

## Understanding the Hijra Community: *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

### Introduction:

A gender blender I

A creature of illusion

Of genital confusion

A gorgeous butterfly”.

(Alistair Beaton and Ned Sherin)

Dattani, as a socially committed writer, continues with his mission to “delve into more mysteries, uncovering some of the hidden India” (Mortimer, 4) and problematizes our understanding of “truth” by subverting the genre of detective fiction in the whodunit, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The marginalized Hijra community is an unwelcome yet unavoidable presence in Indian society, and the play complicates our conception of the Third gender in India, questions the representation of Hijras as third sex and sufficiency of sexual politics and gender performativity as adequate bases of their identity and practices, obliterating other axis of identity such as religion, sect, kinship and blood and local moral and economic identity of “Izzat” (respect).

Ancient, medieval and colonial (still powerfully prevalent in postcolonial India) narratives, especially in literature, represented the hijra people through their own ideological agenda and framing premises, while the objects of representation themselves remained silent. Their sexual ambiguity incorporates both the ascetic and the erotic aspects. The pan-Indian acceptance of the thirdness of sexuality is evident in the convention of dividing humanity into three sexual categories -- man, woman and Napumsaka -- depending on presence and absence of certain physical features, procreative ability and Jain's differentiation between material or physical (dravyalinga) and psychic sex (bhavalinga) (Zwilling and Sweet, 365). In Islamic medieval India the focus was shifted on to the eunuchs in their important courtly and imperial role as political adviser and administrator, religious figure and slave -- specially recruited as protector of the female domain. Their social and embodied difference -- both for being imported from outside the boundary of the state and for the inability to perpetuate the lineage -- stereotyped them as clever, strong and loyal servants in a world of nepotism and shifting loyalty. Colonial narratives, however, repudiated their slave or third sex status and projected hijras as one of the castes or tribes - reducing them into a community stratified by gender and religion. Latter with the promulgation of the criminal tribe act in 1871, they were officially included in the list of criminal tribes, compulsorily under registration, surveillance and control. (Reddy, 25-30).

The mention of the figure of "sukumarika" in *Kamasutra* and other ancient Indian literature and even the reference to male and female napumsaka -- depending upon penetrative (masculine) and receptive (feminine) role -- in Jain exegetical literature bear witness to the affiliation of the erotic aspect of the third gender. In many Islamic

literatures offering of love to an idealized slave and representation of a desire of a free male to become the slave of his beloved (slave controlling the 'slave of love', his master) did not subvert the power structure.

With increasing colonial intervention, gendered, sexist and racist principles got functional: European travelers tried to explain the eunuchs's status in the oriental imperial and religious sector by referring to their not-man aspect, awarding them the duty to handle women without impropriety, and thus, sexualizing the role of eunuchs who were mostly African in origin. Citizens were encoded in gendered sexuality and all the previous discourses of active and passive sexuality that were accorded free and slave status were uniformly reinterpreted as masculine and feminine or natural and unnatural propensities. This secularization of the discourse of their religious responsibilities and criminalization of the love of the eunuchs resulted in an epistemic shift in the understanding of homoeroticism, social hierarchy and embodied difference. Male impotence was categorized as the defining feature of eunuchs, cross-dressing and performances like dancing of men in public place were prohibited, laws were passed criminalizing their body and proscribing their labour -- sexual or asexual work/occupation. The knowledge legitimized the moral condemnation and subjugation of the criminal castes by which these bodies must be servile, regulated and controlled, in effect, made docile (Reddy, 25-30).

Central to the colonial power and subjectivity was the homology the colonizers drew between sexual and political domination -- their essential masculine nature legitimized their colonizer position and subjugation of feminine subject (men minus

masculinity). The discourse of resistance upheld by Gandhi and Vivekananda highlighted the “dissident androgyny” (Leela Gandhi, 100) and celibacy and the concept of “god eunuch”, a position superior to both man and woman, and the principle of non-violence disabled colonial sexual binary by creating anti-colonial subjectivity.

However, neo-colonial forces continued to perpetuate the colonial code and hijras were removed to the status of outsiders. Consequently, though the concept of hijras as ‘neither man nor woman’ institutionalized their role of ritual performers, the erotic aspect threatens the normative reality of the gendered and sexist society of modern India. Though social prestige derived from Muslim court accorded them some respect in traditional society and Hindu mythic sanction of their alternative gender role of generating fertility validated their presence in ritual of marriage and birth, with the increasing rigidifying of sexism in society, only the ascetic aspect got privileged to the point of neutralizing and making derogatory the erotic aspect. The heteropatriarchal society feels it disturbing to allow the hijras the sexual role which is not only threatening to the male identity but is transgressive to the feminine image, since their mimicry of the image, to follow Homi Bhaba, is at once a resemblance and a menace.

Yet the fact remains, with the decline of their traditional role the hijra people have become a butt of sexual exploitation and prostitution has gained in importance in maintenance of the group, at least financially. However, secrecy permits the practices to slip easily through the moral net.

Any attempt to challenge the fixity of the specific structure which validates their “outsider” status or any act threatening to destabilize the discourse of marginality is

countered with institutional violence. The play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, exhibits how Subbu's (a normal man's) attempt to acknowledge the status of a Hijra as wife through marriage not only transgresses the boundary of gendered female identity but also destabilizes the concept of masculinity. It also puts under scanner the practice of freely exploiting an "invisible marginality" and dumping them as the "outsider". Naturally, the young, beautiful hijra, Kamla, is burnt down to exterminate any possibility of disruption.

State machineries like media, police, politicians and respectable families join hand to hush up the truth and defunct penal consequence of a guilt committed. Yet, a resistance is built in the process of saving the marginalized non-guilty by a subterfuge, a sisterhood developing between a respectably married woman and socially outcast hijras, a revelation of the truth at least to the seeker, a reclamation and legitimization of a non-normative relation through the violent yet resisting means of suicide.

