THE MONSTER IN CONFINEMENT: THE INTERSEX IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE*.

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Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is one of those rare dramatic attempts in Indian Literature which elevates the intersex as a valid subject of literary representation. Barbara J. King in her paper "What does it Mean to be Intersex?" (2015) argues that the term "intersex" ought to be acknowledged in the parlance of Third Gender Studies, in preference to the old word "hermaphrodite" which once suggested bodies which encompass both male and female genitals. The word "transgender" too is no more preferred by theorists of the intersex on account of its discursive fluidity. The following definition opens up new vistas of scholarship in the field:

> In the area of 1 in 2000 people are born intersex. These individuals may have mixed genitilia, meaning some combination of ovaries and testes. This comes about either because ovarian and testicular tissue grow together in the same organ or because "male side" and a "female side" develop in the body. Other intersex individuals may have genetically inherited chromosomal abnormalities such as congenital adrenal hyperplasia, which may result in masculinization of the genitals in people born with XX chromosomes, or androgen insensitivity syndrome, when the body doesn't respond to testosterone and a person has XY chromozomes and feminized genitilia. (King)

King's definition problematizes the artist's semiotic attempts to represent characters born intersex in literary works, as it opens the pandora's box of anxieties pertaining to sexualized bodies, compulsory gender configurations and identities which refuse to bend and budge in mainstream discourses of culture. Nevertheless, Mahesh Dattani in his pathbreaking production *Seven Steps Around the Fire* addresses issues of intersexed bodies, and the binaries of beauty and bestiality accorded to intersexed individuals in modern India. Despite a pronounced literary heritage going back to ancient Indian mythology and episodes in the Mahabharata celebrating the presence and function of the intersex, modern Indian literature has rarely subjectivized them in literary

representations. Dattani's play, with its whodunnit structure, revolves round a criminal investigative inquiry into an alleged murder of a eunuch Kamala by her/his erstwhile peer Aanarkali, who is in prison when the play begins *in media res*. Anarkali is confined to a male prison and is subject to untold physical harassment by the other rogue inmates who molest and bully her/him. The Superintendent of Police in the Mumbai cell she/he is confined in, along with his juniors, subject Anarkali, the *hijra* to continuous anatomical glare and scrutiny as she/he is first bestialized and then gradually dehumanized, until she is academically resuscitated by Uma, the wife of the S.P who dedicates herself to writing a Ph.D thesis on intersexed individuals.

The first section of this study attempts to revisit notions of anatomy, sexuality, subjecthood and other identificatory norms to locate the exact site of the intersex in the domain of discourse, in the light of Foucault and Judith Butler. The second section reads into the internal procedures of exclusion which control and delimit literature and popular culture as discourses which carefully bypass representations of the intersex. Both sections have been engaged upon in the light of a close reading of Mahesh Dattani's play. Foucault's critiquing of the "hermaphrodite" prejudice in one of his 1975-76 lectures titled *Abnormal* analysing the representation of "hermaphrodite" as a category of "monster" since the end of the eighteenth century (62) may open up the beast debate. The following extracts from Foucault's 22 January 1975 lecture on the prejudiced notion of the hermaphrodite as a monster may throw significant light on the evolution of the beast debate. Foucault observes: "The monster is problematic, challenging both the medical and the judicial system. It is around the monster that the entire problematic of abnormality is set out in the period from 1820 to 1830…" (62). He then goes on to historicize the hermaphrodite conundrum:

> No doubt this should be examined more closely, but broadly speaking, we can accept, or at least people will tell you, that from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century, and until at least the start of the seventeenth century, hermaphrodites were considered to be monsters and were executed, burnt at the stake and their ashes thrown to the winds….Very soon afterward a different type of jurisprudence appears…from the seventeenth century at least, a hermaphrodite was not convicted just for being a hermaphrodite. Individuals recognized as hermaphrodites were asked to choose their sex, and to conduct themselves accordingly, especially by wearing clothes. They were subject to

> criminal law and could be convicted for sodomy only if they made use of their additional sex. (67)

For Foucault the hermaphrodite is deemed no better than a monster as he/she defies our categories of understanding our institutions - be they civil, scientific, religious or judicial.

