Chapter II

Poverty and the Body

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

T.S. Eliot “The Hollow Men”

The famous last paragraph of T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men” appropriately sums up the plight of the poor urban dwellers, who live and die inconspicuously. Their death does not make any difference to the world. The poor urban dwellers are condemned to lead a life of utter poverty, which pushes them to the wall—leaving them with no choice whatsoever. In the absence of choice and minimal subsistence level—a bleak future and a tragic predicament staring them in the face—they are forced to take extreme decisions like selling their body organs.

Unfortunately enough, in the recent past a market for human organs has come up as an emerging business. Though there are many means of earning a livelihood in cities, consumerism has increased to such an extent that those who do not have anything to survive upon commoditise their bodies to make both ends meet. Tsuyoshi Awaya in her paper “Organ Transplantation and the Human Revolution” termed this process as “Human Revolution” (145). What forces an individual to commoditise his body? Or how ‘ethical’ this issue is? These issues are part of the ongoing debate but the main point of concern is the increasing velocity of this market. Though there are many reasons behind this increase, the root of the problem lies in the ever widening financial disparity in urban space.
Even in the past, human body parts were utilized for various purposes; for instance, the utilization of the human body as food, that is, cannibalism or the utilization of the human body for medical experiments, treatment and as medicine. It is said that people ate human flesh, whether as an exception or as a norm, from the time of Cro-Magnon man and Neanderthal man. The use of fallen teeth and teeth extracted from dead bodies in ancient Etruria is an example of the utilization of the human body for medical aid. The most popular old Chinese work on pharmacology Bencao Gangmu (1596) describes how most parts of the human body, including bones, nail, hair, dandruff, earwax, organs etc. can be used as medications against various ailments (Nie 167–206). The utilization of mummies as medicine was in fashion in Europe from the 15th to the 17th century; it was believed that, human fat taken from the dead body could be turned into medicine. Thirdly, the utilization of parts of human body as tools has also been common practice. Whistles and pipes made from bone, or bowls made from skulls are examples of this transformation. Human body has been used in the field of art as well. For example, a famous church in Rome has decorations made of many skulls and other bones. And a famous Buddhist temple in Japan has statues of Buddha made of large amounts of human ashes after cremation. These are practices documenting the use of the human body as art (Awaya web).

These days human organs, tissues, cells, kidney, cornea, liver, womb (in case of surrogate mothers) and even sperms are widely used for transplants, medical research, biotechnology, drug tests, etc. While efforts are on to prohibit the sale of human organs around the world, human body, at the same time, is fast becoming a commodity. Blood is commonly traded as a regular commodity. Whether donated free or for money, blood becomes a commercial item and is called “haematic (blood)
medicine.” Hair and spermatozoa may be added to the list of such commodities. Even tonics made from human placenta are known as marketable medical item in Japan.

Though the above mentioned aspects of commoditisation have a medical basis, there are other aspects of this; such as human trafficking, prostitution and the sexual exploitation of eunuchs (Hijra tradition related to the south east countries of Asia). In any form, commoditisation is always an example of dehumanization. The two plays Harvest and Seven Steps Around the Fire taken for analysis in this chapter show trends in ‘neo-cannibalism’ in the urban cities of modern India.

Georg Simmel in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” writes “The modern city, however, is supplied almost exclusively by production for the market that is for entirely unknown purchasers who never appear in the actual field of vision of the producers themselves”(Levine 327). The present chapter takes into account two plays dealing with pressing urban issues of poverty and the consequent body selling. The present chapter examines Manjula Padmanabhan’s Harvest, dealing with the gruesome trade of organ selling and Mahesh Dattani’s Seven Steps Around the Fire which is about the ‘Hijra’ community and its tragic predicament in the city space. Both Harvest and Seven Steps Around the Fire represent the similar city space where body is a commodity for the unknown or hidden consumers.

Poverty, Body and New Technologies

Manjula Padmanabhan’s play Harvest has a futuristic setting though it highlights the heinous self-inflicted suffering of people who require money to survive in the demanding environment of a modern city today. The play projects the compulsive need for which the marginalized sell their organs. It depicts the darkness
and bleak scenario surrounding the lives of the poor helpless people of third world countries.

The play is set in 2010 AD in Bombay, where the sale of human organs is a common practice. The play focuses upon the mingled admiration and horror of the suburbanites’ life style and their increasing craze for electronic gadgets. The donors, mostly single room dwellers in a crowded Indian city sell their body parts to rich clients through registered and approved international agents. Devoid of basic human amenities of life, they mistake wealth for happiness.

Though Padmanabhan has used a futuristic space to depict the deprivations faced by the poor city dwellers in the twenty-first century, the idea for Harvest was the outcome of a visit to her sister in Chennai in 1995 where she was confronted with the brutal reality of the trade in human organs on a morning walk around the town. Padmanabhan shares the incident that led her to write this play in her essay “The Story of Harvest “ (1998). During her visit to Chennai, she saw several men in dressing gowns and sterile mouth masks. Upon making enquiries, she was told that they were the poor villagers of Tamil Nadu and were recovering from kidney-transplant surgery. Later, she read many news articles on this flourishing trade in organ selling. This compelled her to write on the theme of a frenzied quest for longevity by cannibalizing the bodies of the young and needy.

Poverty is one of the major issues in the third world. If we see the statistics the World Bank estimate of 2010, 32.7% of the total Indian people fall below the international poverty line of US$ 1.25 per day (Purchasing Power Parity) while 68.7% live on less than US$ 2 per day. Many socio-economic studies on Indian cities are available but they are not directly poverty-related studies. However, they provide
useful information about the realistic aspects of urban survival. Major causes of urban poverty turn out to be unemployment, underemployment in a number of low productivity occupations, insecure employment and low wages. In cities, the majority among the poor population are the migrant workers. As urban poor are not producers of food they have to buy their requirements from the market which makes their survival extremely difficult with the meagre money they earn in the city.

