

# Subaltern Voices in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of subaltern representation in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani, focusing on the hijra community as a marginalized social group in India. Drawing upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, the study interrogates the structures that silence marginalized identities while simultaneously examining the complexities of representing these voices within dominant discourses. The paper argues that while Dattani attempts to foreground the hijra community, the mediation of their voices through elite characters underscores the paradox of subaltern representation. The play becomes a critical site where visibility and silence coexist, revealing the limitations of liberal humanist approaches to marginality.

**Keywords:** Subalternity, Hijra, Gender Marginality, Indian Drama, Representation, Power, Silence

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of Indian English drama in the post-independence period marked a significant shift toward the exploration of identity, marginalization, and socio-political critique. Among the leading dramatists of contemporary India, Mahesh Dattani has carved a niche for himself by addressing taboo subjects such as homosexuality, gender discrimination, and the lived realities of marginalized communities. *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999), originally written as a radio play, is a powerful narrative that investigates the murder of Kamla, a hijra who secretly marries Subbu, the son of a powerful minister. The investigation, led by Uma Rao, uncovers the deep-seated prejudices and systemic violence faced by the hijra community.

This paper examines the play through the lens of subaltern studies, particularly focusing on whether Dattani succeeds in allowing the subaltern to speak or merely re-inscribes dominant structures of representation.

The term "subaltern" was first conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci, who used it to describe groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. In the Indian context, the Subaltern Studies Group expanded this concept to recover marginalized histories.

However, the most influential critique comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* challenges the possibility of authentic representation. Spivak argues that the subaltern is structurally silenced and that any attempt to represent them risks reinforcing hegemonic discourse. Her assertion that the subaltern "cannot speak" highlights the epistemic barriers that prevent marginalized voices from being heard. This theoretical framework is crucial for analyzing Dattani's play, where the hijra community remains central yet voiceless.

The hijra community in India occupies a paradoxical position within society. Historically, hijras have held ritual significance, often invited to bless weddings and childbirths. However, in modern society, they are subjected to severe discrimination, exclusion, and violence.

Their marginalization operates on multiple levels:

- **Social:** Ostracization and stigma
- **Economic:** Limited access to employment
- **Political:** Lack of representation
- **Legal:** Historical denial of rights

In Dattani's play, these realities are vividly portrayed through characters like Anarkali and Kamla. Kamla's secret marriage symbolizes a challenge to heteronormative and patriarchal structures, leading to her brutal murder. The play exposes how violence functions as a tool of silencing: Kamla's murder is a direct consequence of her transgression against societal norms. Similarly, Anarkali's imprisonment reflects the routine violence inflicted upon hijras. The police, represented by Suresh Rao, embody systemic oppression. Law enforcement becomes a mechanism for maintaining social hierarchies. Kamla's identity is erased from official records. Her marriage is denied legitimacy, and her death is covered up. This aligns with Spivak's concept of epistemic violence.

One of the central concerns of this paper is the mediation of subaltern voices. In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the narrative is filtered through Uma Rao, an educated, upper-class woman.

While Uma's investigation brings visibility to the hijra community, it also raises critical questions:

- Can the subaltern speak through an elite intermediary?
- Does representation become appropriation?

Spivak warns that such mediation risks silencing the subaltern further. In the play, Kamla never directly speaks; her story is reconstructed through others. This reinforces the idea that the subaltern remains structurally voiceless. Dattani's play challenges rigid gender binaries by foregrounding the hijra identity. The hijras exist outside traditional categories of male and female, disrupting normative gender constructs.

Their marginalization is rooted in:

- **Patriarchal norms**
- **Heteronormativity**
- **Cultural taboos**

Kamla's marriage becomes a radical act that exposes the limitations of these norms. However, the violent response to her transgression reveals society's resistance to change. Despite their marginalization, the hijra characters exhibit forms of resistance:

- **Anarkali's defiance** against police authority
- **Community solidarity** among hijras
- **Assertion of identity** despite stigma

These acts challenge the notion that subalterns are entirely passive. Instead, they demonstrate resilience and agency within oppressive systems. The title of the play refers to the Hindu marriage ritual (saptapadi), symbolizing sacred union and social legitimacy. However, Kamla's marriage subverts this symbolism.

The fire represents:

- **Purity vs. exclusion**
- **Legitimacy vs. denial**
- **Tradition vs. transgression**

Thus, the ritual becomes a site of ideological conflict, exposing the contradictions within societal norms.

Dattani critiques multiple layers of power:

- **Political Power:** The minister suppresses truth
- **State Power:** Police enforce oppression
- **Social Power:** Norms dictate legitimacy

These intersecting structures ensure that the subaltern remains marginalized and unheard.

While Dattani's play is empathetic toward the hijra community, it operates within a liberal humanist framework that seeks inclusion rather than radical transformation.

This approach has limitations:

- It relies on elite mediation
- It does not dismantle power structures
- It risks reinforcing dominant narratives

Thus, the play simultaneously critiques and reproduces systems of power.

## 2. Conclusion

*Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a powerful exploration of subalternity in contemporary Indian society. Mahesh Dattani brings visibility to the hijra community while exposing the mechanisms of their marginalization.

However, the play also reveals the limitations of representation. The subaltern voice remains mediated and partially silenced, aligning with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique.

Ultimately, the play serves as both a recovery of marginalized voices and a reminder of the challenges inherent in representing the subaltern.

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