

Examining Subalternity and Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's "Seven Steps around The Fire"

Abin Chakraborty

Department of English, Government General Degree College, Salboni, West Bengal, India

Received: 18/May/2026

Revised: 11/Jun/2026

Accepted: 15/Jul/2026

Published: 23/Jul/2026

Copyright: International Journal of English Literature, Linguistics, and Social Sciences: A Multidisciplinary Journal

This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract

Seven Steps around the Fire explores the social ostracisation and systemic victimisation meted out to hijras by the dominant patriarchal heteronormative order and the vortex of desire and longing in which their lives are entangled. As in other plays by Mahesh Dattani, what stands out is the dexterity with which he fuses in his representation both the material and the psychological contours of subalternity and the way in which all of it finds a place within a dramatic structure that remains full of suspense and excitement. This paper would seek to map the particular material determinants of hijras' subalternization, the representation of such crisis in the play, the response of the hijras as well as the efficacy of Dattani's portrayal. What would also be investigated is the way in which non-subaltern persons may become allies of subalterns to effect counter-hegemonic interventions that can challenge patterns of prevalent subjugations.

Keywords: hijras, heteronormative, representation, subalternization, victimisation,

I. INTRODUCTION

Seldom, our society realizes or cares to realize the trauma, agony and pain which the members of the Transgender community undergo, or appreciates the innate feelings of the members of the Transgender community, especially of those whose mind and body disown their biological sex. Our society often ridicules and abuses the Transgender community and in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals, they are ignored and treated as untouchables, forgetting the fact that the moral failure lies in the society's unwillingness to contain or embrace different gender identities and expressions, a mindset which we have to change. – Supreme Court of India [1]

"Seven Steps around the Fire" acts as yet another example of Mahesh Dattani's penchant for exploring uncharted territories as he analyses the subalternization of hijras or transgender communities in India through a play that is moving and gripping at the same time. In the process, Dattani takes us into the heart of the material and psychological subjugation experienced by individuals belonging to such communities – a subjugation that results from an unholy nexus of colonial legislations, the prevalent heteronormative discourse and the maladies of the postcolonial state. Furthermore, the play also traces the possible modes through which non-subaltern characters may extend a bond of solidarity to subaltern figures and help them emerge out of their subalternity, in view of recent socio-cultural changes. The paper will go on to discuss all these issues while grounding the analysis in anthropological findings, historical contexts and the material conditions of hijras' contemporary existence.

II. THE SUBALTERNEITY OF HIJRAS

It is important to locate the play in its proper context by understanding the nature, causes and extent of the subalternization faced by hijras and transgender communities in India. Vinay Lal remarks, in "Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality",

As is well known to students and observers of Indian society, there has been in existence for some time in India (or since "time immemorial" in the language of the Orientalist) a community of people known as the hijras, described variously in scholarly and popular literature alike as eunuchs, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, and gynomimetics; and as if this multiplicity of terms were not enough, they are also referred to as a people who are intersexed, emasculated, impotent, transgendered, castrated, effeminate, or somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional. ([2], p.119)

Whatever terms we chose to apply to this particular community of individuals, there is no doubt about the fact that they do not fall within the rigid binaries of sexual and gender identities which are generally advocated by the patriarchal heteronormative discourse. The plethora of definitions suggests that the irrepressible heterogeneity which is inherent in the hijra community invariably eludes the neat taxonomic discussions we are generally comfortable with. However, that which we do not know often evokes our fear and that in turn often generates irrational prejudices and feelings of revulsion and disgust. Quite naturally people of such communities are subjected to both social marginalisation and institutional discrimination of various kinds and they are subjected to a plethora of abuses that are conditioned by legal provisions, administrative apathy, familial ostracisation, unavailability of education, employment and other necessary facilities, poverty, subjection to various sexual offences and many other related problems. The issue of poverty and consequent unavailability of resources is especially critical as unlike metropolitan queers, whom Dattani often portrays in his plays, who at least do not have to undergo daily struggles for survival, the hijras are forced to endure wretched living conditions and therefore become even more vulnerable to various processes of subalternization to which sexual minorities are generally subjected.

Such subjection however seems rather unwarranted in India since the country has had a long tradition of hijra communities, endowed with specific roles and responsibilities associated with crucial rituals of ordinary existence. Ancient Indian literature, belonging to Brahmanical, Buddhist or Jain communities do mention, acknowledge and explain the presence and nature of persons belonging to a third sex, beyond the conventional male/female binary, depending on the presence or absence of genital organs, the actual ability or inability to procreate and the associated behavioural and psychological attributes. As Gayatri Reddy explains, drawing on the insights of several scholars in the field, in ancient India there existed three predominant views on the third sex: the Brahminical view identified the third sex or the *napungsaka* on the basis of presence/absence and utilization of genital organs, the second one, endorsed by Buddhists stressed the presence/absence of procreative ability and not just the presence/absence of genital organs and the third one, espoused by Jains which referred to bipartite assessment depending upon both 'biological sex' or *dravyalinga* and 'psychological gender' or *bhavalinga* ([3], pp.18-22). All such textual evidences testify to the fact that ancient Indian society either recognized or at least engaged in debates about gender and sexuality which went beyond the categorizations of orthodox heteronormativity.