The hermaphrodite calls the law into question and disables it, for, as monsters, with their exceptional physicality, they jam up the juridical machinery that regulates social institutions such as marriage laws, the baptismal canon and laws of succession and inheritance. The human monster thus according to Foucault combines the impossible and unalterable. For him, the monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table. (63). Hence, the hermaphrodite is the appropriate model of the transgressed being: "one did not know whether to treat him/her as a boy or a girl, whether or not he/she should be allowed to marry" (65). The Foucauldian monster thus is not just a transgressor; a criminal too. A perusal of Anne Grandjean's trial in 1765, as recorded and analyzed by Foucault would explain why hermaphrodites were incriminated. As a criminal, his/her monstrosity then has nothing to do with being a hermaphrodite, but rather, that she/he, despite registering her/his gender as 'she', loved other women, and not men, hence transgressing the limits set by compulsory heterosexuality. According to Foucault this is exactly why social institutions collectively conspired to incriminate him/her.

Locating case studies of such incriminations in literature or popular culture is not an easy task as such subjects are still tabooed in the discourses of literature and popular culture. Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (first broadcast as a radio play and then staged in 1999) is one of the very rare theatrical attempts to offer a critique of the institution of social justice in modern India in this regard. The play opens in the interiors of the office of the Superintendent of Police where Uma, a research scholar and the wife of the S.P, waits to be escorted to the cell where Anarkali, the *hijra* is locked up for the alleged murder of another hijra Kamla. Munswamy, the police constable who escorts Uma, desperately attempts to dissuade her from visiting Anarkali, addressing her/him as "it", a blatant signifier of dehumanization. When Uma asks Munswamy, 'Will she talk to me?' he replies: She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. (Dattani 238). As Munswamy tries to dissuade the lady from a "respectable family" from seeing the hijra, Uma has already pushed her way through to the cell of Anarkali. Later that night she enquires of her husband, "Why did they put her in a male prison?" Suresh replies "They are as strong as horses." Later he rebuffs

her when she tries to explain that she could never have murdered Kamla who was almost a sister to her: "What's that you said? Sister! There is no such thing for them. …They are all just castrated degenerated men. They fought like dogs everyday, that Anarkali" (238). We may note here how the *hijra* is being continuously denied subjecthood and is repeatedly being referred to in animal terms. He/she hence becomes a *monster* jamming up the juridical machinery which regulates social institutions. A close analysis of only the first scene of the play would throw much light on the issue. The play begins with the sound of Sanskrit chants appropriate to a Hindu wedding that fades into the sound of fire and flames engulfing a scream. The murder of the *bride* Kamla has been committed and symbolically the hermaphrodite has been denied the social institution of marriage .When Uma expresses her interest to study the case of Kamla's murder allegedly by Anarkali, Munswamy dissuades her on the grounds that there are other more socially acceptable crimes for study than that of the crime of the *hijra*: "There are so many other cases. All murder cases. Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother…Madam, once again I request you to take up some other case. Look at this man. He cut off his wife's nose. He will give you an interesting story" (Dattani 234-235). The institution of justice recognizes the vilest of gender related crimes, including dowry murders and even the cutting off a woman's nose by her husband but displays a strange aversion towards the crime perpetrated by a *hijra*. His/her criminality too is marginalized in juridical discourses. Anarkali is locked up in a male prison nevertheless to gratify the perverse lusts of male prisoners. Although Dattani's play is primarily a critique of the social responses to the intersex community in India, he nevertheless deconstructs the hegemonies of gender constructions in the process. As the story progresses, it gets exposed that Anarkali has been falsely accused of Kamla's murder; that Kamla had been a pretty eunuch, in love with Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister, and had already got married to him in a temple according to Hindu rites. The priest had not recognized the identity of the erstwhile 'bride'- an intersex, excluded from the institution of marriage. The minister was left with no other option but to eliminate Kamla (the bride) so as to avoid a family embarrassment, and therefore hastily arranges a suitable bride for his son Subbu, who is thus compelled to part ways with the object of his affection. But at the wedding—attended of course by the *hijras* who sing and dance at weddings and births---Subbu commits suicide, and the truth behind the suicide is hushed up with the arrest of Kamla's '*hijra*' mate Anarkali. Kamla's story thus exposes the desire of the intersex to be assimilated into the mainstream traditions of culture, which unfortunately is sadly denied to them. The play is about the struggle of