Urban Existence and The Abuse of Human Body

Padmanabhan’s imaginative narrative depicts the realistic happenings of the modern world. *Harvest* presents the dreadful consequences of poverty such as over population, organ selling, prison like incarceration, partiality of parents towards bread earners, artificial insemination, and the exploitation of women. This act of organ selling also brings to the fore the ethical question of use and abuse of human body of both male and female persons. Rather than justifying the point of organ selling, Padmanabhan depicts it as one of the bitter realities of the modern third world where there is total lack of choice for the poverty-stricken people.

At a superficial level the play is about Om Prakash who loses his job while living in a one bedroom apartment with his family. He decides to sell unspecified organs through a company called InterPlanta Services to a rich person, Ginni, in the United States so as to get rich quick. InterPlanta and the recipient are obsessed with maintaining Om’s health and therefore control the lives of Om, his mother Ma, and wife Jaya in their one-room apartment. The recipient, Ginni, periodically looks in on them via a videophone and treats them condescendingly. First Om’s diseased brother Jeetu is taken to donate organs instead of Om and then Om volunteers to meet Ginni who has been projected as enticing white woman. She, however, turns out to be
someone else and not the one she was expected to be. Ginni, in actuality, turns out to be a decrepit old man called Virgil. The underlying theme of the play carries deep meaning and constitutes the substance of the play. It is a parable of contemporary social scenario of the third world countries and specifically of India as the organ trading is prevalent due to increasing demand for donated organs, high economic profitability and uncontrolled trafficking. Every reported case illegal harvesting and sale of the body parts is motivated by money with little or no security of those whose bodies have been systematically sold one piece at a time.

The setting of the play Harvest is similar to the ‘fourth world’ of Manuel Castell. The play is set in a single room accommodation on the fourth floor of a tenement building in Mumbai’s congested inner city with very poor sanitary conditions. The diagonally walls help maintain the privacy of the individuals. The homeless, sick, illiterate people live in ‘chawls’ in a highly modern metropolitan city. So the stark contrast of this ‘fourth world’ in the city space foregrounds the reality of poor people.

**Faustian Pact: Compulsions of Poverty in Urban Space**

In selling their body, which also in a sense amounts to the selling of their soul, the characters go through a sort of Faustian pact. The play opens with the presence of Jaya and her mother-in-law, Ma, on stage who are impatiently waiting for Om’s return from his job interview. Both are restless: Ma fervently hopes that Om will get employment; Jaya, knowing what the job entails, hopes that he would not. But Om returns to announce that he has indeed been selected for the ‘job’ at InterPlanta Services. After passing a fascinating process of medical tests at InterPlanta, he has
been decreed as an eligible, healthy candidate for selling the rights of his entire body to an anonymous buyer in the United States.

His confused feelings about signing such a contract allow Padmanabhan to portray the complex mix of hope and despair that has motivated his actions. At first, in ecstasy after getting a job he says,

OM. “We’ll have more money than you and I have names for!’ he says to Ma, proudly. “Who’d believe there’s so much money in the world?”  
(Harvest 11).

When his wife expresses her reservations about what he has done, he becomes defensive:

OM. You think I did it lightly. But […] we’ll be rich! Very rich! Insanely rich! But you’d rather live in this one small room, I suppose! Think it’s such a fine thing – living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case – lulled to sleep by our neighbours’ rhythmic farting! […] And starving. (Harvest 23)

When Jaya accuses him of making the wrong choice by accepting this job offer, he is adamant that his decision was not made out of his own free will but due to the miserable circumstances they lived in:

OM. No. I went because there wasn’t anything left to do. I went because I lost my job at the company. And why did I lose it? Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks anymore! There are no new jobs now, from here till next week! It’s all over! The factories are all closing! There was nothing left for people like us! Don’t you know
that? There’s us—and there’s the street gangs—and then the rich.

*(Harvest 68)*

As Jaya blames him further, Om, demonstrates the plight of a poor urban dweller by saying: “Huh! I didn’t choose. I stood in queue and was chosen! And if not this queue, there would have been other queues—[…]*" *(Harvest 68).* Om represents poverty stricken urban dweller too confused about choice and free will. As Om’s final reaction makes clear, his judgement has been severely impaired by the lure of unlimited wealth. When the reality of what he has done hits him, he is terrified “How could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I?” *(Harvest 53).*

Om’s mother, however, expresses no such regret. A victim of urban conditioning, she dreams of getting rich quick too. Upon first hearing her son’s promises of unimaginable riches, Ma is mystified with the kind of job that pays even if a person sits at home? As she begins to understand what Om’s ‘job’ implies, she resumes her queries as though she cannot believe their good fortune:

MA. Tell me again: all you have to do is sit at home and stay healthy?

OM. Well—not sit necessarily —

MA. And they’ll pay you?

OM. Yes

MA. Even if you do nothing but pick your nose all day?” *(Harvest 21).*

By showing Ma’s continuous amazement at the fact that her son will be paid to do absolutely nothing, Padmanabhan is able to depict the extent to which the forces of the capitalist market economy appear to nourish dreams of making money that lure
the third world poor urban dwellers to sell their bodies for the sake of ever elusive wealth.

In the first scene of the play shortly after Om’s return with a ‘new job’, after signing the contract with the InterPlanta, representatives of InterPlanta Services, barge into the donor’s home to install a series of gadgets. As Om, Jaya and Ma watch, they dismantle the family’s old kitchen and replace it with their own cooking device and jars containing multi-coloured food pellets. They then install a Contact Module, a device that hangs from the ceiling and which looks like, Padmanabhan tells us, a ‘white, faceted globe’. Each time the device springs to life, Ginni, the American who has purchased Om’s body, is able to make contact with the donor’s family. Ginni communicates with the donor family only through this contact module.

The Act II starts with the time gap of two months. As the curtain lifts, the stage reveals that, the donor’s household is fully equipped with an air-conditioning unit, a mini-gym and a gleaming fully-equipped kitchen obviously acquired through sudden wealth. The small space has been transformed into a sophisticated apartment with modern amenities. Every character seems to be accustomed to the luxuries and high tech lifestyle. Ginni keeps an eye on their way of living, especially of Om.

