

## THE ISSUE OF EUNUCH IN DATTANI'S SEVEN STEPS AROUND THE FIRE

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Subaltern are the marginalised class of people. They are kept away from the hegemonic power. The term is derived from the work 'cultural hegemony'. Subalterns are away from the socio-political structure of the society. They are deprived of political representation. Excluded from the established structure of the society they are secluded in in one area framing a society e of their own. They are not the part of the mainstream of life. They are virtually ostracised from the society.

Today the term subaltern has acquired an extensive connotation. Initially, the metaphor signified any subordinate portions. In the present global scenario subaltern represents a variegated section which is isolated from the rest by certain yardsticks. For instance, racial subalterns are segregated on colour differences such as the Blacks of Africa or the ethnic subalterns who stand secluded due to this ethnic root and are often found in minority groups Globally the Jews fall within the periphery while in India the Parsis and the Anglo-Indians belong to this category In India a large chunk of the society is discriminated on the basis of the traditional caste system. Hence, they are also the subalterns. For that matter, women have been regarded as subalterns both in pre and post independent India Quite recently attention has been drawn towards another group of subalterns-gays, lesbians, and eunuchs who are often treated as 'untouchables' in a different sense. The eunuch suffers psychologically as well as biologically. While the gays and lesbians bear the brunt psychologically. Widening the horizon of the term we may infer that the old people, the working class, the poor and the immigrants are visualized as subalterns.

All these groups categorized as the subalterns contain one common factor that they are socially ostracized and suppressed. They are the most ignored and neglected section of society being frequently deprived of their rights and privileges. Literature demonstrates the plight of the subalterns sympathetically and much has been written about them pondering over the question why they are treated as subordinates when society benefits by their respective contributions in one way or the other. Moreover, they are also creations of the same superpower. Subalterns, if allowed to persist, creates anomie in society because it hampers the natural growth of human being by repressing their inborn instincts and imposing restrictions which, in turn may lead to a state of neurosis and ultimate mental break down resulting in psychopathic problems for the community. Therefore, subalterns become subject of psychological studies for writers who probe deep into the psyche of such characters, analysing the working of their minds which can be both creatively positive as well as negatively harmful. While some characters are depicted as vocal against repression, others sink into silence which is the ancient language of defeat. The usages of the application of the terms 'subaltern' and 'subaltern studies' entered the field of post-colonial studies. The works of the subaltern studies group explored the role of men and women in the socio-political matters taking into account the demography of such people. They did not find any place among the social and

economic elites of the south Asian countries. During the seventies of the nineteenth century they began to denote the colonized class of people in the subcontinent of South Asia. In this respect Marxist historians already had been investigating colonial history told from the perspective of the proletariat. In the South Indian historiography any enquiry related to the studies of the subalterns was taken to be an intervention. However, the concept of the subaltern occasionally proved culturally problematic, because it remained a Eurocentric method of historical enquiry. The study of the non-western people of Africa, Asia and the Middle East became a part of intellectual discourse. From having originated as an historical research model for studying the colonial experience of South Asian peoples, the applicability of the techniques of "subaltern studies transformed the intellectual discourse into a method of vigorous critical explanation of post-colonialism. The intellectual efficacy of the term 'subaltern' eased its adaptation and adoption to the methods of investigation in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, human geography and literature".<sup>1</sup>

In post-colonial theory suggests that by and large the subjugated class of people belonging to the lower strata of the society are termed as subalterns: "A subaltern is a person rendered without human agency, by his or her social status",<sup>2</sup>

Let alone the theoretician and the philosopher, in broader sense the subaltern does not stand against a too broad application of the term: Only for oppressed or subjugated class of people. It also stands for those who do not have an access to cultural imperialism. This is post-colonial view point which seems to be apt and appropriate. A kind of gulf is created which is the space of difference. Now-a-days oppression is found everywhere. It may be domestic, social, economical, official and emotional. Even in the university campus we find discrimination against the minority. At times, it seems that it is a dangerous form and requires intellectual discourse to settle it. What they are given in the name of caste and class is not enough for them because it may keep them physically alive but they experience a moral death. In the hegemonic discourse "The Mechanics of discrimination" is well addressed but they are not allowed to be a part discussion.