We must however remember that the word *hijra* itself is not of any classical origin at all but is rather supposed to be an Urdu word, which gained wide currency in the country only after the arrival of the Mughals in the sixteenth century. This may largely be due to the fact that persons of the third sex or eunuchs played significant roles both within Islam and within various Islamic regimes all across Asia. While on the one hand there have been secret societies of eunuchs who have served as custodians of Prophet Mohammad's tomb, on the other hand, within the courtly world eunuchs have often played the roles of political advisors, administrators, trusted generals and guardians of the harem or women's quarters. In a world full of intrigue, ambition, nepotism and dynastic politics, these emasculated men, unable to father heirs, often served as loyal and trusted allies

whose presence was more assuring than disrupting to the authorities, as opposed to the shock, amazement or dismay of European chroniclers, who could not move beyond the grid of conventional structures of gender and sexuality. Such practices continued in India even during the beginning of the twentieth century and in places like Hyderabad, ruled by the Nizams and a flourishing centre of aristocratic Islamic culture, the hijras were even given the opportunity to continue with their traditional vocations of performing on festive occasions with generous royal patronage. As Gayatri Reddy informs us, one of the most celebrated of such rulers was the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad,

...Mir Mahbub Ali Khan Asaf Jah VI, or Mahbub Ali Pasha, as he is more affectionately called, during whose reign at the turn of the twentieth century hijras claim they attained their greatest glory...During Mahbub Pasha's reign, hijras were granted a tract of land close to Charminar at the center of what is now the old city of Hyderabad. This area – between Madina hotel and Mahbub ki Mehndi – is the site of the largest hijra residences, or hijron ka allawahs. ([3], p. 9)

Such instances of royal/aristocratic patronage as well as elaborate discussions in ancient religious texts, collectively point to a typically Indian tolerance of diversities, even in the realm of gender and sexuality, which is starkly contradicted by both the attitude of colonial authorities as well as the ground reality of postcolonial India, which is much more starkly heteronormative than the pre-colonial eras probably were.

The marginalization of hijras thus becomes another classic example of postcolonial subalternization which can be seen as the result of a complex response to the administrative and discursive impact of colonial rule which not only bolstered the discourse of aggressive, heterosexual masculinity but also sought to legally penalize and abolish many practices which the colonial authorities considered to be 'deviant' or 'aberrant' or simply 'unnatural' – a stance that accorded well with the declared project of civilizing the decadent Orient. One of the crucial measures, in this context, was the enactment of The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. This act categorically ordered the "registration, surveillance and control of certain tribes and eunuchs" and thus instantaneously criminalized eunuchs with many other communities and thus rendered them dangerous outlaws who became deprived of basic rights as legal subjects. As Gayatri Reddy explains,

Under this act, the term eunuch was "deemed to include all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear to be impotent", a classification that then allowed for the registration, surveillance and ability to arrest all such individuals. This category included individuals who are (a) "are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or of committing offenses under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, or of abetting the commission of any of the said offenses"; (b) "appear, dressed or ornamented like a woman in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place or (c) "dance or play music or take part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house." ([3], p.26-27)

Such a colonial law not only deprived the hijras of their basic rights but virtually sought to destroy the very prospects of their survival by rendering all their traditional vocations illegal and their very existence as being a criminal offense. Much like Article 377, here too we see the predominance of a prudish and parochial Victorian mentality which inculcated into such statutes the Eurocentric moral repugnance regarding such issues and individuals which was then supposed to percolate to the rest of the society. This is precisely why a British officer of colonial India vented his disgust at the hijras and stated that "they are absolutely the scum, the flotsam and the jetsam of Indian life, of no more regard than the beasts of the field" ([4]). While this particular act no longer exists in India it has had a lasting impact on the way in which the administration functions regarding the hijras who continue to be subjected to police harassment and atrocities in several ways. As a report prepared by People's Union of Civil Liberties - Karnataka (PUCL-K) explains,

What is important about this historical background is that the contemporary perception of hijras as thieves as well as the brutal violence which is inflicted against them can be traced back to this colonial legislation which stands repealed today in theory but continues to exist as part of the living culture of law. ([4])

III. MANIFESTATIONS OF SUBALTERNEITY – REPORTS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

This reference to the 'living culture of law' is an extremely important one as hijra communities around the country continue to be subalternized by the police administration which has been accused of several human rights violations by various NGOs and activists working for the welfare of the hijra communities. The following example, taken from the PUCL-K report offers explicit illustration of the kind of degrading dehumanization which police officials often inflict on hijras:

Smita for the past three years has been living with her husband Tejasvi . On the night of 18 March 2002, at around 9 p.m she and her husband were standing in front of a commercial complex on St. Marks Road (opposite Bishop Cotton Girls' High School gate, in front of "Richie Rich" Ice Cream Parlour). Four policemen in a Hoysala van (no. 1) dragged her by her hair and pushed her into the van by force, snatching away her mobile phone...