After making the pact with the receiver, the family of Om starts getting everything they have longed for. At the time of signing the contract there was no proper sanitation in their home as Om’s family was sharing the toilet with forty other families living in the chawl. To Ginni, the American receiver this act of sharing the toilet was “disgusting” and “unsanitary” (Harvest 28). She installs a sanitary system in Om’s house. This toilet results in the uplift in social status of Om’s family.
In scene I Act II; Om is panicking because they are late for lunch. Ironically their lunch consists of the multi-coloured nutritional pellets provided to them by InterPlanta Services. “You know how [Ginni] hates it when we’re late to eat”, Om says, worriedly. The contact module thus allows the receiver to establish a permanent surveillance in Om’s home. Fearing Ginni’s rebuke, or worse, a cancellation of his contract, Om urges his entire family to police their own behaviour. The module is supposed to inculcate self-discipline, turning the donor’s body into a perfect site for the ‘docility-utility’ (Foucault 135-169) model. The constant surveillance of Om and his family would help Om to stay healthy. In other words, his good health would ensure that the extraction of the healthiest organs. As Michel Foucault explains, “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.” This docility views the body as a mechanism itself and allows an increase in the utility of the body. Foucault’s analysis of social institutions centres the human body amidst power relations where it is the object of knowledge and power exercise.

Ginni is careful, however, to provide the donor with plenty of comforts to compensate him for the effort. Ginni reminds the family that by pampering him so, she is only fulfilling her own contractual obligations: “I get to give you things you’d never get in your lifetime, and you get to give me, well… maybe my life” (Harvest. 43).

These words of Ginni jolt and disturb and bring to the fore the irreversible Faustian pact. It is a grim reminder that there is hardly any equivalence that can be established between the receivers of the body and donors of it Ginni provides ‘things’ for which the donor pays her back with his own life. In fact, Ginni’s frequent gifts amount to little more than mere investment:
GINNI. The most important thing is to keep Aumn smiling. Coz if Aumn’s smiling, it means his body’s smiling and if his body’s smiling, it means his organs are smiling. And that’s the kind of organs that’ll survive a transplant best, smiling organs—I mean, God forbid that it should ever come to that, right? But after all, we can’t let ourselves forget what this programme is about! I mean, if I’m going to need a transplant—then by God, let’s make it the best damn transplant that we can manage! Are you with me? (Harvest 41)

Bliss /Curse of Technology: Ma’s Video Couch

In this Act we also notice that Ma has become completely addicted to the new life of luxury. The household displays array of gadgets that Ginni has provided in order to entertain the donors and to give them comfort, and Ma spends most of her time compulsively watching television. She becomes the perfect recipient of Ginni’s gifts dismissing Om’s anxiety and guilt and increasingly seeks to escape the harsh truths of her life in Bombay by dependence on the technological devices. By the end of the play, she has locked herself away into what Padmanabhan terms as a “Video Couch”, a capsule into which Ma can plug herself, watch one of 150 television channels, and not worry about food or digestion because the unit is entirely self-sufficient. Surrendering to the joys of technologically-induced bliss, Ma is thrilled that, for literally performing no labour at all they will be rich forever and ever.

The notion of this never ending opulence and eternal comfort is ultimately reversed. When the final moment draws near with the imminent arrival of InterPlanta agency Guards, the value of every bit of his body dawns on Om and the idea of commoditising it appears to him to be his worst mistake.
OM. The smallest pimple on my chin is more precious to me at this moment than a diamond mine in someone else’s fist! Oh—how could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I? (Harvest 53).

When the Grey Guards really come they take Jeetu mistaking him to be Om. Later they return him after taking out his eyes for the transplant. Even as the transplant turns out to be a successful Jeetu realises that he has lost the ability to see the real world as his eyes have been gauged out but the programming done in his brain still makes it possible for him to see the beaming video image of Ginni. He was so enticed by the magical beauty of Ginni that he heartily agrees to provide his whole body for Ginni’s transplant:

JEETU. ...You never told me she was so—so young! (hushed) And beautiful ...Well. It would have made all the difference if I had known. I saw all of her, you know! Standing there (he draws her with his arms). all of her........ wearing... almost nothing!(Jaya bites her lip, frowning) And she kept... (he moves his body sensuously) moving, like this, like that... wah! I could have had her, right there and then!

(Harvest 81)

Here Jeetu serves a doppelganger for Om by substituting him. Later at the end of the play we see that Jeetu also serves as a doppelganger for Ginni as his whole body is transplanted to keep Ginni alive. While Jeetu happily goes with the InterPlanta Guards, Om tries to convince them that he is the real donor.

In between all this melodrama we see ma engrossed in her television programme. Though she was aware of everything around her still she showed least interest in what is happening around her. She also buys Super Deluxe Video Couch
model XL 5000! The self sufficient unit with seven hundred fifty channels and full recycling and bio feed processor. A complete delink from the world.

Act III Scene Two serves as a denouement with so many revelations about Ginni, “Nothing. Nobody. A Computer- animated wet-dream to bait the donors” (Harvest 95). The main strategy that the receivers adopt is that “For every fish, a dish—” (Harvest 95). The scene also discloses the lost privacy of the donors who were all the time policed by the receiver. It also reveals the truth that it is not only the men whose bodies are commoditised in the international market but the concept of surrogate mothers from the third world and the fast growing process of artificial insemination also point to the same ends.