### **Myth:**

The category of third sex has been part of the Indian world view for three thousand years. The mention of "kliba", "pandaka", "tritiyaprakriti", most popularly *napumsaka* in Sanskrit and Pali, provides historical evidence of a pre-modern concept of sexuality and a sexual thirdness in Indian consciousness. A pan Indian acceptance of third sex and variety of sexuality is evident in the abundance of transgender desire, same sex procreation and other non-normative fantasies in mythological, folk-lore, Vedic and Puranic literature and an extensive mythologic sanction of the origination and functions of the third gender. Apart from Brahminical and Buddhist literature, Jains offered most elaborate and thorough account about the third gender and transsexuals, accepting a

difference between “dravyalinga” (biological sex) and “bhavalinga” (psychological sex). The affiliation of the erotic aspect could be derived from the mention of figures of “Sukumarika” in *Kamasutra* as well as in the derogatory assignment of hyper libidinous nature to the third sex in exegetical Jain literature after fifth century B.C. The figure of “brihannala” -- a disguised identity of Arjuna -- in *Mahabharata* bears witness to the approval of their artistic pursuit. The concept of “ardhanariswara”, the hermaphrodite, is the religious icon for their specific gender status. An important icon around which they configure their identity is the renouncer, the “sannyasi”. Sometimes they project themselves as both male and female – “adha-dic” (half-in-the-middle) (Reddy, 117).

Among several myths of origin, the play refers to the myth mentioned in the *Ramayana*. When Lord Rama was on his way to his exile in order to fulfill his father’s promise, many of his devotees decided to follow him even in the forest. But the lord commanded the men and woman to return and some of the followers reluctantly returned to Ayodhya. However, there were few who, unable either to disobey or leave him, sacrificed their genitals and became hijras. Another legend reads when this earth got barren and the whole creation came to a halt, lord Shiva castrated his genital and threw it into the earth to make it pregnant. Thus many of the Hijras, professing to be asexual, “badhai” (emasculated) Hijras, undergo nirvana operation or emasculation to remove testis to achieve the power of blessing with fertility to the newly wedded.

Thus the traditional Hindu society found a place for the third gender in its cultural narrative as ritual performers validated by the mythical sanction of their role as the giver of blessing in marriage and child birth. In fact, the acceptance of the erotic

aspect of their specific gender role in the Hindu tradition is evident in their mythic association with the process of reproduction: the blessing conferred on his devoted followers by Lord Rama, with the power of instilling fertility in spite of their genital impotence, ensured their presence in festivals celebrating marriage and birth. This is of course an effective way to incorporate the minority into the society and institutionalize their presence in those social performances from which they are excluded. The castrated lord Shiva representing the principle of progeny accords them an alternate reproductive role. Interestingly, the image of hermaphrodite is an inclusive conceptual terrain which incorporates both the male and female principles, containing the potential of progeny.

The word 'hijra' which came into being after the Mughals, as Uma points out, is Urdu in origin. This is a combination of Hindi, Parsi and Arabic, literally meaning "neither male nor female". However, the term was not an unproblematic extension of the terminologies accommodating large variety of sexualities. The monolithic segregation based on sexual difference identifies a group as transvestite.

A paradigmatic shift came with the introduction of this concept of hijra, neither male nor female -- a negation, unlike the hermaphrodite including both the creative principles. Now castration instead of incorporation became the defining principle. The practice of castrating the male slaves to make them the protectors of harems fostered the non-erotic aspect despite adding to their social prestige.

The third nature of sexuality was hardly found in medieval India (eighth to eighteenth century), but an explicit reference to eunuchs was obvious in the courtly tradition of the Islamic world, especially in the Mamluk Sultanate, in Chinese and

Byzantine Empire and in India after the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Though social history tends to concentrate its overarching focus on their role in courtly and imperial sector, religious and slave status were equally important. Medieval foreign travelers were fascinated by the vibrancy and longevity of their presence and increasingly dominant role as political adviser, powerful administrator, chamberlain, trustworthy guardians of harems and inner female domain etc.

New myths were taking their origin due to their social and embodied difference. Apart from the fact of the eunuchs mostly being geographical outsiders and thus belonging to their owners, their physical difference imbued their body with moral worth. They were thought to be trustworthy and loyal subject in a world replete with conspiracy, shifting loyalty, nepotism and betrayal, bound by the perception of them as clever, loyal servants who had free spatial access to all segments of society. Shaun Tougher notes, the “condition of the eunuch as a castrated man” is what made them valuable commodities in the politics of empire building” (Tougher 152). As in ancient India, their religious importance is evident from the account of such travelers like Ibn Batutta and Ibn Jubayr who referred to holy eunuchs as the venerated guardians of treasury of prophet’s tomb at Madina and Kaba. In many Parso-Urdu literary texts, there had been a suggestion of love offered to an idealized slave by his master cum beloved. The representation of desire did not subvert the social hierarchy and threaten power relation. “This trope was the normative lens through which relations of love, both within and outside of the formal slave topos, was depicted” (Reddy, 25).



With colonial encounter Europeans rendered all sexual activities outside the dimorphic gender binary criminal and omitted the various topoi from social hierarchy. The pre-eighteenth century European interpretation held that it was the impotence of the eunuch which guaranteed their honesty; and afterwards their role was further sexualized and was proclaimed that their non-man aspect enabled them to handle any demonstrations where women were concerned. Men were encoded in gendered sexuality and all the previous discourses of active and passive sexuality that were accorded free and slave status were uniformly reinterpreted as masculine and feminine or natural and unnatural propensities. As Indrani Chatterjee holds, gradually the lens of gender and sexuality “displace[d] the lens of slavery in the language of the colonized” (Chatterjee, 67).