In the police station, she was pushed into a room with her husband. 15-20 policemen stripped her naked in the presence of a senior police officer (Circle Inspector Munirathnam Naidu) who was in the Police Station at that time... All the 15-20 police men stood around her, sexually abusing her by touching all over her naked body ([4]).

Such gruesome and repugnant realities emphasize what Upendra Baxi refers to as the "absolute human rightlessness of transgender communities" because of "the microfascism of the local police state" ([5])

The personal narratives of most hijras regularly document such atrocities as they narrate how they developed 'effeminate' tendencies from an early age, how they were subjected to sexual abuse during childhood/adolescence which contributed to their effeminacy, how such features inflicted on them familial humiliation and an absence of ordinary means of earning their livelihood and how sex-work was chosen by them as the last resort for survival owing to the absence of other alternatives. What marks such narratives is the ubiquitousness of violence and trauma in the lives of these individuals which has been amply substantiated by Gayatri Reddy:

As Suresh... told me quite calmly and matter-of-factly, "I entered this line first when I was 'raped' by my teacher in school. I was nine or ten years old, and my teacher told me he wanted to talk to me after class. Then he 'raped' me ... Kajal told me in a somewhat embarrassed tone. "First this neighborhood goonda spoiled me, first. Then when he told other people, then they also spoiled me and slowly my body had no more strength." ([3], p. 203)

As the quoted excerpt indicates, 'spoiled' and 'raped' are used synonymously by the hijras to connote similar experiences of forced sexual encounters which they believe have been responsible for their eventual emergence as hijras as well as their vocation of sex-work. While such experiences explicitly highlight the undeniable and dehumanizing violence meted out to hijras, what we also need to take into account is the absence of either the usual familial framework of support or a similarly helpful network of trusted individuals, who would have been able to shoulder responsibilities and extend their cooperation in times of distress.

In the process hijras are forced to exist on the peripheries of the society as a constantly vilified and targeted community of individuals who have no other option but to remain closely bonded together as they have very few opportunities of realising those dreams of having husbands and families which are generally available to ordinary women. These hijras, though endowed with biologically male identities, identify themselves as women and therefore have both sexual desires for men as well as dreams of setting up family with them even though they are not endowed with the opportunity of giving birth to children. While the kinship systems within various hijra-houses partly acknowledge the need for such relations by adopting new recruits to the communities as daughters to the senior ones, nothing can fulfil the longing for husband and families which characterise the lives of such individuals.

One of the basic requirements therefore is a sensitive awareness of the struggles and subjugations which constitute the existence of transgender people so that a more humane social condition may evolve. Mahesh Dattani's "Seven Steps around the Fire", written in 1999 as a radio play and then staged in 2004, may be seen as an example of such attempts as it seeks to utilize the space of the theatre as one of those sites from where the misconceptions about hijras and the various injustices they suffer from may be contested. The play seeks to voice the helplessness of subalternized hijra subjects as well as the possible endeavours of non-subaltern allies which may contribute to a more tolerant and sensitized counter-discourse.