“Winning by Losing”: Jaya’s Reclamation of Identity

The final scene of the play has only Jaya on stage. Om has abandoned her, having wilfully chosen to seek out Ginni and give up his body to her. Ma is plugged into her Video Couch, oblivious of her surroundings. Jaya awakens to an unfamiliar, disembodied voice coming from the contact module. This is Virgil, yet another American receiver with designs to prey upon Jaya’s body. Jaya, however, refuses to negotiate with Virgil as long as he attempts to assure control from his safe, disease-free environment in the first-world. She is determined to lay down her own conditions that if Virgil wants her body, he must come to her in person. “I know you’re stronger than me, you’re richer than me. But if you want me,’ she insists, ‘you must risk your skin for me” (Harvest 99). Bragging that she cannot win against him, Virgil sends his InterPlanta employees to break down Jaya’s door. But Jaya has discovered ‘a new definition for winning. “Winning by losing” (Harvest 100). She announces to Virgil that she plans to reclaim the only thing she has which is still her own: her death.
Thus, Jaya resists Virgil’s advances and retains her own dignity. In one swift stroke, she embraces the very mortality that Virgil and his fellow receivers seek to banish from their thoughts. “I’m holding a piece of glass against my throat”, (Harvest 101) she warns an increasingly frustrated Virgil. The play concludes on this unresolved note. While Virgil weighs his options, Jaya threatens to reclaim power over her own body through suicide:

JAYA. Stupid or not if I lose my life, I win this game.

VIRGIL. You won’t be alive to savour that victory—

JAYA, -- but I’ll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I’ll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I’ve had in my entire life so far.

(Harvest 102)

Padmanabhan thus leaves us to ponder over questions about winning through resistance, urban materiality and the vicious stranglehold of city space. The family relations in the play Harvest debunk almost all sanctities of the Indian context. In our ancient literature Mother and motherhood are held in high esteem. Manusmriti says “The mother exceedeth a thousand fathers in the right to reverence”. The concept of mother who is always considered as the centre of any family is very well described in “Shanti Parva”, Section CCLXVI of Mahabharata (trans: Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli):

She is the panacea for all kinds of calamities. The existence of the mother invests one with protection; the reverse deprives one of all protection. The man who, though divested of prosperity, enters his house, uttering the words, “O mother!”—hath not to indulge in grief. Nor doth decrepitude ever assail him. A person whose mother exists,
even if he happens to be possessed of sons and grandsons and even if he counts a hundred years, looks like a child of but two years of age. Able or disabled, lean or robust, the son is always protected by the mother. None else, according to the ordinance, is the son's protector. Then doth the son become old, then doth he become stricken with grief, then doth the world look empty in his eyes, when he becomes deprived of his mother. There is no shelter (protection against the sun) like the mother. There is no refuge like the mother. There is no defence like the mother. There is no one so dear as the mother. For having borne him in her womb the mother is the son's Dhatri. For having been the chief cause of his birth, she is his Janani. For having nursed his young limbs into growth, she is called Amva. For bringing forth a child possessed of courage she is called Virasu. For nursing and looking after the son she is called Sura. The mother is one's own body. (529)

_Harvest_ clearly dismantles every line of this philosophy by presenting the character of Ma as a self centred person. Not only the ancient epic but even modern poets such as Nissim Ezekiel in the poem “Night of the Scorpion” highlight the Indian attitude: “Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.” Mother in Padmanabhan’s version seems to defy the essence of the Indian motherhood as far from being a source of love, compassion ans strength, she is utterly self-centred and callously indifferent towards her family. The small house is a microcosm of city space where relationships are based on benefits. Not only mother-son relationship but all relationships are deformed in the house. Though there are four inmates in small house, two of them think, “the other two don’t exist” everyone is selfish to the core. Ma never cares for her younger son, Jeetu, a male prostitute and her daughter- in-law.
The ideal image of bonding between brothers or of husband and wife that is embedded in the psyche of citizens through our familiarity with the Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata has been disrupted by the playwright’s version where the brothers are perpetually dispute and where husband is ready to turn his wife into his sister for the sake of money.

Jaya is not true to her husband as she is inclined towards her brother-in-law Jeetu. Jeetu does not bother much about the insufficient space that they share and cracks a joke with Jaya. “If we can shit in public, we can just as well screw in public too—especially since you’re now officially my wife!” (Harvest 31). Again in scene three of Act I he very disgracefully remarks: …my brother’s sold himself to the foreigners? Or that you’re my wife? (shrugs) The second one is hardly…news! (Harvest 30).

At the end of this chilling tale, Padmanabhan explores the nexus between sexuality and cultural difference to address the myth of the exotic, sexually available, and yet potentially dangerous Other that still circulates in western discourse. Virgil’s desire to impregnate Jaya, and his simultaneous fear that she would pollute him if their coupling were to happen anywhere but in the virtual realm, could be read as a modern instance of the ambivalence that infused imperial sexuality, Jaya refuses point blank to be party to a transaction that effectively puts Virgil in control of her sexuality, just as she has previously refused to suppress her sexual desires by playing the demure wife of Om. Her demand that Virgil meet her in the flesh before she will consider his proposition functions as a more general challenge to Western societies to put aside damaging stereotypes and obsessive fears about contamination in order to interact with other cultures on a more equal footing:

JAYA. I’ve discovered a new definition for winning. Winning by losing. I win if you lose.
VIRGIL. Zhaya, this is craziness

JAYA. I’m sorry, you-whose-name-I-have-forgot—

VIRGIL. Virgil—

JAYA. It’s your fault. If you want to play games with people, you should be careful not to push them off the board. You pushed me too far. Now there’s nothing left for me to lose —

...

JAYA. You can’t see me, can you? I’m holding a piece of glass against my throat. If you force the door, you will push this glass into my throat.

...

VIRGIL. Zhaya – please! We’ve got this far – I love your spirit – I really do. In these months and weeks, I have come to admire you and care for you. Don’t let me down now!

