfront about them. First, I read *Seven Steps* as a work that does something structural to the tradition of Indian English drama it changes what the form can talk about and how. Second, I put Butler's gender performativity in conversation with the realities of hijra life in India, and I am candid about the tensions this produces. Western queer theory does not map smoothly onto South Asian gender systems; pretending otherwise would be intellectually dishonest. Third, I do a sustained close reading of the play, attending to its use of the radio medium, its diary-frame narration, and its strategic silences. My guiding claim is that Dattani's theatre does not just depict gender fluidity. It takes apart the machinery that produces and polices gender in Indian social life.

### **Existing Scholarship on Dattani**

The critical literature on Dattani is growing but remains, to put it bluntly, thin in places. Erin Mee's work on contemporary Indian theatre offers a helpful overview, situating Dattani among playwrights who pushed back against the dominance of mythological and realist modes (Mee 42). Angelie Multani's edited collection is useful as a starting point, though the essays tend toward thematic description rather than the kind of theoretical heavy lifting the plays deserve (Multani 8). Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri gives Dattani sustained attention in her study of Indian English drama, but her reading of *Seven Steps* feels rushed, as if she recognized the play's importance without having the space or perhaps the inclination to unpack it fully (Chaudhuri 134).

K. Prabha's recent article makes a stronger intervention. She argues that Dattani's plays dismantle patriarchal structures by exposing the violence woven into normative domesticity and heterosexual institutions (Prabha 97). This is a persuasive reading, and I draw on it throughout this paper, but I think Prabha stops short. Her analysis focuses on feminist themes in a broadly cisgender register; the transgender and non-binary dimensions of Dattani's work which are, after all, front and center in *Seven Steps* receive less attention than they warrant. Anita Singh's essays on Dattani's use of space (both literal and metaphorical) offer another productive angle, particularly her observation that spatial marginality in the plays mirrors social abjection (Singh 63). But again, the formal dimension the question of what the radio medium does to the representation of gendered bodies goes largely unaddressed.

This is the gap I am trying to fill. Most Dattani criticism treats the plays as containers for social messages. Extract the theme, analyze the message, move on. But a radio play is a strange animal. It strips away the visual body entirely, forcing the listener to construct gender from vocal cues alone. That formal feature has political implications that nobody, as far as I can tell, has seriously theorized.

### **Theoretical Framework: Butler, Reddy, and the Limits of Translation**

Let me be direct about the theoretical scaffolding. Butler's *Gender Trouble* argues that gender is not the expression of some inner truth but a "stylized repetition of acts" that creates the illusion of a stable gendered identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). This is by now a familiar argument, almost a commonplace in gender studies, but its radicalism should not be dulled by familiarity. If gender is performed rather than possessed, then the regulatory norms that police gender the Love Laws, as Roy might call them are not protecting a natural order but producing one. *Bodies That Matter* pushes further, insisting that even materiality is a process of reiteration, that bodies "come to matter" only through their relation to regulatory ideals (Butler, *Bodies* 2). The pun on "matter" substance and significance is deliberate and devastating.

But here is where things get complicated, and I want to be honest about the complication rather than papering over it. The hijra community, as Gayatri Reddy documents in *With Respect to Sex*, does not straightforwardly map onto Western categories of transgender identity or queer subjectivity (Reddy 28). Hijras have their own kinship structures, their own ritual practices, their own internal hierarchies. The guru-chela system, the nirvan operation, the badhai performances at weddings and births these constitute a social world with its own logic, one that Butler's theory can illuminate but cannot fully contain. To read hijras solely through a Butlerian lens flattens their specificity into a generic narrative about gender subversion. And yet to reject Butler entirely would mean giving up analytical tools that are genuinely useful for understanding how the play works as theatre.

So I take a deliberately mixed approach. I use Butler where Butler helps and set her aside where she does not. I supplement her with Revathi's autobiography *The Truth About Me*, which provides a first-person account of hijra life that both supports and complicates performativity theory (Revathi 45). And I keep returning to Spivak's haunting question "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 271) because it puts necessary pressure on the whole enterprise of representing hijra subjectivity through the conventions of English-language drama. Dattani, to his credit, seems aware of this pressure. *Seven Steps* does not pretend to solve the problem of subaltern speech; it dramatizes the problem itself.

## Reading Seven Steps Around the Fire

The play opens with the sound of a diary being opened. A small thing, apparently. But consider what it establishes: we are entering this world through Uma Rao's written record, through the consciousness of a sociology researcher studying hijras for her PhD. Her husband, Suresh, happens to be the police superintendent investigating a hijra's murder. Dattani is not being subtle here the academic gaze and the juridical gaze are presented as twin instruments of surveillance, both claiming authority over hijra lives from positions of comfortable exteriority.