IV. DATTANI'S REPRESENTATION OF HIJRAS' SUBALTERNEITY

The play revolves around the tenacious investigations of Uma Rao, a teacher of sociology in Bangalore University who is engaged in writing a thesis on class and gender based violence in society, which takes her to an intriguing case involving the murder of a hijra named Kamla for which another hijra named Anarkali was arrested. As the play reveals, Anarkali was arrested without any proof for the murder which was actually committed according to the orders of a minister, Mr. Sharma, whose son Subbu had actually married the murdered hijra Kamla. Uma Rao's position in this context is quite similar to Gayatri Reddy or Serena Nanda or some of the other researchers of this field. The play itself seems to be a hybrid between a detective thriller and an ethnographic survey as it not only takes the readers/audience through layers of mystery and obscurity to the heart of the truth but also exposes in the process the entire panorama of administrative discrimination, poverty, violence, social scorn, unfulfilled yearnings, kinship structures and cultural practices which constitute the ordinary existence of hijras in various cities of India. And this panoramic vision only becomes possible through the persistent probing of Uma Rao, reluctantly aided by the constable Munswamy, who also highlights the possibilities of unexpected bonds of solidarity, through which we may both listen and speak to the subalterns and make their voices heard in order to ensure that they no longer remain confined to the peripheries. As always, like other plays by Dattani, here too, the text is complemented by an array of aural and visual images as well as appropriate set designs to create that multifaceted performative framework which speaks to us through many tongues and transforms the stage to a truly polyphonic space where multiple discourses jostle together and cry out for our attention. Such dexterity seems all the more relevant for this particular performance as hijra-lives and the general response to them from ordinary heterosexual citizens is as much governed by perceived misinformation as by actual and imagined visual experiences. Dattani obviously realizes this and therefore his dramaturgy deliberately incorporates drastic visual images through which he not only seeks to contest both the dominant heteronormative discourse and its usual vilification of hijras but also attempts to sensitize the audience/readers by foregrounding those images of hijra-lives which emphasize their fundamental humanity and makes us interrogate the validity of all those stereotypes about them we have grown up with and, at times, come to believe.

Significantly the opening scene is set inside a police station and as the previous section itself explains, the police station has often been the site of severe atrocities against hijras and other queer people who are subjected to both physical and sexual abuse within the confines of the police station by police officials of various hierarchies who threaten the victims with dire legal consequences if they dare to protest or resist. At the heart of such abuse is a pathological fear and consequent revulsion of the hijras, because of which they are often denied their minimum human rights. This is evident from the very beginning as we see that Munswamy only refers to the arrested hijra as 'it', as opposed to 'he' or 'she' and most of such utterances are juxtaposed with threats of violence:

Munswamy: You may see the hijra now, if you wish, Madam.

Uma: Will she talk to me?

Munswamy: (chuckling) She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't. ([6] p. 233)

This is complemented by similar such statements as well as a heap of popular misconceptions such as that hijras are habitual liars. Interestingly, such stereotypical notions are so pervasive that both the ordinary constable

Munswamy and his superior, Suresh, the Superintendent, are unanimous in their shared disgust towards hijras as a community. Therefore, just as Munswamy tells Uma that "It will only tell you lies" ([6], p.234), Suresh also states decisively "Don't believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars. ([6], p.237)" In fact, Suresh even refers to the arrested hijra as a 'creature' ([6], p.237), as opposed to a human being. Such instances are illustrative of the pervasive dominance of the discourse of patriarchal heteronormativity within the administrative structures and it is quite obvious that when the keepers of the law are themselves infused with dehumanizing tendencies, the criminals would not think twice about victimizing hijras, as also exemplified by the various personal narratives which repeatedly refer to assault and abuse at the hands of local ruffians. Dattani offers us a brief but stark glimpse into this sordid world of violence at the very beginning as we see how Anarkali, the arrested hijra is subjected to abuse at the hands of the other inmates:

Munswamy: Ai, Anarkali! Come here...

Anarkali: Go away. After servicing all these sons of whores, my mouth is too tired to talk...

Munswamy: (hitting the bars with his stick) Back! Beat it! Kick the hijra!

The other inmates begin to beat Anarkali up.

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

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

Aaagh! Aaagh! ([6], pp. 234-36)

The visual representation of such violence foregrounds on stage that trauma which is the daily experience of many hijras who have very few sources of assistance, if any, outside their own community as they are subjected to bouts of dehumanizing violence from all corners. It is important to distinguish the plight of such hijras from peasants or labourers or even minority communities. The hijras generally lack either the numbers that make them electorally significant or the constitutional privileges or the organizational modalities through which they may attempt to secure their rights and resist the kind of deprivation they suffer from. In fact, members of the other generally subalternized sections of the society may also harbour collective hatred against hijras since they too are likely to be interpellated by heteronormative discourses.

Herein lies the significance of intervention or mediation from those who do not belong to subalternized sections themselves. While it is indeed important to ensure that the subaltern finds the opportunity to speak on his/her own, it is also imperative to usher into being those conditions which would enable others to listen to their voice: be it documentation or translation of life-histories, formation of organizations that look into the welfare of these communities including the extension of legal assistance or even the publication of newspaper reports that highlight various forms of injustice. This is precisely what Uma Rao, a teacher of the Bangalore University, engaged in her sociological thesis, seems to be doing within the context of this particular play as her academic enterprise seeks to locate the plight of the hijras within the dominant discursive order. As the wife of the Superintendent and the daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner and the daughter of the Vice Chancellor, Uma Rao has all the privileges that one may require for embarking on such an attempt and despite all her initial awkwardness and hesitations as well as the warnings issued to her by her husband and others, it is her tenacious investigation into the lives of hijras like Anarkali and Kamla, through her interactions with Anarkali, Champa and others, that manages to foreground the layered structures of oppression that surround such lives. She also emphasizes in the process all those longings, aspirations and forms of kinship or cultural expression that regulate the lives of such hijras. The most significant aspect of such interaction is the seemingly free articulation of differing perspectives without there being any attempt to impose any specific code of articulation on the hijras by the non-subaltern mediator whose actions may well be seen, following Spivak, as a kind of "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" ([7], p. 342) without there being any "clandestine restoration of subjective essentialism" ([8], p. 74). It is important to bring in Spivak's insights here as the head hijra Champa's statement may well be seen as the paradigmatic representation of that unspeakability of the subaltern which Spivak seeks to highlight: "We cannot speak...When we want to speak, nobody listens." ([6],

