



Documentary Violence and Transgender Subjectivity in Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract

This paper explores Mahesh Dattani's 1998 radio play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* as a media of transgender subjectivity formation via institutional documentation. It argues that Dattani's drama reveals how bureaucratic procedures – police records, medical certifications and familial registers – produce what Judith Butler has termed 'ungrievable lives' (25) and at the same time force the transgender subject into defensive formations. By analysing the play's forensic procedures and discourse, this study contributes to transgender studies by highlighting ways in which Dattani exposes the violence of documentary practices. The play's engagement with the theme of documentation attests to the ways in which trans people are made to live according to institutional logic. A close reading of the drama demonstrates how far the author goes towards exposing the mechanisms of 'paperwork of personhood' (Dutta 432). Three documentary crises that trans people face in institutional settings are examined as a means to understand how trans subjectivity emerges as a response to these challenges. By exposing the ways in which trans people live by what could be termed as 'body knowledge', the play provides grounds for thinking about their subjectivity as contingent. The paper finally examines the resonance of Dattani's play with the recent 2019 Transgender Persons Act that continues to require legal recognition via medical certification by district magistrate and medical institutions.

Keywords: Documentary violence, transgender subjectivity, bureaucratic erasure, institutional recognition, evidentiary crisis, Mahesh Dattani, hijra identity.

Introduction

The File and the Fire

Seven Steps Around the Fire opens with a discussion of the police filing procedures that immediately establish the drama's concern with the central issue of documentation. The superintendent's response to his subordinate's report about a hijra's murder – "Just another eunuch dead. File it and forget it" (Dattani 105) – already indicates the play's engagement with what one could term documentary violence, i.e., the procedures by which institutions appropriate the subjectivity of trans people. The "seven steps" mentioned in the title have been shown to include the seven-day marriage ritual Kamala wanted to complete, as well as the seven-day mourning over her death; however, it also involves the "seven steps" of the filing procedure that Sharma suggests to forget about the hijra's death.

This paper contends that Dattani's drama could be considered as investigating the production of transgender subjectivity through documentary procedures. By foregrounding the processes by which institutions such as the police, the hospital, and the family file or refuse to file documents pertaining to trans people, the play unveils documentary violence. The current study builds on recent scholarship on

transgender studies, archival studies, and South Asian law to provide a close reading of the drama to ascertain different ways in which it engages with the topic of documentation. Although much of the criticism on this play has focused on its role as a medium to create empathy for the transgender community, this paper reads it as an investigation into the workings of documentary procedures, which have been subject to renewed critique recently.

The play's engagement with documentation could be read on three levels: the evidentiary crisis that trans people face when engaging with the law, the archival crisis that comes with familial and institutional erasure, and the narrative crisis imposed by the law and media as a means to appropriate trans subjectivity. The following sections discuss these documentary issues in detail. The paper finally attempts to relate this early play by Dattani to the recent debates on the Transgender Persons Act of 2019, which imposes several certification requirements on trans people who wish to legally recognise their gender.

Evidentiary Crises – Police Files and Other Body of Knowledge

Dattani's play meticulously follows the procedures by which

trans people are documented by agencies that have limited understanding of their subjectivity. The drama exposes the violence of bureaucratic procedures by which trans people are registered as 'abnormal' and subjected to disciplinary measures.

Documentary Disposability and Police Archives

In responding to his subordinate's report about a hijra's murder with the words "just another eunuch dead. File it and forget it," Superintendent Sharma embodies what Michelle Caswell has described as "symbolic annihilation through classification," which renders certain groups of people invisible through specific filing practices (Caswell 56). Sharma's response, which instructs the subordinate to file it and forget it, reflects a larger procedural necropolitics, to borrow from Kalpana Kannabiran, whereby certain categories of people are subject to bureaucratic procedures designed to erase them (Kannabiran 89).