Since castes were the primary social category in the colonial imagination, hijras were categorized as a caste and further designated the status of criminal tribe with the promulgation of the criminal tribe act in 1871. The term eunuch came to encompass any male declared or medically proved impotent and the offences of the potential criminals were punishable under 377 of Indian penal code. The knowledge base of the classification and construction of criminal derived much from Victorian discourse of crime, deviation and degeneracy constituting the dangerous class encompassing unemployed, poor, vagrant, prostitute etc (Reddy, 27). The concept of indigent defect in character and hereditary predisposition towards criminality led to the myth of caste affiliation. A naturalization of sexual difference and centrality of defective body in the construction of identity rendered the body oppositional and diminutive status.

However, the formulations of Vivekananda and Gandhi evolved round celibacy and androgyny, which challenged the colonial construct of masculinity and domination. These two principles threatened the colonial homology of political and sexual domination and championed the non-violent means of combining activism and courage -- courage needed to rise above “kapurusatva” (cowardice) and to become “man” as the authentic man expresses the desire to be both sexes. Thus Gandhi’s philosophy creatively disabled the colonial sexual binary, inverted the turn of militant nationalist debate of reproducing imperial category by highlighting Indian virility and elevated femaleness with maleness to create the anti-colonial subjectivity as god eunuch (Gandhi, 100-1). The transformation of sexual energy into a higher spiritual power through disciplining of body and sexual renunciation adopted for the remasculinization of the nation was powerful concept in hijra ideology, identity and izzat.

But the hegemonic allegiance to the sexual dualism in the sexist society of modern India dominated with neo-colonial forces, with the motif of enjoying its discursive privilege, tends to oppress the erotic aspect of the hijra identity to the point of immorality and unnaturalness. Yet the sexual arousal and appeal of the sexual outcasts led to their sexual intimacy with so-called “normal” man. In this case, either the non-normative practice is kept under secrecy or the minority is cast out and even exterminated. The increasing regularizing of secular temperament corresponds to the weakening of the mythical sanction of their role as ritual performers leading to the decline of their ascetic importance.

The myth cannot hold the hijras any longer tied to the centre and the modern society/state/law cannot accord them a life of respect and security; they are pushed to the marginal position of the “invisible minority”. In spite of the fact that the origin myths repeatedly refer to the deepest bonding of love and loyalty as the point of their origination and function through relations like “dudh behan” (milk sister) and “dudh beti” (milk daughter”) (Reddy, 122) as well as various stories of fatal and impossible pregnancy, society continuously thrusts them outside the matrix of relationship and questions their fidelity to any relation: “there is no such thing for them” (*Seven Steps...*, 10).

An appropriation of myth helps the inclusion yet in another way -- an effective strategy of projecting the Other as the perpetrator and perpetuator of all our negativities. Culture’s fear of the sexual anomaly is manifested in projection of the antonymic identity of that of giver of blessing – the cursing evil. Various supporting “tales” complete the image of evil and undesirability. The potential exposure or revealing practice of their lack of genital acts as a source of their disembodied power and they use it powerfully to make people ashamed, and scare them of being cursed with infertility. In order to explain away the so-called shame of nonreproductibility, Uma’s mother declared that the hijras put curse on her and her husband for not allowing them to sing and dance in their wedding -- the reason for their adopting Uma. This proves a really convenient way to maintain the image quite suited to that of negating agency in failure, transferring their own anxiety of being marginalized for the discontinuity, to the already outsiders to culture. This is rather convenient in a society where recognition of woman’s gender status depends upon her

reproductive role and the third gender is precluded from their desired feminine role on the basis of their nonreproductibility.

Society's growing disbelief in the mythic association intensifies their self-abnegation. Anarkali mockingly observes, "As if god is on our side..." A terrible appropriation of the myth comes into being in the play as, by the end of it, the auspicious blessing conferred by the hijras on the house of Mr. Sharma ("May God bless this house with many children", *Seven Steps...*, 38), is realized by the death of its only son Subbu.

### **Gender Confusion:**

Butler rightly observes that the disciplinary society in its production of normalized subject attempts to affect "a false stabilization" by making biological characteristics determinates of fixed gender role and situating gender in the reproductive domain (Butler, 125). The uncomfortability of the mainstream in asserting the presence of another alternative in form of hijra people is evident in naming the category as "third gender" – the word "third" having a covert connotation of undesirable, transgressive, uncommon, unusual and abnormal. However, the word also carries potential resistance to the conceptual structure built upon the norm of duality.

Since heteropatriarchal society does not admit of male sterility in the domain of reproduction (evident in the normally married relation of Uma and Suresh), their not-man aspect is based on the lack of virility-- man minus man. Their not-woman aspect depends upon their exaggeration of the femininity to the point of "mimicry" and acting in sexually suggestive ways 'which would be considered inappropriate, even outrageous, for the

ordinary women in their significant traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers” (Nanda, 35). They move a step farther even to attract the attention to their specific hijra identity in following manners: loud and abusive manner of speech, exaggerated feminine gesture and movement, loud clapping and demonstration of shamelessness signified by potential exposure of genitals (Reddy, 202-10.) Thus they are reduced to the marginal mockery of men, stigmatized but embodying the ambivalence of Indian sexuality and thereby presenting a portent and enduring identity in its cultural universe.