JAYA. Then risk your skin. *(Harvest 100-101)*

In this sense, like much science fiction, *Harvest*’s bitter narrative is driven by a utopian impulse to suggest the impossible of a world in which there are no winners or losers, only partners. *Harvest* had its formal premiere in on 20 January 1999 at Karolous Koun Theatre, Athens, directed by Mimis Kouyioumtzis. The play has also had amateur staging in India, including a Delhi production by Yatrik at the Sriram Centre in July 1999, directed by Joy Michaels.
Sunil Sethi has described *Harvest* as a modern morality play in which Padmanabhan questions the limits of poverty, material ambition and individual dignity (Sethi 98). Om Prakash’s Faustian pact with InterPlanta organ transplant services brings into focus the spiritual emptiness of a society so seduced by the promise of wealth that its members will sell their body parts for material profit. As the narrative progresses, the full horrors of this kind of trade are suggested not only by the gradual disintegration of the donor body but also by the complete breakdown of Prakash family as a social unit. Ma’s bizarre retreat into the media-controlled oblivion of her Super Deluxe Video Couch with 750 channels represents only a slightly more palatable future that Om’s groveling capitulation to the InterPlanta world-view or his brother Jeetu’s eventual disappearance into the abyss of the organ bazaar. In their hollow quest for affluence, all have betrayed family members and or lovers, and perhaps more critically, they have compromised their humanity. Only Jaya refuses to be taken in by glittering illusions of western-style capitalism--her lone stand against exploitation suggesting a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak vision of human society at the beginning of the twenty first century.

**Degenerating Family Values in City Space**

The degeneration of human values in the context of Om’s family followed by his readiness to sell his organs for the bliss of luxury is reminiscent of Dr. Faustus’ story who sells his soul to the devil for twenty four years of bliss. For Ginni everybody in Om’s family is like goldfish. It clearly depicts the disregard of the first world mercenaries for the third world countries. At the same time Ginni presents the stark reality and the absurdity of highly developed cyber age. “Nothing to hold on to—nothing precious” the advancement in technology and civilization develops deep chasm between human beings.
The impact of Ginni on the lives of Om’s family leads to their gradual abasement for human life in the strange reaction of inmates at the encounter with Jeetu, “Death’s first cousin” (46). The only character having some quotient of emotions in the otherwise grim tale of human trading is Jaya. In a metaphorical way Jaya is the only living character in the play rest of them are completely devoid of human traits. The nonchalance of city dwellers is vividly presented by Padmanabhan. In their mindless quest for affluence, they have compromised their humanity. The mother and the son completely ignore their own blood Jeetu, when he is victimized.

The science fiction genre holds sway over the narrative. Most of the hi-tech devices that fascinate the characters in the play are currently available in many parts of the world. For example the contact module may suggest a video conferencing unit. Ma’s video couch has recognisable mix of dialysis machine and an entertainment unit. Jeetu’s artificial eye replacement works on the same principle on which bionic ear works where the external stimulus is sent directly to the brain. Even the trade of exotic babies is in fashion in the elite western world.

While discussing about the ending of this soul stirring tale, Helen Gilbert discusses that, ”Padmanabhan explores the nexus between sexuality and cultural difference to address the oriental myth of the exotic, sexually available and yet potentially dangerous Other that still circulates in the western discourse” (Gilbert 216). Even in search of Utopia by the third world people the play suggests the impossible equality of so called Utopian world where everybody is sharing the same space with equal rights. Harvest speculates the unequal prepositions shared by western societies and third world countries as now the social difference like race, class, colour are less important than the similarity and adaptability of physicality. So
the body here become a great leveller when it is reduced to its functional organs. The body in the play becomes the space of contestation where the colonial drama unfolds.

The title *Harvest* is highly ironic. In all the cultures harvest is associated with prosperity, plenty, abundance, the period of growth and yielding. Not only this, there is always some spiritual power associated with it that signifies the blessing of mother nature be it Maa Annapurna of Hindu mythology or Demeter of Greek mythology or Ceres of Roman mythology. The play, however, employs the metaphor of harvest in a heavily ironic manner. Here the reference is to the harvest of organs. The suggestion of overpopulation in the third world countries is also hard to miss.

The Orient has always attracted the West. Earlier it was due to gold, spices, cotton and tea that the colonizers were drawn to the it, now the interest lies in the body of the Other Though India is an independent nation now but poverty and overpopulation have led to a situation, where exploitation can occur again because of the availability of a market, where even body parts would fetch a fortune. The play echoes the idea of cannibalising of the body in the medical/urban space. The cannibalising of the body, however, has been replaced with the much more positive word *Harvest*.

While discussing this play Helen Gilbert refers to various striking elements ranging from science fiction to corporate business to the disparity between first world and third world. In the introduction to the play in her edited book *Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology* she elucidates:

The science fiction elements in *Harvest*, while crucial to the play's tightly plotted narrative, are held largely within the bounds of late twentieth century life, so that the future presented remains on this side
of plausibility. The portrayal of InterPlanta as the sinister face of corporate business in the twenty first century also draws from current models of large, transnational corporations staffed by human automatons with little sense of individuality. Padmanabhan’s visceral satire is not without some sympathy for the Prakash family. Like many parables, Harvest is just as concerned with social structures as it is with the individual’s moral choices. In particular, the play highlights the ways in which poverty can limit moral options and degrade human lives, and it also demonstrates that a modern trade in body parts can be understood only within the context of gross material inequities between first and third worlds. (Gilbert 216)

The selection of the global organ trade as a compelling metaphor through which to dramatize the west’s exploitation of its cultural Others suits the futuristic bent of the play because it draws on the familiar science-fiction motif of body-snatching; yet this trope is also based in historical fact. The motif of snatching has taken a new shape in this futuristic tale of organ selling where the West is shown as exploiting the East for organ trading. John Frow in his essay “Bodies in Pieces” discusses the media reports on the Oriental markets where this trade flourishes:

I should stress that my access to information about this trade is mediated largely by press reports and television documentaries that have as a part of their agenda or their effect the construction of the Third World as a site of disorderly otherness. They are organized around a relatively small number of figures – indeed, the same stories and even the same personnel tend to travel from report to report (the mysterious kidney broker Count Rainer Rene Adelman von
Adelmannsfelden, for example), as do the simplifying metaphors (the “bazaar,” the “underground network,” the “organ factory”) and the ways of posing the ethical questions. What the reports construct is a domain of facticity structured around the tropes of the body resurrected and the body dispersed in pain. (Frow 37)

While referring to the findings of Frow, Gilbert further discusses Padmanabhan’s stand on the issue of body selling. Padmanabhan is acutely aware of the way the colonizer exercises his right to plunder everything that belongs to the erstwhile subjects of the colonizers:

Padmanabhan’s particular take on the issue suggests the ease with which western nations position themselves as the ‘natural’ recipients of other cultures’ human and material resources. In this respect, the macabre trade dramatized in Harvest readily evokes its imperial precursors, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which saw millions of racialised bodies bought, sold and exchanged for the benefit of European mercantile expansionism. By presenting images of the colonized body plundered for its specific parts, the play also recalls such imperial practices as ‘souveniring’ native heads, bones and skin in the names of science and anthropology. These resonances between past and present forms of traffic in human bodies and or body parts situate the contemporary trade in organs within a continuum of exploitative cross cultural relationships. That InterPlanta also administers a transnational sexual economy of sorts, encompassing a trade of exotic babies, strengthens the suggestiveness of the historical parallels. (Gilbert 215-216)
City and the ‘Cannibalistic’ Configurations

Hence, *Harvest* can be read not only as a cautionary tale about the possible (mis)uses of modern medical and reproductive science, but also as a reflection on the economic and social legacies of western imperialism, particularly as they converge with new technologies. With skillful irony, Padmanabhan employs the always loaded motif of cannibalism to distil some of the moral issues raised by organ trade. Om’s taunt that Jeetu has been sent to a human game sanctuary where the rich hunt socially disadvantaged types neatly refiges the connotative reach of cannibalism so that it points to characteristics of developed rather than primitive societies.

The cannibalization has a ritualistic element as it is driven by the myth of resurrection—the restoration of youth and wholeness. When Jeetu’s organs are transplanted to Ginni/ Virgil, the transaction is not merely a medical one; symbolic ‘capital’ also flows for the young, the poor and the beautiful to the old, the rich and the ugly. On another level, the leitmotif of cannibalism makes the play’s critique of a dehumanized Indian society more intense, which is depicted in microcosm through the savage conflicts within the Prakash family.

*Harvest*’s narrative also traces the figurative power of disease to communicate the moral ills of a world that are impelled by greed and self-interest to such an extent that trade in body parts has become the norm. However this disease metaphor operates in complex ways after the contract with Interplanta Prakash’s housing unit was sanitized and the family members Om, Jaya and Ma are forced to live. When Jeetu enters the unit covered with muck and grime and weeping sores, his presence contaminates and disrupts the carefully regulated Receiver world. At this point, Jaya’s
rebellion against her bullying family provides some tender moments of the play, as she gently dresses Jeetu’s wounds:

She uses the loose end of her sari to cover her hand as she holds his head, then wipes his face with it with the other corner—OM hands her disposable towels and fetches a mug of water.

OM. (his showing revulsion) What a mess! You’ll have to incinerate your sari—

MA. And what about the carpet?

JAYA places JEETU’s head on her lap.

OM. We can disinfect the whole room—and better wear the nose guard—

MA. But the lice—the lice can get into everything—then we’re finished—

OM. Oh! (in exasperation) It would have been better if—

JAYA. (quietly, stroking JEETU’s disheveled hair) Don’t say it.

(Harvest 47)

The play presents a strong question on struggle of choice by all the characters from the postcolonial perspective. In this scenario their identities as the poor third world citizens make their survival instincts opt for desperate choices. It is imperative to examine the construction of both masculinity and femininity together in the articulation of cultural and national belonging in both public and political discourse. Thus while recent feminist work critics have projected women as a symbol of nation in moments of ethnic conflict—I feel that violence against men in the postcolonial
Indian sphere reveals masculinity and men as gendered subjects and can be read as critical sites for symbolization of nationality and belonging.

Partha Chatterjee, while referring to the nationalist construction of new India in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* discusses how in the confrontation between colonialist and nationalist discourses, the dichotomies of spiritual/material, home/world, feminine/masculine, enable the production of nationalist discourse and at the same time remain trapped within its false essentialisms (134). Kavita Daiya in her paper “Postcolonial Masculinities: 1947, Partition Violence and Nationalism in the Indian Public Sphere” comments on Partha Chatterjee’s observation and poses a serious question, “This leads us to questions we are now prepared and need to address, about men and masculinity in the production of gender: What happens to men’s roles, male bodies, and conceptions of masculinity in the discursive articulation of nationalism in the public sphere? How are male bodies represented, deployed and refashioned in the creation and contestation of nationalism?”(Daiya 2006).

**Power Equations: The First and The Third World**

While we find both the male characters Om and Jeetu in a situation where their maleness is compromised due to their poverty, in a patriarchal society a woman is no more than a ‘body’ for gratification. Similarly in the play the binaries of male and female shift to third world and the first world where the third world citizens play the role of female whose main identity is restricted to their body. Om sells his body, Jeetu works as a male prostitute so both of them are projecting the role-change and are projected as female substitutes. The demeaning of the poor citizens does not end here as we find, ironical, that Jaya’s identity is reduced to her womb. This diminution
of the third world citizens is done by challenging its cultural construct of family, relationship, culture and habitual practices so the play oscillates between the identity of “East Vs. West” or to be specific between India and West.

The play follows a very symmetrical pattern where India’s projection is restricted to the body and destitute perspective the west is projected indirectly through the virtual image due to money, power and technology which hinders the reality. This virtual space is the intriguing world which caters to alluring stereotypical young white woman that attracts the brown male. This dream of achieving or accompanying a typical traditional alluring figure that is always beyond the reach of the colonised brown makes the role of technology based virtual reality the biggest tool of colonization. This also brings the diaphanous status to Ginni. Who is Ginni? Although Ginni is projected as a (young beautiful) white woman it is only in the last scene that the true identity of Ginni is revealed by the playwright as an old white man. So a fe(male) body works as a place of contestation of achieving power by both the colonizer and the colonized. Ginni's identity speaks volumes about the projection of first world. We find Ginni playing various roles in this dubious identity. She is both a coloniser and virtual reality of a superior race created by doctored imaging.