In accordance with the Marxist theory, the term subaltern is a synonym of proletariat. To them, it was used as a code word to deceive the prison authority. They were used as a means of taking the manuscript "out of prison for circulation."<sup>4</sup>

In several essays the post-colonial critic Hom K. Bhaba, emphasized: "the importance of social power relation in defining subaltern social group as appeased, racial minorities whose social presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group, as such, subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subject the authority of the social groups who hold hegemonic power."<sup>5</sup>

In *Towards a New Legal Commonsense* (2002), the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos applies the term subaltern cosmopolitanism to describe the counter hegemonic practice, social movement, resistance and struggle against neo-liberal globalization, especially the struggle against social exclusion. Moreover, Prof. De Sousa Santos applies Subaltern Cosmopolitanism as interchangeable with the term cosmopolitan legality. It is so done also describe equality of difference. The term, in fact, is reflective of the hegemonic globalization in which the people at margin may have their share. However, in India woman, Dalit, Rural Tribal, Immigrant, Labourers are part of subaltern, within India, in the Punjab the most oppressed people are the rural folk, the Dalit and illiterate woman. Gayatri Spivak's reasoning was developed in *geographies of post-colonialism* (2008), wherein Joame Sharp proposed that western intellectuals delegate other non-western (African, Asian, Middle Eastern) forms of knowing of acquiring knowledge of the world.

The westernization came into being in terms of thought, reasoning and language. They adopted western ways in order to be heard and known. But they know that they must conform expression of their non-western knowledge of colonial life to the western ways of knowing the world. They abandoned the customary ways culturally imbibed and subsequently adopted Western ways to their benefit. It was a must in the colonial situation. They started believing the fact that emulating the methods applied by the oppressor they could avoid being operation. They began to speak language. Intellectual and cultural conformity was necessary.

The complex dynamics of modern urban family life and subaltern gays, eunuch is the central character of his drama. Dattani focuses on this subject. He portrays characters who are in a state of mental conflict while striving for some sort of inner freedom and happiness. These characters suffer from repressed desires, bondage to unreasonable traditions and are very often victims of the cultural construct of gender. Dattani lays stress on the fragmented psyche of his characters who are placed in an equally fragmented social background. He takes up the "invisible issues of Indian society,"<sup>6</sup> which are usually tabooed subject. In one of his interviews the playwright says:

"Our culture is so rich with tradition and that's a great advantage and a great disadvantage as well because, we're living in the present and there are so many challenges facing you just have to cross the road and you have an issue, think it is very important for our country to spawn new playwrights who reflect honestly and purely our lives, because that is our contribution to the world."<sup>7</sup>

Adhering strictly to this statement of his credo, Dattani daringly takes up some of these important issues in his plays as their main theme.

"The play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*" highlights the situations in the life of eunuch. They lead a pitiable life being socially ostracized. They are deprived of the life of dignity as the people in general are averse toward them. They carry the social stigma through their life. They are not only allowed to join the mainstream. These trans-sexuals are neither men nor women and so they are made to lead a secluded life. The stress and strain they suffer for no fault of their own is not understood by the society. They create a society of their own because they are laughed at in public. The people in general throw a curious look at them. Various myths surround their human identity. The people are blinded by the various mythical stories rife about them and thus, they are unable to frame a positive opinion about them. These myths need to be demythicised.

Here in this Play we find the depiction of a murder mystery. A beautiful eunuch, Kamala is murdered. A researcher on eunuch who happens to be the daughter in law of a vice chancellor and the wife of a police inspector unravels the mystery. She leaves no stone unturned to find out the truth behind the gruesome murder. Uma is not only an academician doing her research but also a sensitive lady who feels bad at the maltreatment meted out by Anarkali in jail. She develops a kind of emotional relationship with the eunuch community. This emotional affinity gives her strength to reveal the truth behind the murder. The condition of eunuch is pitiable. They are deprived of being the part of the mainstream and called castrated generate which is humiliating to them. Anarkali is fabricated in this case to safeguard the influential person involved in the murder.

Salim evades Uma when he knows her identity while Uma gets all the more curious about what he is searching for. She comes to know through Champa that he is the bodyguard of the minister and that he was a frequent visitor of Kamala. She also tells Uma that Salim was in search of the evidence in the form of the photographs. The element of suspense is doubled by this revelation. The plot of the murder mystery gates all the more complex and Uma seems to be desperate to meet Salim. She dares to knock the door of

the minister being escorted by a constable. She wants to ascertain his relationship with Kamla. Uma has heard that salim's wife had killed Kamla and so she insists to meet her.