Apart from the threat to normate the body, the sexual discourse of Hijra people disturbs the normative structure in another way: their sexual cartography differentiates gender depending on sexual or gender performativity rather than anatomy. Centered on penetration in sexual intercourse, *pantis* refer to the penetrative masculine men and *kotis* to the receptive feminized men as well as *narans* i.e. all women. It also refers to the complexity and specificity of the configuration of gender identity that varies with the spatial, temporal and life/history positioning and could be contested, negotiated and reconstructed. The cartographic understanding which positioned their self-definition against the *koti-panti* spectrum, challenges the hermeneutical theorization of gender difference by showing the embeddedness of sexual difference in other differences and problematizes the construct of hijras as personification of third sex (Reddy, 74-7). In a research among travestis in Salvador Brazil, Don Kulick observed, that they have changed the man/ woman schema into man/not-man -- penetrator and recipient “into which both biological females and males who enjoy anal penetration are culturally situated” (Kulick, 579).

A very effective instrument by which the mainstream marginalizes the sexual deviants is a shift of epistemic standard of prioritizing its own experience over the lived experience of the people concerned. Their desire for and sense of prestige associated with femininity amounting to repeated claim to be counted as women by non-hijra people was mocked and rejected. In order to augment femininity they undergo “nirvana” operation (emasculatation), in order to intensify womanliness and beauty (sometimes under Dayamma multiplying risk factor), they take hormone pills, less harmful but equally tortuous erasures like twitching facial hair and bleaching, use whitening cosmetics, acquire feminine markers like growing long hair -- a mark of identity and status distinguishing them from kada-catla kotis (Reddy, 131) and sex workers --wearing sari and jewelry (except “munda”), the widow, even to the extent of flashing of genitals proving at least the not-man aspect.

Their enactment and production of the gender identity as woman depends on cartorial markers, performance of women’s task and various modes of beautification. The gender aspiration is fulfilled by the performance and development of various gender components. Their tailored identity accords prestige or “izzat” (respect) to them within. To echo Roland Barthes, if there is a difference between “innocent” and “intentional”, (quoted in Reddy, 132) they try to elide the difference -- using hormones for example. Hebbdige observes while “innocent” is “expressive of normality as opposed to deviance, i.e. [ensembles which] are distinguished by their relative invisibility , their appropriateness, their ‘naturalness’, ... intentional communication is of a different order... it is a visible construction, a loaded choice” (quoted in Reddy, 132). Yet they cannot unequivocally project themselves as women, their non-reproductibility virtually

preventing the identification, in spite of their strong desire to nourish a baby that gets expressed through different ritual performances.

To follow Judith Butler, our identity is gendered but it is performative and parody subverts both the category and the lived experience of the gender. Moreover, if discourse is the foundation and our body is the text, the nature of parody or subversion will depend on the textual surface. In that case, confusion arises whether the hijras performance is the subversion of the category or the resignification of the normative gender identity. While their sartorial preferences, use of hormone and cosmetic beautification appear to be an uncritical reinscription to the normative gender ideals, other performances problematize the categorization. The assumption of an identity located outside gender binary and other activities which focus on gender liminality rather than accentuating femininity such as the loud clap and lifting the sari to expose genitalia are performative correctors to an easy theory of mere reinscription. Their ambiguity defies both the structure of mere subversion and resistance and the poetically flamboyant feminine surrogate. In public space the disembodied exposure or revelation of the absence of genitalia inverts paradoxically the power in favour of hijras by exhibition of mutilation and implicitly incorporating the curse of infertility. Thus the people without “sharam” (shame) transgresses women’s domain by sheer shamelessness and mocks male power and procreative imperative (Kira Hall, 435-8). Moreover, these empowering stances encapsulate limitations of binary analysis by not taking into account imbrication of gender with or within the multiplicity of differences that constitutes an individual’s life nor adequately captures what Trawick calls “intentional ambiguity of Indian life” (quoted in Reddy, 141). Thus the clapping which they call “dedh tali” (Hall, quoted in Reddy, 138) signals the onset of the

discursive practice signifying both solidarity and authenticity of the group and a potentially disruptive social and physical threat to “respect” of the society.

The play explores how, in spite of all mythical and imperial sanction of the presence of hijra people in Indian society, our allegiance to the sexual duality makes us both scared and intolerant of any gender discontinuity and we learn to Otherize them to the extent of dehumanizing a section of humanity. The audacity to defy and mock their preference for feminine gender role is evident in the chuckle with which Munnuswami reacts to Uma’s calling the hijra Anarkali as “she”: ”She! of course...”(*Seven Steps...*, 7). Unable to categorize, he reduces the “she” into “it”, the neuter gender, robbing her of humanity itself: “I will bring it” (*Seven Steps...*, 7). Almost in the same vein we talk of taming down a disobedient animal, the constable decides to “beat it up if it doesn’t” (*Seven Steps...*, 7). This system of unhesitatingly associating them with animals is equally commonplace for Suresh -- the superintendent belonging to the blue-blooded bureaucracy. Suresh casually observes, “They are as strong as horses or easily says “They fought like dogs everyday” (*Seven Steps...*, 10).

The duplicity of the discursive practice addressing the Hijras -- denigrating them to animals, thereby, reducing them into the hyper-libidinous reservoir of animal/sexual instinct, and simultaneously, presenting them as hyper strong and too aggressive to be a woman -- accentuates their status as gender outcast. With a reversal of epistemic standard, as common with queer and disabled people, the heteropatriarchy refuses to register their sexual preference and always identifies them as “castrated male” instead of their repeated claim to be identified with woman. The designation serves dual purpose:



on one hand, with the castration of the phallus, any discontinuity does not disrupt the hegemony and autonomy of the male body; on the other, resisting them from entering the arena of female sexuality, it removes the threat to abnormalized dimorphic discourse of sexuality in which virility is dependent on desiring women as the object of sexual satisfaction. The play exhibits the fearful impact the conjecture may have through the housing of Anarkali with male prisoners. Brutal consequence follows: “after servicing all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk” (*Seven Steps...*, 8). We may recall how we shuddered at Droupadi’s predicament in Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*, at once building up resistance against the frequently reported gang rapes by demanding more effective protection of law. But the legal system finds a collusion with the larger society in a nexus of indifference and silence when it comes to the assault of a hijra by refusing to acknowledge the phenomenal existence of the horrible fact.

