

**Envisioning the humane society for Transgenders: Tracing the struggle of Transgenders from Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Round the Fire to Kalki Subramaniam's WE ARE NOT THE OTHERS**

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Abstract:

The research paper aims to study the hegemonic, arbitrary, and biased gender construction of Indian society and the need to dismantle them and envisage a society in which every individual will be given humane rights irrespective of their gender. The present paper aims to study the journey of transformation of the transgender community from the period 1999 to 2021 and to visualize a humane society for them through the portrayal of their struggle in the insightful playwright, Mahesh Dattani's play, *Seven Steps Round the Fire* and the transgender activist writer, Kalki Subramaniam's *WE ARE NOT THE OTHERS*. The stereotypical image of Hijras has always been very comical. They are portrayed as mere 'objects' to be mocked. They are often seen as child thieves, indulged in sex-rackets, and rendered as very crude and cruel. They create an image of awe and fear in the conservative society of India. But with time the transgender community has become aware of the atrocities inflicted on them from the very beginning of the gender construction in society. Transgenders have come up to the forefront of society without their gender identity being a hindrance. The 'third gender' option while filling out forms, the seatbelt campaign, and reservations for the third gender implemented in Kerala are some of the recent revolutionary changes that have taken place. Transgender writers like Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* ((2007) and A. Revathi's *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), Vivek Shraya's *God Loves Hair* (2010) Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2015), and Vivek Shraya's *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018) are the autobiographical works that truly showcase the real struggle faced by the transgenders. These writers have not only written about their hardships but they have also participated actively in spreading awareness about their community. The present paper is a modest attempt to trace the journey of struggle in the portrayal of the transgender community from the groundbreaking play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani, in 1999 to the recent revolutionary multi-genre book *WE ARE NOT THE OTHERS* (2021) by transgender activist, Kalki Subramaniam.

Keywords: Transgender, the dignity of human beings, social justice, Envision a humane society, Revolutionary changes, Social Acceptance

According to Wikipedia, “**Gender** includes the social, psychological, cultural and behavioural aspects of being a man, woman, or other gender identities. Depending on the context, this may include sex-based social structures (i.e. gender roles) and expression”.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender#:~:text=Gender%20includes%20the%20social%2C%20psychological,gender%20roles\)%20and%20gender%20expression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender#:~:text=Gender%20includes%20the%20social%2C%20psychological,gender%20roles)%20and%20gender%20expression). Kamla Bhasin, an Indian feminist writer has emphasized a similar belief in her book *Understanding Gender* states: “Gender refers to the sociocultural definition of man and woman, the way society distinguishes men and women and assigns them social roles” (Bhasin1). Society has expected all women to be feminine and all men to be masculine. At the same time, transgenders have not even been considered in the process of gender construction. The dictum in *Manu Smriti*, a canonical Text in the Hindu religion depicts the insignificant position assigned to eunuchs as unproductive, useless, unprolific, and ignorant: “As a eunuch is unproductive with women, as a cow with a cow is unprolific, and as a gift made to an ignorant man yields no reward, even so, is a Brahmana useless, who (does) not (know) the Rikas” (*Manu Smriti* 2.158.).

Thus, religion has played an important role in creating a hetero-patriarchal Indian society. In feminist theory, “Heteropatriarchy (etymologically from heterosexual and patriarchy) or **cis heteropatriarchy**, is a socio-political system where (primarily) cisgender (same gender as identified at birth) and heterosexual males have authority over other cisgender males, females, and people with other sexual orientations and gender identities”.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heteropatriarchy#:~:text=In%20feminist%20theory%2C%20heteropatriarchy%20\(etymologically,people%20with%20other%20sexual%20orientations\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heteropatriarchy#:~:text=In%20feminist%20theory%2C%20heteropatriarchy%20(etymologically,people%20with%20other%20sexual%20orientations)). In hetero-patriarchal society women and the transgenders suffer from the discrimination against them. This kind of society assigns a powerful position to the men. Contemporary creative writers such as Mahesh Dattani, Roswitha Joshi, Vivek Shraya and Kalki Subramaniam have questioned the very basis of the heteropatriarchal Indian society in their works.

Gender from the ages has been constructed only in the binary of man and woman. In Indian society, no gender beyond the binary of men and women has been accepted as natural by society and its power structures. Therefore, the gender binary has assigned certain fixed roles to men and women only while completely neglecting the transgenders. Men are the bread earners while women are deemed fit to be protected inside the four walls of the household and take care of the household work and child-rearing.