p.259) This is precisely what makes the role of Uma Rao so significant as she manages create the circumstances through which the subaltern may speak and be listened to, whatever the effectiveness of the performance.

This is evident from her very first interaction with Anarkali in the police station where she attentively observes and notes the actions and statements of Anarkali without ever attempting to either privilege her own position or pretending to tell her what she is and is not supposed to do. It is precisely such attentive listening which enables her to identify Anarkali as a sister. The conversation deserves attention as it illustrates how Dattani represents on stage the tentative attempts at formation of solidarity among the two individuals whose differences, in terms of class and gender, are not enough to segregate them. While on the one hand it is true that hijras, because they identify with female sexuality, are inclined to be more frank and warm to women, it is also true that they are bound to retain misgivings of their own, on account of the ostracisation and victimisation they so regularly face. Similarly, women are often rather apprehensive and suspicious of hijras, even though they are both, often, victims of the same patriarchal forces and heteronormative discourses. The singular gesture of holding each other's hands is a significant mark of solidarity precisely because it is able to overcome entrenched fears and prejudices and when Uma states "This is just what I am trying to do with my paper" ([6] p. 242), she declares her intent to understand the plight of the hijras and transcend those obstacles which prevent any united organised attempt to align women's problems with those of the hijras. Her academic enterprise thus serves as an attempt at the excavation of entrenched silences through which the subaltern subject may be endowed with a history and a context that renders her visible and audible, even if only partially.

This does not however mean that Uma Rao is able to arrive at this role from the very beginning. Dattani is always realistic and nuanced enough to show the various moods of hesitation and misgiving that she has to overcome. What makes the situation all the more problematic is that Anarkali's despair seeks in her a powerful ally which she is unable to be because of her own lack of power and agency regarding the particular legal crisis in which Anarkali finds herself. Therefore, she either states "I-I don't think I want to get involved" ([6], p.243) or wonders "Are they just extortionists?" ([6], p.246) or confesses to her supervisor, "But there is no way I can win their trust...And I don't trust them either. Dattani, ([6], p.262)". And yet, despite such misgivings, she does not give up and persistently follows all the clues that are provided to her by the hijras who obviously trust her to an extent. It is as part of this process that Anarkali gives her two vital pieces of information: she tells her to go to Shivajinagar and meet with Champa, the head hijra, and further informs her that she had scarred Kamla's face with a butcher's knife only for her own safety and that Salim's wife had "put fire to her beautiful skin and burnt her to the other world. ([6], p.245)" As we later learn, the last piece of information was a deliberate lie from Anarkali because she was well aware of the risks involved in accusing a minister of ordering a murder. She neither sought to jeopardise her own position nor did she wish to jeopardise Uma. Instead she cleverly mentions Salim, the minister's bodyguard, to point Uma to the right direction so that she can discover the rest, if she wishes to. It is as part of this attempt that Uma, despite the reluctance and objections of Munswamy, pays a visit to the hijra quarters of Shivajinagar to meet Champa which not only operates as a turning point in the investigation but reveals to us a number of glimpses of the hijras' lives which either remain invisible to the society at large or is shrouded in a series of misconceptions and prejudices.

One such misconception revolves around the recruitment of hijras and it is often alleged that hijras kidnap young children in order to raise them as hijras. Champa's opening statement to Uma itself illustrates the way in which such misconceptions operate as she tells her "We did not kidnap your son. Ramu came to us of his own free will. If you want you can take your son away." ([6], p.254) As the earlier references to various life-histories of hijras would substantiate, individuals join hijra communities precisely because their biological and psychological sexualities are at odds with each other and one cannot forcibly be turned into a hijra. This is further illustrated by the picture of young Kamla as a handsome man which Champa shows to Uma. While one of the photographs shows her with her birthparents, the other is a picture of Kamla and Champa after she became a hijra and Kamla states "Afterwards, I am her father and mother...This one we took together after she became my daughter" ([6], p. 260). This is not just a casual reference to an intimate relation, but actually points to the way in which kinship-relations operate in the hijra world, as a whole. As Gayatri Reddy's study reveals, hijra