This marginal entity is precluded from the mainstream by the sexist society to the extent, where even the academia is shut up for them. Papers and exams and other academic paraphernalia are as meaningless for them as other institutions by which the mainstream exerts, authenticates and justifies its power from which they are excluded as from marriage or family: “Shall I come to sing and dance when you pass exam?” (*Seven Steps...*, 12)

In India identity is relationally constructed and context-dependent in a different and greater degree than in the West. As Sudhir Kakar puts it, here “individualism stirs but faintly and [...] the subordination of the individual to the superordinate family interest and relationships is a preeminent value” (Kakar, 118). Hence in an Indian mode, the hijra

people try to situate their identity in relational and social context and position themselves in relational network of hierarchy and exchange. Apart from the guru-cela and Lashkarwala-Sheharwala (Reddy, 154) “riste” (relationships) that are prerequisite for kinship within the hijra community, other relations -- familiar as “Andhra riste” or “pyar ka riste” (relation of love) --are prevalent in the community. The latter category is neither as binding or obligatory nor legitimately ensuring lineage as the former nor is it restricted in the lineage or hijra house, but highly valued. These are the relations of “dudh behan” (milk sister, and “Dudh beti” (milk daughter) referring to the nurturing bond in which the mother nurtures her daughter with milk which, in turn, is shared by the sisters (Reddy, 165). These relations of care and tenderness embody Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of practical kinship. A psycho-analytical study of “koti” desire shows that hijras embody both the male fantasy of a cultural fusion with the maternal body and modal resolution of Oedipal complex and the female desire of “jodi” (pairing) by which they inscribe to the cultural construct of self and other, what Margaret Trawick calls “category mediation”: “If it is at all legitimate to think of ‘Indian culture’ as an organic whole, a system that can be moulded and described as such, then ambiguity must be a key component of that whole, a key feature of the communicative system by which that whole is maintained” (Trawick, 41).

The centrality of affective relation in the hijra kinship network and the assimilative procedures like symbolic performances of rituals and terminologies do not imply uncritical reflection of the consanguinal bonding in the non-hijra world. Neither are the relations completely counter procreative or counter-hegemonic, but as Reddy points out “a tension reflects through the polysemic body”. The architecture of ambiguity

central to their identity is at work here, mediated through their sexual difference and lived experiences. But our inability to conceptualize anything outside the regime of binary construct makes us deny any existence of relationship among the people located outside our structured universe.

However, the resistance gets built in both discursive/epistemic and practical level -- though on a minor scale. The constant denial of the hijra people's capacity to be in any relationship apart from materialistic consideration, is countered by Anarkali's explosive comments exposing the "immoral" and "abnormal" hidden pattern of sexual practice of which the outcasts like homosexuals and hijras are accused: "If you had a beautiful sister, you will give her a cigarette for a fuck, no?" or "You are not a sister-fucker?" (*Seven Steps...*, 11) The charity of normal person like Uma's mother is exposed as terrible deception and cruelty, throwing worthless coins to the beggars at signals on to the footpath and making them fight.

A more positive and potential resistance is effected by building up a subculture promoting an alternative method of creating bonding other than reproduction. Precluded from the specific regime, they seek for other -- "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" (*Seven Steps...*, 11). However, Munnuswami anxiously rejects any possibility of any relation with a hijra, be it that of brother and sister. The absence of any security provided by the society in case of the outsider ("You see us also a society, no?" *Seven Steps...*, 23), is countered by an alternative socio cultural existence. Otherwise "invisible" as individual, they are visible

as a mass presence singing and dancing in a group. Lack of acceptance of their non-normate body makes their autonomous existence virtually impossible. This is the reason Champa fears Kamla will not be happy in the world outside who previously came here leaving her former parent whose photographs she kept with her; Ramu ran away from his home to live with them. Interestingly, while they are seen as neither male nor female, negativising both gender, Champa -- the head hijra -- becomes both Kamla's father and mother ("adha-dic", half-in-the-middle, that is, both male and female) and challenges the fixity of the oppositional gender construct. Uma also prefers to call them children "just children" (*Seven Steps...*, 18) defying Munnuswami's insistence on calling them hijra. They are denied even the privilege given to women (we may recall Kamla Das' *Introduction* where she rebels against growing up into a "woman" consequent upon outgrowing childhood) in their childhood when gender is subordinate to other consideration.

An ideological and emotional bond of sisterhood between the subjugated female and the degenerated male or Hijra develops beyond the society's area of surveillance. Suresh's repeated addressing Anarkali as "it" is orchestrated with Uma's recognition of her as "she" which is a minor denial to inherit authority's epistemic standard. A policy of subterfuge is at work as in front of the authority and allied margins hide their real rapport and instead of calling Uma sister, Anarkali salaams the Memsaab, the wife of superintendent saab (*Seven Steps...*, 16) in public. The alliance advances farther and Uma pays off the required money to bell out Anarkali. At least one person investigates into the matter and gains the knowledge of the actual fact outside the community.

## **Marriage:**

Dattani presents a powerful expropriation of the institution of marriage in the play with its specific focus on Hindu marriage. The play performs a circuitous journey, starting and terminating on marriage, unique in its kind that frustrates/fulfils union by the medium of death. It exposes the paradoxical and superficial nature of the arguments forwarded on behalf of tradition, religion, law, family and other like institutions by which society keeps up its surveillance.