Manjula Padmanabhan has skilfully presented the power equation in which power is shared by both the coloniser and the colonised. Ginni's body defects and richness and Om's bodily perfection and poverty make them equal competitors. There mutual needs change the whole power equation where we cannot simply consider Om and his family at the receiving end. Similarly, when Virgil, the real self of Ginni wants Jaya to surrogate his child, Jaya asks him to come in person to get her. Here Jaya is positioned as the most powerful person who prefers and chooses the real over the virtual. Partha Chatterjee claims that women’s bodies often bear the symbolic
burden of signifying culture, tradition, community and nation (233). However, Padmanabhan through the character of Jaya presents the reverse gaze of the colonised world to contest their position:

VIRGIL. Zhaya –

JAYA. I won’t talk to you unless you say it right!

VIRGIL. (pause) Zh...Jaya.Jaya. Jaya—listen to me—

JAYA. No! You listen to me! I want to be left alone—truly alone. I don’t want to hear any sounds, I don’t want any disturbances. I’m going to take my pills, watch TV, have dozen baths a day, eat for three instead of one. For the first time in my life and maybe the last time of my life, I’m going to enjoy myself, all by myself. I suggest you take some rest. You have a long journey ahead of you and it’s sure to be a hard one. (Harvest 102)

*Harvest* is one of richest texts and can be linked together with other great works. The play echoes the presence of old myths and legends and incidents from various texts though Padmanabhan has parodied those grand themes and ideas to make this play realistic. First is the pact of Om with the receiver through Interplanta services for the life time bliss and comfort that has a close semblance to the Faustus’ pact with Satan. Not only this both Faustus and Om signed the deal for the lifetime bliss in which Dr Faustus’s bliss meant all the knowledge of the world while in Om’s case it is luxuries and comfort of technology. Even the final moments of Om remind us of Dr Faustus’s speech before damning for hell.

FAUSTUS. Mountains and Hills, Come, come and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God

No. No!

Then will I headlong run into the earth:

Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbour me! (Doctor Faustus V.iii)

In *Harvest* Om’s reaction when he finds that the guards of InterPlanta agency have reached to take him away for the transplant echoes similar response:

OM. “Where’ll I hide? In the fridge. That is where I’ll just crawl along here, all the way to the fridge and I’ll sit there—yes” (*Harvest* 54).

Consciously or unconsciously Manjula Padmanabhan’s text brings many intertextual references where Jeetu has a close semblance to Greek tragic hero Oedipus. While Oedipus kills his father and sins by marrying his mother though unconsciously. As this revelation dawns on him, he blinds himself. In the play Jeetu does not kill anyone but he commits adultery with his elder brother’s wife, who in the Indian context is elevated as mother. Later his surgery leading to blindness brings him closer to the character of Oedipus. The situation of inmates in the play living in a small room in a *chawl* denotes empty and meaningless life that Anita Desai described in *Voices in the City* as “enclosed in a locked container” (240). The Contact Module in the play is not only to connect the donor and the receiver but it keeps surveillance on their life all the time. This intrusion of the private space is also visible in Frank Kafka’s *The Castle* and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* where “Big Brother is watching you” constantly reminds people that they are under the surveillance by the authorities mainly through tele-screens. Ironically, the play also parodies the great Indian Epic *Ramayana* which is considered as a document of ideal Indian
relationship. We find every relationship is distorted. Through the characters the playwright makes fun of the degeneration of family relationships which reek of rottenness be it the relation between husband and wife, the relation between mother and son, the relation between brothers, the relation between mother and daughter-in-law or between brother and sister-in-law. Not a single relationship in the play is ideal or even conventional.

Even the name of receiver Ginni reminds us of Arabian Nights where these Ginnis are supernatural creatures which possess free will and can fulfil all wishes of their master. Here in the play the master-slave dichotomy is blurred as they have a mutual benefit. Later after transplant Ginni’s true identity is put forth by the playwright, where Padmanabhan named Ginni as Virgil. The name Virgil means “strong” suggests the renewed vigour and strength after the body transplant.

The distortion of names like Om as Auum, and Jaya as Zhaya, clearly debunks the whole idea of identity. While Om is a very sacred word in Upanishad and religious practices in Indian context and holds a whole range of meanings like Omnipotent, Omnipresent and the source of all manifest existence. The distortion results in removing the deeper connotation of the words and gives a new identity that is far removed from its original meaning. Even the character of Jaya is true to her name. Jaya signifies the victorious but the distortion of the name simply questions and ending makes us wonder who wins in the end?

Poverty, Marginalization and the Body: Predicament of the Transgendered in the City Space

Both the plays taken in this chapter share a common ground in the depiction of poverty and power structures by which the body becomes the site of struggle. While
Manjula Padmanabhan’s play *Harvest* highlights the trauma of Jeetu the male prostitute and ambiguous virtual identity of Ginni/ Virgil, Mahesh Dattani’s *Seven Steps Around the Fire* takes the issue of identity a step further focussing on the transgendered body. In Dattani’s portrayal of the urban issues, the transgender occupies the central space both as a physical body as well as a metaphoric critique of confused identities.

The transgender, however, is a wide category, historically and biologically diverse. Dattani is perhaps the first Indian English playwright to bring the ‘hijra’ identity into prominence. The transgendered identity has a special connotation in India. Though today the ‘hijra’ is a much maligned community that is both derided and feared, there is a long tradition in ancient Hindu Mythology that shows the acceptance of this community as part society. The ‘hijra’ community in India constitutes the third gender category, considered by themselves and by others to be neither men nor women biologically. It is customary for the ‘hijras’ to sing and dance raucously at birth and marriage celebrations and demand money. Since they have no other source of income people pay them out of compassion, distaste, or superstition. A past-master in handling sensitive issues, Dattani deftly depicts the hostility these hapless people face just because of their sexual ambiguity. Equipping them with human status, which is generally denied to them, Dattani highlights their-woes in a subtle manner to leave a lasting impression on the minds of the readers and audiences—so that the realization of altering their perception about this misunderstood community dawns upon them.