communities are strongly centred around guru-chela relationships or those of mother-daughter relations which generally revolve around the issue of seniority and serve to subvert the patriarchal and heteronormative kinship structures prevalent in society in general. Champa's relations with Kamla and Anarkali seem to operate as a conflation of these two central kinship structures in hijra communities which serve to organise their lives and also provide them with a community of their 'own people' which is essential for them to compensate that exclusion from the imagined community of the nation which they persistently experience. The significance of such relations is attested by almost all hijras who repeatedly confessed to Reddy "These are our people now. It is only hijras who will look after us, if anything happens." ([3], p. 151) This is further reinforced by one particular instance of initiation into a hijra house which Reddy witnessed where the initiate, Kaushal, was told by another senior hijra "And your guru Saroja, you should serve her well because she is now everything to you – mother, father, husband, sister everything." ([3], p. 156) Dattani's dialogues emulate the same rhetoric and despite the petty jealousies and grievances that also exist, Champa indeed functions as a caring protector who not only bails Anarkali out but even looks after her, while singing a lullaby and maternally placing Anarkali's head on her own lap.

Such visual sequences need to be foregrounded in order to dispel the common misconceptions about hijras prevalent in society which often vilifies them without there being any rational justification whatsoever. This is evident in the play itself where Suresh snubs Uma when she identifies Kamla as Anarkali's sister and sharply retorts: "There's no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerate men. They fought like dogs every day. ([6], p.238)" However, as research shows, hijras everywhere have intricate kinship networks through which they seek to build intimate ties with more of their 'own people' and such relationships are as much based on practical requirements and hierarchical orders as on affective bonds as exemplified by mother-daughter relationships or those between sisters. In fact, as Reddy informs, there are special rites and rituals through which a senior hijra would adopt a younger one as her daughter or 'dudh beti' and earlier or future 'daughters' would become the sister or 'dudh behan' of that younger hijra. As Reddy states, "Dudh betis are cared for by hijras like actual daughters. They are taken care of when ill, helped out of crises, given gifts for festivals, and may even be provided with *kattanam* or dowry.... ([3] p. 166)" Champa's relationship with Kamla and Anarkali is not only that of a head hijra and her chelas, but also a maternal one and this is precisely why she cannot tolerate Uma's suspicion that she may have been responsible for Kamla's murder and especially the way in which Uma dismisses all possibilities of there being any affective bond between her and Kamla: "Oh don't give me all that rubbish! Daughter indeed! ([6], p.262)" Such a statement seems to place at stake all those fundamental bonds through which hijra identity is framed and rightly provokes Champa into an impassioned outburst:

Take your money and get out of my house. Go! This is my house! In my house you respect me!

Pause

You don't know! You don't know!

Pause

You don't know how much we all loved her! You will not understand. I loved her more than you can love your daughter!

You don't know! ([6], p.262)

Such unknowability is to an extent built into the condition of subalterneity and it is often difficult, even for sincere critics, to go beyond the shroud of dominant discourses and accept as truth what seems altogether incredible to them even if the evidence points indisputably to that. Uma herself concedes the possibility such an impasse as she muses "May be they tried to tell me the truth but I wasn't listening" ([6], p.264). This again offers a paradigmatic illustration of that intellectual aporia regarding subaltern speech which Spivak has been emphasising. However, the acknowledgment of this aporia should not lead to inaction. What is required instead is an even more thorough and painstaking disentangling of knotted discursive screens that serve to keep the subaltern either invisible or visible as the effect of dominant discourses. Therefore Uma Rao, despite her initial

failure at communication with the hijras, follows the clues she had been provided with and indeed visits the house of the Deputy Chief Minister in order to interrogate Salim, his bodyguard whom she actually suspects for being Kamla's murderer as it was he who had come to search for a particular photograph at Champa's house and the news-cutting that Champa tore apart also had a picture of him. However, her suspicions are again misplaced. Although Salim initially offers a false confession he knows quite well that the minister himself will "get [him] out of this mess" ([6], p.266) as he was only following orders in order to eliminate all trace of Subbu's relationship with Kamla and thus save his employer from facing a public scandal. The minister's promise to look into the matter and ensure Salim's arrest after the end of the wedding ceremonies both serves to delay the process and also ensures Salim's safety and the consequent concealment of the truth regarding Kamla's murder. Uma herself realises this and therefore states: "I have a feeling he [Salim] is not going to confess. Mr Sharma wouldn't want to lose a trusted bodyguard and will use all his influence. There is no real proof ([6], p.271)". Such reactions manifest, what Spivak defines as "the tragic emotions of the political activist, springing not of superficial utopianism, but out of the depths of what Bimal Krishna Matilal has called 'moral love'" (Spivak: [10], p.310). This is why Uma despairingly pleads "Help me in having the murderer of Kamla arrested...I feel I owe it to you and Anarkali and...and...all of you!" ([6], p.271) – only to find her legitimate attempts being strangled by the lack of means and resources. She thus faces the quandary that haunts every investigator of subalterneity as they are forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of all those trusted modes of acquiring knowledge which had served them so well on other occasions. Even to read against the grain one requires a text which can be read so. But since the subalterns are generally deprived from all those institutions of knowledge and representation through which they can voice themselves, it is either imperative for them to orchestrate on their own those moments of crisis which force the hegemonic order to record their presence, however distortingly, or to initiate new modes of representation altogether which challenge our established definitions to emerge as pathbreaking texts of resistance, capable of constituting an anti-hegemonic discourse, however fledgling and ruptured.