Marriage has remained a powerful cite throughout the centuries for contestation for power between individual and society. Since this is held to be the foundation for building family, the primary unit of society which replicates and maintains its power structure as well as reproduces the replica of the species, it has always continued to be the prime interest of every society. From a very early period, in almost every society the divine sanction has been recourse to its validation and legitimization. Christianity holds that marriages are made in Heaven; Islam believes in the prevalence of the practice in “Jannat” (heaven); Hinduism invokes gods and goddesses to bear witness to and authorize the bonding for seven life cycles. With the passing of time, religious authority was replaced by the law of state as the exerting authority of hegemonic control. The heteropatriarchal society with its exaggerated obsession with the domain of reproduction, exterminates any discontinuity or disruptive possibility in the regime of sexuality.

The Hindu marriage act reads:

THE HINDU MARRIAGE ACT, 1955 ACT NO. 25 OF 1955 1\* [18th May, 1955.]

Conditions for a Hindu marriage: A marriage may be solemnized between any two Hindus, if the following conditions are fulfilled, namely:- (i) neither party has a spouse living at the time of the marriage 1[(ii)at the time of the marriage, neither party- (a)is incapable of giving a valid consent to it in consequence of unsoundness of mind; or (b)though capable of giving a valid consent, has been suffering from mental disorder of such a kind or to such an extent as to be unfit for marriage and the procreation of children; or (c)has been subject to recurrent attacks of insanity or epilepsy;] (iii) the bridegroom has completed the age of 21 [twenty- one years] and the bride the age of 18 [eighteen years] at the time of the marriage; (iv.) the parties are not within the degrees of prohibited relationship unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two; (v) the parties are not sapindas of each other, unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two (<http://indiankanoon.org/doc/590166/>).

The play opens with the utterance of holy “mantra” which sanctions/sanctifies a Hindu marriage. The incantation reaches an ominous crescendo, and contrary to our expectation of watching the holy fire/fire god bearing witness to the oath of eternal bonding, engulfs someone -- latter discovered to be the bride herself --, and the incantation drowns into the scream of death. What follows is a gradual unfolding of the layers of secrecy and falsehood by which society’s intolerance reduces any non-normative sexual practice into non-entity – both literally and metaphorically. Even after the affiliation is cancelled, the practice does not pass out of existence. The hijras are

regularly used as sex object with or without their consent, in exchange of money or following mutual consent, and the practice is either kept veiled under secrecy and non-recognition or the tool of entertainment is dumped after utilizing its full potential. Complications arise as Subbu, the so-called “normal” man transgresses the boundary of accepted “moral standard” and marries the young beautiful hijra Kamla whom he loved and courted for sometime.

The centre feels threatened at the possibility of any readjustment of its relation with margin. The rise of Kamla to the status of wifhood challenges the heteropatriarchal norms which fixes the position for a “normal” woman -- her womanhood certified by the reproductive potential. The social prestige of Mr. Sharma, the minister and his family, the validity of the “usage and custom” of the religio-cultural tradition of India and the concept of masculinity/virility which depends upon its sexual complementariness to female, come at stake. She is burnt to death and to “ensure him (Subbu) in a right track” (*Seven Steps...*, 37) his father arranges a proper marriage with a proper woman from a respectable family: “This is the happiest moment for any parent --watching their child perform this rites” (*Seven Steps...*, 37). This respect for “right” however assumes a dubious status as the previous rites , performed with similar piety, were de-affiliated straightway since one of the participants did not fit into the conceptual framework which gives meaning to the performance. The marriage taken place between Subbu and Kamla in a temple observing all ceremonies prior to this is violated violently. Ironically, a classic nemesis comes upon Mr. Sharma for disrespecting the “holy” laws and he loses his son at the very day of his second marriage, arranged by him, as Subbu commits suicide. The institution of marriage with its overt emphasis on reproduction/birth is hit

back as it turns out to be the grave of both the bride and bridegroom, concretizing the promise to the letter: “You can’t keep me away from Kamla” (*Seven Steps...*, 39).

The play also explores the “normal” married life of Uma and Suresh. The gender domination is at work in subtle ways: Suresh loves Uma but in his own terms. He imposes his will on her in trivial matters like which night dress to wear, “allows“ her to go on with her thesis and cares of course for her “soft heart” and tries to keep it under control and regulation (*Seven Steps...*, 10). Their incompatibility in intellectual sphere and area of sensitiveness is evident. Even after being a teacher at a university, Uma cannot mobilize enough money to pursue her wish to bell out Anarkali. She got to ask her father for it and the message is readily conveyed to her husband. The peculiar women’s sphere in which Suresh accepts Uma’s independence and even refuses to share the interest, is the domain of shopping, handling guests, playing hostess and other issues of maintaining social relation and decorum as opposed to the world of service, politics and finance. She is free to choose gift for Subbu. He even does not control her expense in this matter: and “Have I ever refused you any money?” (*Seven Steps...*, 32) but she has to account for her need for the money taken from her father.

The colonial code of sexuality held any man declared or medically diagnosed an impotent, as eunuch and expelled any possibility of nonreproductibility from the “male” domain. Hence, greater and subtler domination is effected in the domain of reproduction. Since the patriarchal society does not admit of sterility in “man”, the reproductive incapability is imposed on Uma instead of repeated clinical testimony on the contrary. She has to abide by the wish of her mother-in-law to accompany her to the doctor in



order to authenticate her potency, while Suresh determinedly refuses to see the doctor to have a sperm count: “I don’t have to.” We may recall the movie “Mrityudand” where the barrenness was projected on the deplorable and pitiable “banjh” (impotent) wife whose pregnancy replaces her status with that of another outcast, the “vesshya” (infidel).