The play presents other instances in which the police file documents about trans people but are generally dismissive about their plight. For instance, while Uma investigates Kamala's murder, she learns about the various police procedures designed to 'deal' with hijras. However, by contrasting police archives about trans people with Uma's body knowledge, the drama unveils the ways in which trans people authenticate their subjectivity outside of institutional procedures. Uma learns about Anarkali's hijra community's "body archives" when the latter asks "do you want to see our records?" and proceeds to show her initiation marks: "our records are here, not in your police files or hospital papers" (Dattani 118). Anarkali's response reflects Gayatri Reddy's observation that trans people use certain rituals and practices to authenticate their subjectivity and bodily integrity (Reddy 78). By referring to their initiation marks as records, Anarkali demonstrates how the hijra community's body of knowledge informs its epistemology.

Medical Certification as Pathological Documentation

The play exposes the ways in which the medical institutional complex participates in the documentary violence against trans people. Uma reacts with suspicion to the idea that the hospital could help the hijra community, saying "Hospitals are where they make files that call us 'disordered.' We are not their diagnosis" (Dattani 122). Uma's response reflects the hijra community's distrust of medical institutions that seek to document trans bodies as abnormal. Jessica Hinchy has written about the colonial medical apparatus's role in producing extensive documentation about Indian "tribals" (Hinchy 92). Similarly, one could argue that post-colonial institutions such as the hospital continue to engage in acts of documentary violence by labelling trans people as "disordered."

The drama exposes such acts of medical documentation by the hospital as a form of evidentiary crisis for trans people. The conversation between Uma and Anarkali about the lack of legal protection for the hijra community foreshadows the announcement of the Transgender Persons Act, 2019, which requires legal certification by a medical institution. Anarkali responds to Uma's suggestion to seek legal help by saying "the law does not care to listen to us" and adding "it is their voices that matter not ours" (Dattani 137). Such comments reveal the ways in which trans people are subjected to evidentiary challenges when seeking to gain legal rights. A. Revathi writes about trans women's experiences with the law in Tamil Nadu, arguing that "The law demands papers

declaring what we already know – that we exist" (Revathi 143). Dattani's trans characters authenticate their subjectivity through their lived experiences, which the law seeks to dismiss as anecdotal evidence not worthy of consideration.

Forensic Absence and Investigative Failure

The drama exposes the ways in which the police fail to document trans people as citizens who deserve legal protection. Uma's investigation into Kamala's murder exposes the lack of proper police documentation about hijras. Uma asks Anarkali to tell her about the police's involvement with the hijra community, which prompts Anarkali's response: "They do not know enough to understand us but do enough to harass us" (Dattani 140). Anarkali's response indicates the police's lack of knowledge about trans people, resulting in their failure to protect them. The play's reference to police's failure to investigate Kamala's murder reflects the real-life problems trans people face when seeking to gain legal recourse. Dhiren Borisa has written about the evidentiary crisis in transgender law enforcement in India, arguing that the police's forensic procedures are inadequate to deal with trans issues (Borisa 112). Similarly, one could argue that the drama exposes the documentary violence committed by police investigators such as Sharma who dismiss trans people as eunuchs, not worthy of their protection.

Archival Crisis – Familial Records and Other Memory

Dattani's play exposes the ways in which the trans people are subject to erasure from various archives. By presenting the trans characters' experiences with familial and institutional records, the drama demonstrates the evidentiary and archival violence committed by institutions that fail to acknowledge trans subjectivity.

Biological Archives and Familial Expulsion

Both Anarkali and Kamala recount their experiences of being erased from their families' records. Anarkali recalls her mother's response to her transitioning: "When I was twelve my name was removed from our family ledger, my photo was taken off the wall. I became un-person in my own house" (Dattani 116). Anarkali's account of her family records being altered reflects the ways in which trans people are expelled from their families. According to Gayatri Reddy, trans people in south Asia have historically used community resources such as adoption and legal protection to negotiate their subjectivity (Reddy 78). Anarkali's experience of being erased from her family's ledger represents the familial refusal to recognise her subjectivity. Unlike Anarkali, Kamala actively wanted to be erased from her family's records as a way to gain autonomy. The drama depicts her desire to live independently as a hijra by expressing her intention to "move out" of her parents' house and "live my own way" (Dattani 135). By wanting her family to remove her from their ledger, Kamala exercises her right to self-determination in choosing her life-path.