numerous Kamlas invisible in our society fighting for existence, for recognition as human beings. Kamla, like many "hermaphrodites" in India is a *castrated man* who belongs to neither sex. Such individuals who are anatomical exceptions are generally ghettoized in tabooed localities of the underbellies of towns and cities, and due to their inferior social status, often are compelled to take up begging and prostitution for a living. Dattani, however avoids going into the intricacies of their gendered identities, choosing to expose how their 'presence' or symbolic absence is controlled and regulated by the politics of *compulsory heterosexuality* in our society. At the centre of the murder-mystery in the play lies a photograph – a polaroid picture of the minister's son Subbu garlanding his beautiful bride Kamla. This photograph may not simply be read in terms of its fictional significance in juxtaposition with some other photographs recovered from Kamla's trunk in her closet as Champa rummages through them to help Uma, the researcher. When Champa opens the rusty tin case containing Kamla's belonging in the cramped *hijra* quarters, an old photograph draws Uma's attention as she exclaims, "Who is this beautiful young man?" (260). Champa explains that the beautiful man had been Kamla before she decided to become woman. Dattani may be critiqued for having consciously or unconsciously eschewed overt references to the erstwhile beautiful man's cosmetic transformation into a beautiful woman, fit enough to marry her lover Subbu – a practice which has conventionally allowed the intersexed "beast" or "monster" to switch over to the realm of "beauty" by cosmetic practices approved by patriarchy. We may recall Foucault's reminder here of the "different type jurisprudence" (67) which emerged in the eighteenth century, offering the hermaphrodite the choice to opt for their dominant sex and "to conduct themselves accordingly, especially by wearing appropriate clothes" (67). The modern Indian hijra of the twentieth century (in the context of Dattani's play) perhaps is still confined to the same prison-house of "appropriateness" in terms of conduct and sartorial appropriation. Kamla was only practicing the same norm in order to augment his feminine beauty for the sake of social acceptance. But that acceptance was never to come, and the rude jolt of his original "monstrosity" estranges him forever from the realm of institutions. The monster is debarred from the institution of marriage primarily because of "its" inability to participate and function as a reproductive agent to further the cause of civilization. Citing the case of "the Rouen hermaphrodite" from 1614-1615 (68) – concerning an individual who was baptized as Marie Lemarcis, Foucault reports how Lemarcis was sentenced to be hung and then burned and her ashes to be scattered in the wind, not because she gradually became man , wore

men's clothes, but because she married a widow who was already mother of three children:

> There was a denunciation. Marie Lemarcis , who had taken the name of Martin Lemarcis, came before the court and the first judges called for a medical examination by a doctor, an apothecary, and two surgeons. They found no sign of virility…The verdict of the Rouan court is interesting because it releases the woman, orders her to wear woman's clothes, and prohibits her from living with anyone of either sex, "on pain of death." So there is a ban on all sexual relations but no conviction for the fact of being a hermaphrodite or for the nature of hermaphroditism. Nor is there a conviction for having lived with a woman, even though it seems that the hermaphrodite's dominant sex was that of a woman. (68)

The verdict is thus clear on the social, moral, juridical and conjugal injunctions of the intersex's claim to space. These are some of the discursive limitations and bondages imposed upon the intersex bequeathed to culture since ages. Other discursive limitations exist in the realm of art and literature too.

Literary and performative texts have always been subjected to discursive limitations when it came to articulations of transsexuality. Literature too, according to Foucault is *discourse* and the procedures of exclusion and prohibition operate as much in literature as in other discourses. And when it comes to the inclusion of sexuality in literature, the grid tightens doubly. In other words, the procedures of exclusion and prohibition operate twice as much strong here, for among the domains in which exclusion and prohibition get applied, sexuality and politics are the most vulnerable, as Foucault explains in his lecture *The Order of Discourse*. The problem multiplies with the entry of the intersex into the domain of literature and the discourse of art, for he/she is officially and technically debarred, excluded and prohibited from the matrix of *heterosexuality,* denied even the status of a human subject. In other words, the intersex's eligibility to enter the domain of any form of discourse, including literature, would be subject to conditions that sanction his/her role. In India, apart from the Bollywood song and dance rituals during wedding ceremonies and births accompanied by stylized clapping of hands and obscene clowning, eliciting mirth and cat-calls from viewers, the intersex has never really found voice or representation as subjects in literature and popular culture, barring a few exceptional cases. At least in the West there is the exceptional case of the nineteenth century French

hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin who has inspired some very rare literary productions and theoretical postulations in the twentieth century. In America, Jeffrey Eugenides' Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Middlesex* in 2003, and earlier, Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* have all been inspired by Barbin's *Memoirs*. The tell-all autobiography is titled *Herculine Barbin: The Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite*, discovered and published by Foucault in 1980. The work was published initially in 1872 by Dr Auguste Tardieu – a forensic scientist who received the manuscript from a Dr Regnier, who reported Barbine's suicide in 1868. Foucault, first in 1976 and later in 1980 in the English translation, introduced the memoir along with a dossier of documents relating to Herculine's case which later, the gender theorist Judith Butler amplifies upon. Herculine Barbine was born as Alexina in 1838. Brought up as a female, Alexina led a confused life, growing up, having misgivings about her body, and developing close sexual relations with girls. It was in 1860 that a doctor examined her and determined that she was male. Hence, she took on the name of Abel and decided to live as a man, after trying as long as possible to reconcile with the truth of her differences from other women. She eventually committed suicide perhaps on account of alienation and on being socially misunderstood. The memoirs have been presented as a death-bed confession, the text adopting certain tropes of modern autobiography. It appears certain that Barbin must have had a close acquaintance with Rousseau's *Confessions*. The narrator of the text proclaims his/her sincerity and attempts to communicate a sentimental truth from a position of exile, sexual and social. He/she in the narrative acknowledges his/her lack of literary ability-- the inability to wield the pen skillfully to assume a place among the literary 'greats', among the *canons*. According to Judith Butler, Barbin's literary anxiety over sexual identity acts as a metaphor of his /her anxiety over sexual identity, the anxiety resulting out of Barbin's inability to assume a place in the regime of *true sex* and hence in the regime of discourse. From this anxiety might have emanated what may be called a possible *ecriture intersex,* corresponding to what Helene Cixous would call *ecriture feminine*. But tragically, such *ecriture* remains in the realm of theoretical fantasy. For Barbin, the production of oral and written confessions concerning his/her intersexuality serves only to facilitate society's disciplinary gaze which decrees the parameters of acceptable bodily morphology, eventually driving her/him to bodily annihilation in suicide. In Jeffrey Euginedes' novel *Middlesex*, the fictional character of the narrator Cal has been inspired by Barbin and his /her scientifically and historically verified accounts. Such attempts are rare in literature.

To conclude, although Dattani's sincerity in the representation of the marginality of the hermaphrodite in *Seven Steps Around theFire*

cannot be doubted, at best the play offers a critique of the phallogocentric universe. The play is an objective attempt at stripping the hypocrisies of the juridical and educational institutions which, at the most, recognize the 'case' of the hermaphrodite as an aberration, fit to be the topic of a thesis for theoretical research, but refuse to grant him/her subjecthood. Fighting a lost battle, the *hijra* Anarkali in *Seven Steps* spews venom through the use of bawdy slangs disrupting the sanctity of phallocentric language, the sanctity of 'family relations' and above all, the matrix of heterosexuality. His/her diatribe targeted at Munswamy, the agent of the juridical machinery, can be cited as reference. When Anarkali casually addresses him as *brother* and ask for a cigarette, Munswamy rejects the call: "Shut up. And don't call me brother", Anarkali. being denied even a casual kinship, retorts by disrupting the code of sanctified filial relations. "If you had a beautiful sister, you will give her a cigarette for a fuck no? (Dattani 240).

Language for the intersex, therefore, becomes a site of violence, for through the disruption of decorum in language, he/she cries foul against the order of sexuality and patriarchy. The violence embedded in the language of Anarkali and Champa marks out the territorial injunctions laid down upon the intersex and resists at the same time the juridioco-biological space allotted to them. Foucault observes that the "monster" itself is a signifier of that space which is both extreme and rare – the limit of aberration, the extreme point at which the law is overturned, combining the impossible and the forbidden. From that position of the extreme periphery, the "monster" uses the power of disruptive language to create anxiety, trapping the law while breaching it.

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