Uma’s encounter with Anarkali and the other hijras problematizes her superiority as a normal woman (Anarkali observes, “May be you are more unhappy than I am”, *Seven Steps...*, 14). Uma’s attempt to explain the unspoken laws of the mainstream family which alleges any opposition to one’s husband as an act of transgression to someone unadept in the rhetoric like Anarkali (“You are the daughter-in-law of the DCP and you ask me what you can do to save your sister?”, *Seven Steps...*, 13), exposes the fiction of happiness and it also shows happiness in most cases depends upon subordination and compromise. It, however, triggers off her journey from “I don’t have any power” (*Seven Steps...*, 13) to “I have my resources to verify all this” (*Seven Steps...*, 41). She tries to define her identity beyond wife of the superintendent: “I teach at Bangalore University ... I teach sociology” (*Seven Steps...*, 12). Uma uses the patriarchal misconception of the natural gendered preoccupation with shopping of women and bells out Annarkali. Her story of resistance includes developing a bonding of sisterhood with another marginalized section, an independent investigation of the case using her position in the hierarchical power structure as boss’ wife and preservation of the right to secrecy if not revelation. By the end of the play Suresh at least condescends to mention a hijra as “she”. The marriage does not dissolve, nor the respective position, but with these small changes, Uma curves a niche for herself.

### **Hierarchy:**

The play exhibits the embeddedness of power relations in our every “innocent” behaviour and the hierarchical structure of power relations transmits power downward with a continuous process of transforming its victims into agents. Constable Munnuswami, who is almost in tears at the possibility of being transferred by his boss superintendent Suresh for bringing his wife in “such” place compelled by her order, exhibits his power on the male prisoners quietening them with only beating the bars with his stick. Empowered by the law, he threatens and regulates the behaviour of the criminals under his custody. Licensed by indifference of law itself, the prisoners in their turn find a gush of pleasure at being allowed to beat up the physically weaker hijra Anarkali whom they have already assaulted sexually. The replication of the exercise of power reaches high water mark of comic potential as Suresh’s stamping of his finger to command his subordinate Munnuswami to “take it away” (*Seven Steps...*, 16) is imitated instantly by a similar gesture: ‘snaps his finger’ (*Seven Steps...*, 16).

The supreme comic spirit of Dattani is called into operation in the representation of class hierarchy sometimes subordinating and complicating the discourse of gender. Male Munnuswami gets easily threatened by Uma’s warning and shows a ready obedience since she is his boss’ wife. His outright refusal to accept Uma’s request as contrary to Suresh’s order, alters into obedience. And as an embodiment of impersonal power, Uma, the female, becomes “sir” whenever the tone gets imperative. Thus power

gets embodied itself as masculine (boss' wife) effeminizing the male subordinate by implication.

The comic instrument of role reversal becomes for Uma a powerful strategy of resistance and it helps her to continue her investigation/research and discover truth located outside the boundary of the knowledge offered by the power holders. It occurs in the repeated vacillation between the address of sir and madam to Uma: when politely and softly spoken to, Munnuswami calls Uma madam and tries to impose on her the instructions received from his superior -- even his own attitudinal frame-- but unconsciously switches over to sir when the statement is presented in shape of an order and his official designation is alluded to ("constable Munnuswami"). Its mechanical and performative nature get hyperbolically represented in Uma's switching over to the masculine gesture of dispensing order whenever she feels it necessary to keep something hidden from her husband or make Munnuswami help her in some deed grossly violating her in-laws' sense of "right" and "proper". Such events range from replacing the cigarette in her husband's drawer which she gave to Anarkali, to make him follow her to Shibajinagar to meet hijra Champa.

If power threatens to dominate the subordinate, it also deploys the strategy of alluring. Suresh, the superintendent of police, who is promised with the post of deputy commissioner and the higher police officials are compensated "more than adequately" to hush up the murder case of Kamla.

Thus the problematization of gender relation with the introduction of class factor exposes patriarchy to be a performance as masculinity incorporates within its definitional terrain, the subjugation of the weaker. However, an alternative discourse of hierarchical structure could be traced -- though not fully explored -- during Uma's encounter with the hijra people. The potential heir to the headship Anarkali tries heart and soul even to the point of disfiguring Kamla, her more competent rival, only to save her life. The head hijra Champa, in spite of being highly offended with Anarkali, submits to a law greater than her personal interest ("She is my daughter") and bells her out and leaves the lineage to her. The same commitment to the ideal prioritizes the guru-cela relation in field of responsibility and lineage over mother-daughter having greater bonding of affection.

### **The Narrative:**

The play, like many others by Dattani, may be seen as a generic experimentation, a re-reading of the fixed narrative structure by which events and performances get meaning. What we have here is the subversion of a whodunit in which the discovery of "truth", instead of getting publicized, is hushed up into deeper secrecy. The written official record as opposed to the unwritten statement of the "fact" -- the bed rock of history -- is exposed to be the fiction promoted by the allied forces of media, state (police and ministry) and social elites working in perfect collusion.

A very effective tool producing and produced by the marginalization is the outright expulsion of the other from the regime of truth. The play shows from the very beginning how the myth about falsehood being the natural element of hijra people is fostered and shared by the cross section of the society. Both Munnuswami and Suresh echo the generally held belief: "They are all liars..." Unlike detective stories, Uma, with no motive other than writing her thesis on a less explored area, let apart any search for truth behind the murder of Kamla, a hijra, puts her finger on the keyhole of a door hiding multilayered mysteries behind. Paradoxically, the functional value of truth proves illusory equating both its revelation and suppression with death: "They will kill me also if I tell the truth .If I don't tell the truth, I will die in jail" (*Seven Steps...*, 14)

Uma, initially as a subversion of the position of a detective (since she is an academic research scholar), recoils from knowing the truth which may endanger her comfortable white colour status. Yet her intelligent, sensitive and searching nature gets her entangled with the trail. She at first cannot grasp the truth from the hints dropped by Anarkali: "...Selim's wife put fire to her beautiful skin andd burned her to the other world" (*Seven Steps...*, 15). A false but flashy melodramatic narrative appears in its stead: if Selim used to come for Kamla everyday, then his jealous wife might have sufficiently convincing reason to burn her rival down.

