

# Love, Fire and Silence: A Critical Reading of Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around Fire.

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## Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's radio play "Seven Steps Around the Fire" from 1999 deals with issues like gender identity, being and unfair treatment in modern India. The story follows a murder case and looks into deep-rooted traditions and values that keep the hijra community, who are transgender people, oppressed. This article looks at how the story is built, the themes it covers, and the symbols it uses, and says that the play's look at traditions, power, and silence is still important today. Mahesh Dattani's ranks as one of the most important contemporary Writer who address about the social issues that are prevailing in India through his works.

## Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is one of India's top English-language playwrights. He is known for tackling difficult and often ignored topics in Indian society. His plays usually deal with issues like gender identity, sexual orientation, and the conflict between modern ideas and traditional beliefs. One of his plays, "Seven Steps Around the Fire", was created for BBC Radio 4 and first aired in 1999. This play is about the hijra community, a group that lives in a tricky position in Indian culture. They are respected in some special events but face exclusion in daily life (Dattani7).

By using radio, Dattani avoids the visual parts that can wrongly represent the hijra experience. This forces listener to focus on the real people behind the story through the way they speak and what they leave unsaid.

## Plot Overview

Uma Rao is a sociology researcher and the wife of a high-ranking police officer. Her story starts when she gets involved in the investigation of Kamla, a young hijra who is found dead after being burned. As Uma investigates the case, she learns that Kamla had secretly married Subbu, the son of a powerful minister. Their ceremony, called Saptapadi, involved taking seven steps around a fire and went against both gender and caste rules.

Because this marriage could cause political trouble, Subbu's father had Kamla killed and made sure the case was never officially recorded. Even though Uma finds out the truth, she cannot do anything to get justice. This shows how closely political power and social bias are connected.

## Thematic Concerns

### 1. Marginalization of the Hijra Community

The hijras are treated with respect at weddings but face rejection in other parts of society, showing how society's moral values are inconsistent (Jain 112).

Kamla's situation shows how being legally unnoticed makes people vulnerable.

### 2. Love Across Social Boundaries

Kamla and Subbu's relationship break down traditional ideas about caste, class, and gender. Their relationship can't work because it goes against the usual social order, which makes it hard for people to accept personal freedom when it challenges existing power structures (Sarkar 59).

### 3. Power, Corruption, and Institutional Silence

The cover-up of Kamla's murder shows how political and law enforcement systems often work together to protect those in power rather than seek justice (Dattani 24).

### 4. Symbolism of the Seven Steps

The seven steps in a Hindu wedding symbolize a lifelong commitment, but for Kamla, this ritual leads to her death instead of a happy marriage. This shows how ceremonies without real care and understanding can be empty and meaningless (Chaudhuri 88).

## Character Analysis

Uma Rao — Embodies empathy and intellectual curiosity; she is the moral lens through which the audience encounters the story.

Kamla — Represents both resilience and victimhood; her silenced voice is the play's emotional core.

Subbu — Torn between love and filial obedience; a symbol of suppressed individuality.

The Minister's Family — Embodies political hypocrisy and the weaponization of "honor" to maintain power.

## Narrative Technique and Medium

The radio play format focuses more on sound than on visuals, which makes the emotional experience stronger. Silence, pauses, and the way voices change in tone help bring out the importance of things left unspoken. Dattani uses this format to build a close connection with the listener, making them feel the emotional and moral issues in the story (Mehrotra 134).

## Contemporary Relevance

India officially recognized the "third gender" in 2014, but the hijra community still faces a lot of hatred and violence from society. The play connects with current discussions about equal rights for marriage, issues related to caste, and the freedom to love without being controlled by the government or society.

## Conclusion

In “Seven Steps Around the Fire”, Dattani turns a murder mystery into a powerful statement about society. The "seven steps" are not just a ritual; they symbolize the promises that society breaks when it treats marginalized people unfairly. The play is a strong reminder of how prejudice harms real people, making it a lasting piece of art and activism.

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