Therefore, following Spivak's reading of Bhabneshwari Bhaduri's suicide, an ad-hoc subaltern rewriting of the social text of hijra performances at weddings takes place in Dattani's play, as it is their unexpected arrival and performance at Subbu's wedding which leads to the final catastrophe and the consequent disclosure of the truth. Badhai hijras' song and dance sequences at weddings or after childbirth are supposed to be auspicious for the newly wed bride and groom and the parents generally provide money to the hijras in order to secure their blessings. These performances are not only an indisputable marker of hijras' gendered identity but they also operate as simultaneous mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. While these occasions are one of those rare moments when hijras are sanctioned inclusion within the national imaginary, these performances are also implicit indicators of their exclusion from all those envisioned joys of marriage and motherhood from which they are both socially and biologically deprived. As Uma Rao herself explains:

The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable – marriage and birth – ironically are the same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the Fire God, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons'. ([6], pp.239-40)

It is this particular discursive construct, along with the stereotypes they engender, which are momentarily subverted by the unexpected arrival and performance of the hijras. Although the security guards and the Superintendent were initially hastening to drive them away, Uma Rao intervenes by pleading on behalf of the hijras and arguing that it is traditionally expected that the hijras should perform in front of the newlywed couple and that it is an ill-omen to turn a hijra away during a wedding ceremony or a birthday. Mr. Sharma, the minister accepts this traditional logic and allows the hijras to perform which then leads to the theatrical resurrection of Kamla on stage as part of Subbu's psyche and initiates a psychological collapse that not only leads to his suicide but also unearths the truth behind Kamla's murder. This not only problematises the orthodox heterosexist nature of marriage but foregrounds the unacknowledged marital desires of the sexual subaltern which come back to haunt the heteronormative discourse by disrupting one of the sacramental sites through which heteronormativity perpetuates itself – the marriage ceremony. What enables this hauntological return is

the fusion of the hijras' own performance, which triggers the psychological breakdown in Subbu and thus revives Kamla rhetorically from the dead, with that elusive photograph which Uma Rao had been searching for so long. The photograph contains a picture of Subbu with the newly married, bejewelled Kamla which operates as one of those manifestations of queer desire in action that the minister could not afford to circulate anywhere. As Uma Rao explains:

The photograph was what Mr. Sharma was after. A Polaroid picture that Subbu and Kamla had taken soon after their private wedding at some remote temple. A picture of Kamla as a beautiful bride smiling at Subbu with the wedding garland around him. The poojari probably didn't know that Kamla was not a woman. Of course Mr. Sharma couldn't have it, totally unacceptable. So he arranged to have Kamla burned to death. Bu Salim had to tell him about the picture. Mr. Sharma simply had to have the picture. He sent Salim to threaten Anarkali and Champa...He did get the picture eventually...after losing his son. What a price to pay! ([6], pp.280-281)

The discovery of this truth seemingly rehabilitates the silenced subaltern and that only becomes possible through the daring intervention of the hijras and the assistance they receive from Uma Rao. As Spivak explained, "...subaltern insurgency... is an effort to involve oneself in representation, not according to the lines laid down by the official institutional strictures of representation" ([9], p.306). The hijras deliberately go beyond such strictures, unlike Uma Rao herself, and are thus able to bring their subalterneity to crisis, as exemplified superbly by the minister falling at Champa's feet and begging for his son's life. Furthermore, the subsequent representation of Subbu and Kamla's passionate embrace and kiss on stage serves to shock the expectations of the audience as well which is drawn into the circle of response and not allowed to stay outside as passive observers of other's dilemmas. By forcing the audience to witness what the minister and others like him experienced, Dattani forces the audience to interrogate its own responses so that there is less room for self-deluding charades in the name of being 'liberal', 'progressive' or 'tolerant'. In attempting to hold a mirror up to nature, Dattani forces the audience to examine embedded prejudices which serve to perpetuate different modes of subalternization and this becomes his attempt to include the subaltern on the long and tortuous road to hegemony which must begin with the acknowledgment of the rights of citizenship – rights which the hijras have been perennially denied.