“As soon as Subbu looks at the photograph, the living Paraphernalia suspends and the dead Kamla assumes the role and significance of living entity governing and guiding the entire scene.”<sup>8</sup>

We, thus, find that the nuances of the contemporary thought and its shameful nature are beautifully brought out in this play that deals with not only the eunuch but also the women in general. Social apathy and injustice done to the marginalised and subjugated class of people cause a great deal of anguish to the author which is amply clear in his dramatic creation. Uma is the mouthpiece of the author and the anger and curiosity in her character is virtually that of the author. The enigmatic world of the subalterns in the form of the eunuch, a typical creation of almighty God is well deliberated in this play. We have found a wholesome view of the pattern of behaviour of the eunuch and their crisis of identity. Uma Roy in the process of writing a thesis on eunuch investigates into their lives concluding that the society has made them stoop so low that their yearning for socio- familial love remains unheard. Before probing further, she studies the popular myths related to the origin of the eunuchs. These are her observations:

“The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning 'neither male nor female'. Another traces their ancestry to the Ramayana. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family, and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable are marriage and birth. Ironically they are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature.”<sup>9</sup>

Dattani boldly depicts in the play, the marriage between a normal man and a eunuch. However, the male partner Subramanyam, Subbu for short being the son of a minister is disillusioned when his father gets Kamala, the eunuch murdered and the charges falsely put on another eunuch Anarkali:

“Once Uma refers to a eunuch as 'she' and is immediately corrected that a eunuch has no gender identity and hence should be addressed as 'it', Uma calls them the invisible minority.”<sup>10</sup>

They suffer from a sense of inseparability. They walk in group for that reason and strive to make their presence felt by "peculiar hand clap rare of its kind". They constantly feel ignored and create a world of their own. Uma visits Champa the head of eunuch introducing herself as a social worker resulting in Champa's ironical outburst: "Please excuse me, Madam. I did not know that you see us society,"<sup>12</sup>

Evidently the eunuchs are conscious of their social ostracisation. When Anarkali falsely implicated in Kamala's murder and put into prison along with male offenders, they will treat and mock her ironically. She cannot be put with females raising the significant question of eunuch's identity once again.

While pursuing her research Uma finds it difficult to collect material about eunuchs. She comments regretfully. Truth is difficult to be known as they keep lying. Even though they know the secret, they narrate consoling stories to deviate from the fact. The reason is again their sense of insecurity. It requires a great deal of manoeuvring to squeeze the truth.

In Indian society the survival of eunuch is very difficult. They live on begging because they are not allowed to mix up. They are away from the mainstream of life suffering from gross social discrimination. They are deprived of the rights. They have to bear poverty and a sense of inferiority. There is crisis of Identity for being born transgender. They are bisexual male and female combined together. It is a natural phenomenon and the law of providence. But the society is rude to their misfortune. There is a state of being is laughed at. They are born of their parents but even their parents disown them.

They are not blessed themselves but their blessings on the occasion of child-birth and marriage do work. Though sexually deformed, they have potentiality and sensibility of a moral human being. In ancient days the kings used to keep them among the earth managerial staff. They are not allowed to live in respectable society nor are they permitted to utilise their skill and intelligence to earn their livelihood. Educational institutions are close to them. Lack of proper medical care causes their untimely death. "Seven Steps Around The Fire" is a sensitive and authentic depiction of eunuch community.

The chief message of the play is that the eunuch are as good as normal human beings. They, too, are the creations of God bearing natural traits in the same measure as is seen in normal human beings. Love, passion, compassion, kindness, sympathy, hunger that are the natural traits can be found in eunuch, too. Lack of sexual competency is not their choice and so they do not deserve to be socially ostracized. They should be free from the social stigma so that their bruised heart may not bleed any further.

They long for love, family and relationship and they should not be deprived of their rights. They should be allowed to join the main stream of life in order to develop in them a sense of togetherness. Dattani, through his play, makes us aware of every detail related to the life of the eunuch without proposing for any solution. He leaves it to man and society to find out the ways to social change being aware of the pros and cons of the matter. The graphic picture of the metropolitan city with centre and margin as symbols is evident of the high sense of dramaturgy of Dattani.

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