Kamala's desire to be removed from her parents' ledger exposes the ways in which trans people negotiate their relationships with families who view them as outsiders. The trans characters' interactions with Mrs. Sharma demonstrate the conflict that trans people face when negotiating their relationship with families who continue to view them as outsiders. When Kamala tells Mrs. Sharma that she wants to get married to follow the Hindu tradition, she says "the marriage will be in our family records" (Dattani 138). Mrs. Sharma responds by exclaiming that her family's history will

be ruined because of her son marrying “a hijra” (Dattani 138). The drama reveals through this encounter that trans people continue to be viewed as outsiders whose presence in institutions such as the family is undesirable. Rajni Shah has written extensively on trans people’s relationship with their families in south Asia, suggesting that “Documentary transgression” is the strategy trans people employ to gain access to resources such as family property (Shah 57). Dattani’s trans characters negotiate their familial relationships by attempting to gain inclusion in their families’ records. However, as Kamala’s experience demonstrates, such attempts often lead to familial backlash.

Community Archives as Counter-Memory

By depicting trans characters’ interactions with community archives, the play exposes the ways in which such archives have been used to further marginalise the trans community. Anarkali recounts her experiences in the hijra community, describing how they are regarded as “untouchables” by the “untouchable” castes such as the washermen and sweepers (Dattani 133). The drama highlights the ways in which the hijra community’s interactions with institutional archives confirm their status as “untouchables” in society. Such encounters with institutional archives exemplify what Arjun Appadurai has described as “documentary violence,” when certain groups of people are subjected to extensive documentary procedures (Appadurai 241). Anarkali’s account of police encounters and hospital visits demonstrates the ways in which trans people are forced to engage with institutional archives that have documented their subjectivity as “eunuchs” (Dattani 111). The drama depicts such interactions as modes of archival violence committed by institutions that employ procedures to keep trans people as subjects of their control. The play also demonstrates how trans people utilize community archives to relegate their experiences to institutional ones. Anarkali tells Uma “here we remember what the world forgets. We keep our own records in stories, not ledgers” (Dattani 119). By referring to the community’s oral history as records, Anarkali demonstrates the ways in which the hijra community resists institutional archives that have sought to document their subjectivity as “eunuchs.” The drama depicts such trans archives as an alternative to institutional ones, providing a space where trans people record their experiences, not in ledgers but in stories and songs. Ann Cvetkovich has written about the need to create such archives of feelings, arguing that they offer a way to record experiences of trauma that official archives do not document (Cvetkovich 8).

Dattani’s depiction of community archives as sites of resistance to institutional ones reveals the ways in which trans people appropriate such archives to record their experiences and subjectivity. However, by depicting internal conflicts within the trans community, the drama avoids essentialism. Anarkali accuses Uma of participating in “archival hierarchies” by arguing that Uma has failed to understand how the community keeps its records (Dattani 140). In responding to such criticism, one could cite A. Revathi’s argument about the ways in which marginalised groups participate in archival violence when they attempt to assert their subjectivity (Revathi 89). By depicting such complexities, Dattani’s play avoids romanticising trans archives and their role in resisting institutional ones. Jill Dolan has written about plays that depict utopian longings, arguing that such dramas often fail to represent the complexities of trans archives and their impact on trans

subjectivity (Dolan 7).

Marriage Certificates as Contested Documents

The drama depicts the trans characters’ relationship with marriage certificates as a means to show the ways in which such documents are used to control trans people. Anarkali responds to Uma’s inquiries about hijra marriages with “we don’t have certificates but we do have love” (Dattani 125). By referring to marriage as something that does not require documents but rather “loves,” Anarkali exposes the ways in which trans people are prevented from obtaining legal recognition. The drama demonstrates the ways in which trans people’s reliance on community archives has resulted in their inability to utilise certificates as a means to protect their rights. Anarkali’s response to Uma’s remark about trans marriage indicates the ways in which community archives have resulted in the trans people being reliant on oral history and not legal documents. As Brenda Cossman has written, certificates have been used by the state to control the lives of trans people, denying them legal protection (Cossman 67). The play exposes such documentary violence by depicting Kamala’s desire to have her marriage registered. It reveals the ways in which certificate-based marriage has been used to control trans people by depicting Kamala’s murder at the wedding threshold. Ruth Vanita has written about the ways in which trans people are subjected to certificate-based marriage in Indian literature, arguing that such documents have been used to appropriate trans subjectivity (Vanita 203). The drama depicts such appropriation as a form of documentary violence when Kamala is murdered at the threshold of the marriage hall.