V. CONCLUSION

Dattani knows that and that is why he cannot end his play, despite the disclosure of the truth behind the crime, on a note of undiluted optimism. Instead, the conclusion becomes resonant with that anguish which Spivak had experienced while analysing the unspeakability of the subaltern whose persistent attempts to bring subalterneity into crisis have often been met with refusal, repression and erasure. As already explained, the two things which ensured the moments of subaltern insurgency, in a rhetorical sense, in the play were brought about by the performance of the hijras and the picture of Kamla and Subbu. Towards the end of the play when Uma Rao ponders over the imminent arrest and conviction of the minister who had publicly confessed his crime, her husband Suresh takes the photograph and tears it apart and thus erases the one remaining archival record that attested to Kamla's existence and her attempted annulment of those constrictions which barbed hijra existence in India. As Uma Rao laments:

They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamla. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers. Champa was right. The police made no arrests. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So were the lives of two young people... ([6], p.282)

And as the play ends, the spotlight remains fixed on Uma at the centre of the stage, while the hijras "move into shadows on the periphery" ([6], p.282), signifying the prolongation of their subalternized existence, bereft of the means of self-representation. Explaining the intended significance of her famously controversial remark – 'the subaltern cannot speak' – Spivak states: "So 'the subaltern cannot speak' means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech

act.” ([9], p. 292) Despite repeated warnings from her hijra sisters, who told her that “There is no world for the hijra other than the one we make for ourselves” ([6], p.261), Kamla defied the strictures of prevailing heteronormative discourse and sought to create a space for herself which erases the divisive lines that we keep drawing to privilege some and marginalise others and paid for her endeavour with her life.

Yet, such corporeal and epistemic violence does not entirely have the last word as the viewers also witness the surreal reunion of Subbu and Kamla in death which helps to imagine, quoting Spivak’s words on Mahesweta Devi, “an impossible, undivided world, without which no literature should be possible” ([9], p. 273). And one of the preconditions of such a world would be the solidarity between different subaltern and non-subaltern sections of the society – a solidarity which is exemplified by the relationship that evolves between Uma Rao and Anarkali. Despite all her initial fears, mistrust and hesitations, she does eventually arrive at an improved understanding of the hijras by accepting the limitations of her own attempts and her sincerity paves the way for a consolidated solidarity between herself and Anarkali who again embrace as sisters in the last scene of the play and Anarkali even gifts her a supposedly magical amulet to ensure that she is blessed with children. Such solidarities both indicate the responsibility of non-subaltern activists/intellectuals and also perhaps serve as a pointer towards the formation of some such fledgling solidarities. Such solidarities are crucial for “the subaltern’s entry into citizenship, whatever that might mean, and thus the undoing of subaltern space” ([9] p.307). The legal and judicial structures of India have recently extended this process even further. While the Election Commission has given citizens the option to enlist themselves as persons belonging to the ‘third gender’, the Supreme Court has not only ratified the status but by acknowledging their plight has even identified them as OBC or Other Backward Community so that they may participate in various governmental social welfare schemes. Dattani’s play not only explores the various aspects of hijras’ subalternized existence, but also traces the path along which a non-subaltern associate may engage with it and thus secure those legal and judicial provisions through which the entry into “the circuit of parliamentary democracy” ([9], p. 307) may be successfully ensured.

REFERENCES

- [1] Supreme Court of India. *Judgment on National Legal Services Authority versus Union of India and Others*. Writ Petition (Civil) No. 400 of 2012 with Writ Petition (Civil) No. 604 of 2013. Decided on 15 April 2014. Available at: [http://www.stpl-india.in/SCJFiles/2014_STPL\(Web\)_271_SC.pdf](http://www.stpl-india.in/SCJFiles/2014_STPL(Web)_271_SC.pdf)
- [2] Lal, Vinay. “Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality.” *Social Text*, No. 61, *Out Front: Lesbians, Gays, and the Struggle for Workplace Rights* (Winter, 1999), pp. 119–140.
- [3] Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006.
- [4] People's Union for Civil Liberties–Karnataka. *Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore, India*. September 2003. Available at: <https://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/PUCL/PUCL%20Report.html>
- [5] Baxi, Upendra. “Foreword.” In: *Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore, India*. People's Union for Civil Liberties–Karnataka, September 2003.
- [6] Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. Vol. II. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005.
- [7] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography.” In: Guha, Ranajit (ed.). *Subaltern Studies IV*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 330–363.
- [8] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In: Williams, Patrick and Chrisman, Laura (eds.). *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 64–111.
- [9] Landry, Donna, and Gerald Maclean (eds.). *The Spivak Reader*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- [10] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Post-Colonial Critic*. Kolkata: Seagull, 1996.