The process of gendering a child begins with his or her birth, moulding their conduct into socially accepted parameters of dos and don'ts. The miserable plight of those children who do not fit into the accepted behavioural norms of society due to their different sexual orientations can only be imagined. The construction of gender has remained a matter of conditioning even today. “Depending on where you are in the world, simple activities remain interpreted by gender,” says Raaja Bhasin in a recent article ‘A matter of conditioning’ published in ‘The Tribune’ on 7 April 2024.

The term transgender is an umbrella term which includes transmen, transwomen, and someone who is non-binary. Transgender people are those who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex at birth. The existence of transgenders is prevalent in all cultures, countries, and religions. In the present-day world, they are known by the comprehensive term LGBTQIA+, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and the + sign, which represents other communities. They are sometimes called transsexuals if they desire medical assistance to transition from one sex to another. In addition to including people whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex (trans men and trans women), it may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine (people who are genderqueer, e.g. bigender, pangender, genderfluid, or agender). Gender identity refers to a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else; gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behaviour, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics. Transgender also include people who belong to a third gender or conceptualize transgender people as a third gender. The gender that does not fall into the readily accepted categories of binary gender construct is penalized by society in the form of demeaning, dehumanizing, and disrespecting them. The transgender community is fighting its battle against the rigid binary construction and they have made their mark in the past few years. The gender struggle has achieved much advancement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Transgenders are marching ahead in the different spheres but a lot remains to be achieved in terms of their social acceptance.

The discourses about transgender people are constantly changing in a positive direction in popular culture, academia, and science. Theories like feminism, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory etc. have evolved in support of transgender people. “Queer cultural studies may be defined as an attempt to redefine identities and carve out a cultural and political space within

the dominant heterosexual paradigm, to simply stop being the invisible, perverted, or sick' other of heterosexuality" (Nayar 184). Earlier forward-thinking writers like Mahesh Dattani, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, R. Raj Rao etc. have expressed the deplorable plight of transgenders in their work through transgender characters. But in this transition phase, transgender writers like Smile Vidya, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, A. Revathi and Vivek Shraya have expressed their pain, sorrow, and struggle through autobiographies, social media, movies, and other platforms. What was unspoken, unheard and unexpressed is spoken and expressed emphatically nowadays. Though these marginalized people have won half the battle yet to get social acceptance seems a far cry for them even today.

Mahesh Dattani has interrogated the constructs and practices of the dominant gendered system which is inhuman and detrimental to the dignity of transgenders through his farsighted play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999). The play has rightly described the cruel treatment meted out to the transgender community. "Gender relationships and the plight of hijras (eunuchs), who are neither male nor female but want to be both, are artistically as well as realistically presented in his plays" (Das 9). Dattani is a forthright writer who takes up the neglected and pitiable plight of this community. They deserve their right to equality, freedom, and dignity as human beings. However, they are treated badly due to the pre-existing hegemonic and arbitrary gender roles by society. Dattani has shown the dehumanization of the Transgender community through the brutal treatment of Anarkali, the eunuch by the hierarchical gender power constructs of the conservative Indian society. Uma, the protagonist, is the daughter of the vice-chancellor of Bangalore University, who is married to Suresh Rao, superintendent of police. She is pursuing her Research work in Sociology about the life of the Hijra community. She goes to the prison to meet Anarkali, a eunuch arrested for the murder of a beautiful hijra, Kamala. Munswamy, the constable, does not consider the research on Transgender, a fit subject for a respectable woman like Uma. He is highly insolent to Anarkali "Uma: Will she talk to me? Munswamy: (chuckling) She! Of course, it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it does not." (CP. 7). Anarkali does not want to talk to Uma because of being physically molested by the male prisoners. "Anarkali: Go away. After serving all these sons of Whores, my mouth is too tired to talk." (CP. 8). The hijras know that they have no voice in the system and are insignificant to the entire social set-up. "Anarkali: One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband" (CP.35). No doubt, owing to the indignant mindset of the

common man about transgenders they suffer gender violence. This gender reality has been created through the sustained social system for centuries. It is deeply rooted in the psyche of even the modern educated Indian society.

Despite laws in favour of transgender people, the reality has remained the same for them even today. The survey conducted on the violence against transgenders by Swasti Health Resource Centre—a Bengaluru-based non-profit organization speaks volumes about the atrocities inflicted on them. Four of 10 transgender people face sexual abuse before completing 18 years, according to the survey—among 2,169 respondents across three states: Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The abuse begins as early as age five, but the most vulnerable are those aged 11 to 15, the data show. Violence (physical, emotional, and sexual) continues beyond childhood: 971 (44.7%) respondents reported facing 2,811 incidents of violence—an average of three incidents per person—between April and October 2015. Emotional violence topped the list (1,228), followed by physical violence (802) and sexual violence (781). Many gender non-conforming children drop out of school due to harassment and discrimination. As many as 616 respondents (28.4%) without education were more vulnerable to violence than those with an education, the data reveal. (Chaturvedi, Sumit. (2017). Abuse Of Transgender Indians Begins in Early Childhood. 6 January 2017).