The murdered hijra is Kamla. And here is the devastating formal choice: Kamla is never heard. Not once. She exists entirely through other people's accounts Anarkali's grief, the police investigation's paperwork, fragments of gossip and evasion. In a play about hijra identity, the hijra at the center of the story is voiceless. If that is not a staging of Spivak's thesis, I do not know what is. The subaltern does not speak in *Seven Steps* not because Kamla has nothing to say, but because every institutional structure in the play conspires to ensure that her speech never reaches us.

Anarkali is a different matter altogether. She is the hijra Uma actually talks to, and she is magnificent: sharp, sardonic, unsparing. When she describes the guru-chela hierarchy or the economics of badhai, she is not providing ethnographic footnotes for the listener's benefit. She is asserting that the hijra community's social world has its own coherence, its own dignity, its own rules and that the dominant society's refusal to see this coherence is a form of willful ignorance. I find Anarkali one of the most compelling characters in Indian English drama, and it bothers me that she gets less critical attention than she deserves.

The plot turns on the revelation that Kamla had secretly married Subbu, the son of a powerful man. The seven steps of the title are the *saptapadi* the ritual circumambulation of the sacred fire in a Hindu wedding and the fact that a hijra and a man performed this ritual is, within the play's moral universe, the ultimate transgression. Not just illegal. Ontologically impossible, according to the logic of Hindu marriage law. And so Kamla was killed not as a crime of passion but as an act of ontological enforcement, a restoration of the binary order her existence had ruptured.

Dattani does not stage this as melodrama. The truth seeps out sideways, through half-truths and bureaucratic obstructions, and when the case is finally closed Subbu's suicide, the father's connections ensuring silence Uma's diary registers it with a flatness that reads as

exhaustion rather than closure. The system absorbed the disturbance and resealed itself. What lingers is Uma's question, which is also our question: what word exists, in any language, for what Kamla was?

## Language, Medium, and the Politics of Voice

That question about language is not rhetorical it is the play's deepest argument. Throughout *Seven Steps*, characters grope for adequate vocabulary. Uma defaults to the clinical terminology of her discipline: "eunuch," "transgender," "third gender." None of it works. Anarkali inhabits a messier linguistic space where Hindi, Urdu, and English collide, and the instability of her language mirrors the instability of the categories everyone keeps trying to impose on hijra identity.

If Butler is right that gender is constituted through discourse (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25), then the collapse of language around hijra identity is not just a failure of representation it is an active mechanism of exclusion. The law that criminalized hijra sexuality (Section 377, at the time of the play's writing), the medical establishment that pathologized hijra bodies, the academy that turned hijras into research subjects all these discursive regimes parade through the play, and all of them prove, in the end, inadequate to recognize hijra personhood. Dattani is staging a crisis not of identity but of discourse.

And then there is the radio medium. On stage, you see bodies. You categorize them male, female, ambiguous before a single word is spoken. On radio, bodies vanish. Gender becomes purely vocal: pitch, register, intonation, the grain of the voice. For a play about gender fluidity, this is an extraordinary formal decision, because it forces listeners into the active construction of gender, making audible the perceptual habits that normally operate below the threshold of consciousness. I am surprised more critics have not discussed this. As Prabha rightly observes, Dattani's method involves "making visible the invisible mechanisms of patriarchal control" (Prabha 99) but on radio, the mechanism is not visibility at all. It is audibility.

## Conclusion

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* is, I think, one of the most intellectually serious works in the Indian English dramatic canon and I use "serious" not to mean solemn but to mean genuinely rigorous in its thinking about gender, power, and theatrical form. Dattani does not offer solutions. He does not tell us what word to use for Kamla, does not suggest that legal reform will fix what ails the gender order, does not pretend that a single play can undo centuries of entrenched caste-class-gender violence. What he does is refuse to let us look away.

The play's relevance has only grown. The NALSA judgment of 2014, the Transgender Persons Act of 2019 these are steps, but activists on the ground will tell you they are faltering ones, hedged with compromises and shot through with the same bureaucratic logic that silenced Kamla. The questions *Seven Steps* poses about who gets to define gender, who gets to speak, and whose life counts as grievable remain, for all the legislative activity, stubbornly unresolved. Dattani's theatre cannot resolve them. But it can and does insist, with a quiet, persistent fury, that we not stop asking.

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