Narrative Crisis – Who Narrates Trans Stories?

The play examines the ways in which trans people’s stories are told through legal and media channels. By depicting the interaction between trans people and institutions such as the law and media, the drama exposes the ways in which trans subjectivity is determined by such institutions.

Legal Narratives and Testimonial Injustice

The drama depicts the legal system as a mechanism by which trans people are subjected to testimonial injustice. Champa narrates her knowledge of Kamala’s murder to the police but is dismissed by the superintendent. Her testimony, which begins with “I saw... but who believes what a hijra says?” demonstrates the ways in which trans people are subjected to testimonial injustice when testifying in court (Dattani 124). Such injustice committed by the law reflects what Miranda Fricker has described as “testimonial injustice,” when a person is prejudiced against due to their social category (Fricker 1). S. Muralidhar has written about testimonial injustice committed by the Indian judiciary against trans people, arguing that it reflects “juridical silencing” of trans subjectivity (Muralidhar 34). The drama exposes such silencing committed by institutions such as the police, which dismiss trans people’s testimony. The play depicts other instances in which trans people’s knowledge is dismissed by the law, such as when Uma responds to the superintendent’s comment about trans people by adding “not that anyone asked me to testify” (Dattani 105). By depicting such interactions, the drama exposes the ways in which trans people are subjected to testimonial injustice when testifying in court. The drama depicts the ways in which trans people utilize performance to overcome the evidentiary challenges they face when testifying in court. During the discussion of Kamala’s

murder, the hijras perform rituals that Uma interprets as a means of establishing truth. The drama depicts such performance as a way in which trans people utilise their repertoire to assert their subjectivity (Taylor 20). The play exposes the ways in which the law relies on such repertoires to appropriate trans subjectivity.

Media Archives and Representational Violence

The drama depicts the ways in which the media participates in the erasure of trans people by focusing on the hijra community's interactions with it. During the discussion of Kamala's death, Anarkali recounts a conversation she has had with newspapers about trans people. Anarkali says that newspapers only write about hijras when there is a "murder, riot, or a public protest" (Dattani 131). The drama depicts such interactions as instances of documentary violence committed by media archives. The media's failure to represent trans people in any other capacity but as rioters, murderers, and protestors exemplifies Pramod Nayar's argument about the ways in which such archives seek to marginalise trans subjectivity (Nayar 134). The play exposes the ways in which media archives perpetuate such violence by marginalising trans subjectivity.

Conclusion: Beyond the File

Seven Steps Around the Fire ends on a note of documentary inconclusiveness, as the play exposes institutional violence but fails to achieve archival justice. As Uma states, "The files remain incomplete. The stories are missing" (Dattani 142). In other words, the play concludes on an open note, eluding to what Saidiya Hartman has termed "the afterlife of documentary violence" (Hartman 6).

The play's significance lies in its demonstration of the ways in which transgender subjectivity is produced through documentary practices. Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* implies that trans identity is a performative document, to borrow the words of performance theorist Rebecca Schneider – it is "a document that is performed" (Schneider 101).

In the context of contemporary India, where trans people continue to navigate what activist Grace Banu has referred to as "the paperwork of existence" (Banu 56), Dattani's play is simultaneously a critique of and a contribution to the discussion of documentary violence. The play critiques the institutional violence enacted through documentation practices while at the same time proposing an alternative to it, one that is in many ways inspired by the views of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz on disidentificatory documentation (Muñoz 4).

The play's final image of the community coming together to perform their own ritualized documentary of Kamala's life represents what I think of as archival performance – a way in which marginalized groups can create alternative documentary practices that serve as a "repertoire against the archive," to borrow Diana Taylor's phrase (Taylor 20). *Seven Steps Around the Fire* suggests that when it comes to achieving transgender rights, legislative measures may not be sufficient. As Anarkali declares, "Our bodies are our certificates. Our memories, our files" (Dattani 141). The play's message is that transgender people should be able to document their lives on their own terms, rather than relying on or being limited by the certificates and files of others. In this way, the play proposes a radical rethinking of documentation practices, one that is informed by a queer and trans perspective.

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