Kalki Subramaniam, is an Indian transgender activist, queer artist, entrepreneur, poet, actor, and inspirational speaker. She is also a member of the National Council of Trans Persons constituted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in India. She is the founder of Sahodari Foundation, an organization that works for the Indian transgender population through its powerful and innovative projects that bring social change and empowerment to the transgender community. She was invited by the prestigious Harvard University to speak at the India Conference 2017.

Her book, WE ARE NOT THE OTHERS (2021) has questioned the biased heteropatriarchal power structure through diverse mediums like poems, slogans, diary entries, drawings, letters, newspaper articles etc. It has challenged the cis-privileged narrative to dismantle the dominant hegemonic gender binary. In response to the mail and the telephonic conversation with the present scholar, Subramaniam expressed her anguish, pain and concern about the deplorable state of transgender people in Indian society. She emphatically stated that we are human and need to be treated with equality and justice. (Thu, Apr 25, 2024, 06:11 Kalki Subramaniam <[writetokalki@gmail.com](mailto:writetokalki@gmail.com)> wrote)

Transgender people have yet to get a dignified place in society. Subramaniam has expressed the anguish and pain experienced by the transgender when they are curiously questioned about their voices, and bodies and frequently intruded in their privacy by the privileged section of society. Some transgender individuals have lost their families, their occupations, their homes, and their support, and some experience provocation and even brutality. Transgender youngsters may encounter harassment or even physical torture at home, at school, or in their groups. These sorts of encounters prompt nervousness issues, gloom, and other emotional wellness conditions. The poignant struggle and the formidable challenges of the transgender to be treated as normal, to realize their dream of home, husband, and family, and their predicament to be treated as others, social perverts is expressed in a heart-rendering narrative by the writer.

Transgender are needed for the blessing as per the religious scriptures in marriages and on childbirth but they are voicing their innate need and craving to be wives and mothers themselves. They are provided a reverent place in Indian Religion and culture that has the power to bless others, but they want the right to happiness and a life of dignity. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture, marriage and birth ironically are the very same privileges denied to them by man and nature. Transwomen are often used by men for sex, only to be abandoned later.

“We need love; we could give love and receive it; we deserve to be in homes; we deserve to have a husband and a family, don’t we?” asks Subramaniam, the transwoman writer. (Subramaniam 40). Thus, the change needed is rightly emphasized by Subramaniam. The constant efforts of transgenders have won them certain legal rights but a compassionate humane approach needs to be cultivated to address their concerns, to make them educated, to ensure them respectable employment, and to cater to their human need for family, friends, and recognition. So, they feel themselves as part of the social milieu. Subramaniam seems to powerfully challenge the ingrained biased mindset about transgender while emphasizing the need for the transgender community to uproot the hetero-patriarchal Indian society through their inner strength “Stamp your foot on his throat, reveal your Kali-face, Now get away from him; there is so much awaiting to topple, battle and get started in the world” (Subramaniam 50). Thus, Subramaniam inspires the transgender community to fight against the torturous practices against them.

Nothing is lacking in the transgenders. It is only the mindset that needs to change and to consider them as equal human beings. In Hindu mythology, one of the most popular forms of Shiva is Ardhanarisvara, or half-man/ half-woman, which represents Shiva united with his Shakti (female creative power). “There is no complete man or complete woman in this world; in every man there’s woman; and in every woman, there’s man” (105). The hijras are identified with this form of Shiva and hence their blessings are considered auspicious. Therefore, they are commonly seen during weddings and at houses with newborns. Despite this traditional side associated with them, they are usually outcasted by society. They are generally deprived of leading a normal life as any other individual because they are different. But today it has changed to an extent. We see them working in fields that one never imagined such as NGO and they are also seen taking part in events representing India. The government too has accepted them as a third gender and has passed laws on their behalf.

Subramaniam has emphatically depicted the human side of the community. “Your thoughts design your destiny; life is a journey, when we stop there is no meaning. Keep Moving. As a creation, you are complete” (105) she believes. After living on the brink, the transgender community realized that it could not go on forever and decided to fight for their rightful place in society. The acceptance of their struggle, pain, and suffering is lacking in the mainstream.

The initiative taken by Dattani to show the plight of trans people pricks the consciousness of every individual to pursue the cause of the well-being of the transgender community. Subramaniam has asserted a similar concern by exhorting transgender to stand up for themselves and their dignity. She urges “It is so important to love yourself and move on” (106)

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