However, Uma continues to delve deeper into the mystery by building and dismantling several hypotheses and possibilities: first she disbelieves Champa's intention in regard to bailing out Anarkali; then having a hint of a competition between Anarkali and Kamla as potential successor to champa -- the head Hijra --, she holds Anarkali to be

the prime suspect. With Selim's appearance, the scenario changes as she discovers that Champa was at stake of losing an earning member of her family consequent upon Kamla's running away. The configuration changes once more as Anarkali gets cleansed since Kamla's elopement would have been favourable to her, and Champa comes under her screening net. Tension builds up as Uma gets gradually more interested in seeing the photograph of Selim's hunt, and the truth flashes on her that Anarkali might have removed it. Champa refuses to throw up the truth. A hint is dropped as Anarkali asks Uma whether she would be present at the wedding of minister's son, but aware of Uma's own danger, she takes the warning from Champa and pleads, "Don't put your own position in danger" (*Seven Steps...*, 35). Thus, the truth remains ever tantalizingly distant from her.

Following the trail, Uma reaches the house of Mr. Sharma in search of Selim's wife. Her hunt is frustrated with the unexpected presence of the minister supposed to be abroad -- a narrative covering up his presence from public --, and he condescends this much not to inform her father-in-law and take legal steps. Repeating the common conjecture -- "One of them must have done it" (*Seven Steps...*, 31) --, he dismisses her. Uma is however struck by the deep melancholia come upon Subbu regarding marriage which his father tries to explain away by referring to the fatigue of huge wedding preparation. The short colloquy in the day of wedding itself between Uma and Mr. Sharma is a masterpiece of dramatic device of equivocation with many layers of meaning. Mr. Sharma at once threatens Uma for her searching and warns her against his alert watch on her movement. He of course pretends to praise the "spiritual" (*Seven Steps...*, 37) look in her as well as the quest for truth, and illustrates it by referring to the

mask deer that seeks for the source of the heavenly fragrance emanating from its own body. The ultimate failure to find it out and the pathetic ending it meets due to the excessive of that ravishing smell is a covert threat to the possible ending which Uma's excessive thirst for knowledge of the truth other than the one manipulated and made official by legal investigation may lead to.

How truth and "right" are far from being stable, independent things in themselves, gets clear when Mr. Sharma openly avows that his truth lies in "ensuring [Subbu] on the right track." The "right" path (*Seven Steps...*, 37) is an amalgamation of maintaining a proper/heteropatriarchal household, to be married to a renowned family, and to normalize the wayward preferences by which the mainstream enforces its relational positive identity.

Ironically, in the present detective story, law takes its own course to decriminalize the offender and teaches a lesson to the margin trying to push the boundary towards the centre which poses a potential threat to the sociocultural framework of India. With a fine specimen of role reversal, instead of protecting the innocent, it endangers his position; in place of imparting justice to the victim, it punishes him as victimizer. The paradox is also evident in the dubious status of the minority who is "under" law but not "inside", therefore "unprotected" by law. The police superintendent openly admits, "We only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her" (*Seven Steps...*, 33). The hijra people are well aware of the political nature of legal truth and distrusts Uma's claim that she will make her husband arrest the murderers because they are people whom "not even your father-in-law can put ... in jail" (*Seven Steps...*,

34), and also because as Anarkali rightly observes, “One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband” (*Seven Steps...*, 35).

The truth comes out following the norms of a detective story quite unexpectedly, though not following any investigation. However, the truth is hushed up with greater enthusiasm than it was investigated into. The only evidence in form of a photograph is destroyed since “Mr. Sharma’s gratitude will be expressed in ways that will be, I am sure, more than adequate” (*Seven Steps...*, 42). All who knew the truth were either voiceless like hijras and Uma, sworn to secrecy like the wedding guests, obedient like Selim, or bartering Mr. Sharma’s gratitude like Suresh, the would-be five-car-escorted police officer and the media . Only the truth of the communion of love and commitment prevails relocating the oath of marriage and the pattern of the fairy tale despite all attempts of obliteration by the greater society.

Dattani’s dramaturgy works brilliantly in presenting a case study that finds out the subversive approval of the hypothesis -- “They are all liars” (*Seven Steps...*, 9). The widely held belief proves true since they never give out the truth and suppress it though they knew it all along. “The invisible minority” has no “voice”, (*Seven Steps...*, 42), their voice is hushed up by violence in manner of Kamla’s or kept outside the periphery like that of Anarkali and thus, they are absented from history except as the projection of our own opportunistic interest.

### **Conclusion:**



Thus, the play seeks to expose the Indian customs, which enjoy discursive privilege not by exterminating the other kinds, but in the way it naturalizes them and thus fixes other practices as oppositional, reinforcing the centrality of the ethos accepted as “normal” by India’s socio cultural milieu and respected as “sacred”. The play however tries, though on a rather minor scale, to liberate the identity of hijra people from divine, imperial or criminal signification and situate them in a modern context and explore their marginality. What we have is a group whose identity is crafted by various ethical practices, practices which do not only construct their identity as the mere sexual third, but generated through multiplicity of morally evaluated performances. The complexities and ambiguities in the hijra identity and its relation to the larger society make impossible any hegemonic theorization and the play resignifies the genre of the detective story as it seeks to relocate the truth itself.