Transgendered people exist in most parts of the world. While they share their painful predicament, they have their own local identities, rituals and customs. They are known as *baklas* in Philippines, *Serrers* in Africa, *Hijra, Aravanis, Kinnar, Shiv*
Shaktis in South Asia and berdaches among the American Indian tribes. People of this community face various challenges and discrimination as per the PUCL (K) Report on Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community based on a study carried out in Bangalore in September 2003. The report shows that this prejudice is translated into violence, often of brutal nature, in public spaces, police station, prisons and even in their ghettos. The main reason behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that Hijras do not conform to the accepted gender norms. In addition to this, the low socio-economic status makes them susceptible to harassment by society and police (Sangama web).

Mahesh Dattani, fully aware of these complex dimensions, portrays in his play Seven Steps Around the Fire three transgendered characters inhabiting the city space. They also have their own sets of affinities and hostilities towards each other. The central character is Kamla, a beautiful hijra, who was the beloved of Subbu, son of Mr. Sharma, the minister. Subbu decides to enter into wedlock with Kamala, a situation unacceptable to his powerful politician father who then takes the extreme step of having Kamla murdered by hired goons. The second hijra in the story is Anarkali, (ironically named after a legendary dancer in the court of Akbar) who is, then, framed as the murderer of Kamla. The motivation attributed is the rivalry between Kamla and Anarkali for the position of the “head” of the hijra community—a position currently occupied by the imperious ‘hijra’ Champa.

All the hijras are “women identified”, possibly castrated to enhance their female characteristics. Despite the power structures within their community, the hijra are dreadfully poor, hence subject to exploitation by individuals and institutions of society.
The roots of contemporary violence against the hijra community can in fact be traced back to the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 which was an extraordinary legislation that even departed from the principles on which the Indian Penal Code was based. To establish an offence under the India Penal Code, the charges against the accused have to be proved beyond reasonable doubt in a court of law. But certain tribes and communities were perceived to be criminals by birth, with criminality being passed on from generation to generation. It fitted in well with the hierarchical Indian social order, in which some communities were perceived as unclean and polluted from birth. The link between criminality and sexual non-conformity was made more explicit in the 1897 amendment to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which was sub-titled, ‘An act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs’. Under this law, the local government was required to keep a register of the names and residences of all eunuchs who were “reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or committing offences” (IPC Section 377). Any eunuch so registered could be arrested without warrant and punished with imprisonment of up to two years or with a fine or both. The law also decreed eunuchs as incapable of acting as guardians, making a gift, drawing up a will or adopting a child.

Religious ceremonies in India derive from past practices that precede the advent of the British rule. The eunuchs have traditionally been criminalised under law. The social customs debar them from society and yet their presence is accepted on certain occasions such as marriage and birth. By law they have no citizenship rights and no means of generating a livelihood and as discussed earlier, they are often charged with offences under the criminal tribe act.
They are accepted mostly due to the superstition attached to their identity. Believed to be instilled with some magical power, they are supposed to have power to bless and curse people due to their two-gendered spirits. In the first 'voice-over', Uma a character in Dattani’s play clears many doubts regarding the hijras and their social positioning:

Case 7. A brief note on the popular myths on the origin of the hijras will be in order, before looking at the class-gender-based power implications. The term hijra, of course, is of Urdu origin, a combination of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, literally meaning ‘neither male nor female’. Another legend traces their ancestry to the Ramayana. The legend has it that god Rama was going to cross the river and go into exile in the forest. All the people of the city wanted to follow him. He said, ‘Men and women, turn back.’ Some of his male followers did not know what to do. They could not disobey him. So they sacrificed their masculinity, to become neither men nor women, and followed him to the forest. Rama was pleased with their devotion and blessed them. There are transsexuals all over the world, and India is no exception. The purpose of this case study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low; they yearn for family and love. The two events in mainstream Hindu culture where their presence is acceptable – marriage and birth – ironically are the very 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 blessings of ‘May you be the mother of a hundred sons’. (Collected Plays 10-11)
They are always present on the occasions associated with the custom of ‘badhai’, a Hindi word meaning “congratulations.” This custom is observed mainly in festivities marking the life cycle such as marriage, the birth of a child, or an achievement in a career in which eunuchs sing, dance and confer blessings, often in exchange for monetary donations. The holy scriptures such as Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Bible have references to eunuchs.

The *Mahabharata* talks about Shikhandi, a eunuch who played an important role in the death of Bhishma Pitamaha. According to the mythological tale, Bhishma had earlier taken a vow that he would not fight with a eunuch so Arjuna used Shikhandi as a shield to trounce Bhisma. However, there is no derogatory reference in the *Mahabharata* to suggest that Shikhandhi was looked down upon or treated badly. According to another legend in the *Mahabharata*, Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Nagakanya, offers to be sacrificed to Goddess Kali to ensure the victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. The only condition that he lays down is to spend the last night of his life in matrimony. Since no woman was willing to marry the one who was doomed to be killed, Krishna assumes the form of a beautiful woman called Mohini and marries him. The hijras of Tamilnadu consider Aravan their progenitor and call themselves Aravanis.

Even in the *Bible*, the holy book of Christians, there is a reference to eunuchs: “For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He, who is able to accept this, let him accept it” (Matthew 19:12). This means that a eunuch, created so by God himself, should not be looked down upon. There is no ancient literature which suggests that eunuchs or ‘hijras’ were denigrated or were social outcasts. But as
civilization grew, the third gender became ostracized not only in India but also in the western world. The transsexuals hide their identity to be accepted as a part of society. Dattani portrays the pain of these people sensitively to drive home the point that they are also human beings like all of us and have the same emotions. The only difference is in their sexual characteristics.

During the Mughal era, the ‘hijra’ community found relative acceptance in society, as domestic guardians of the royal harems and as political confidants to rulers and nobles, often playing important administrative roles.

Mahesh Dattani’s *Seven Steps Around the Fire* deals with the sensitive issue of the transgendered, who are a stigmatized section of society. They have no acceptance or legitimized identity in the city space. Politically, socially, legally this community is marginalized and victimized. For almost all Indians this group is considered as outlandish who appear once in a while only on certain occasions. Dattani is probably the first playwright who has written a full length play on the life of the transgendered. Dattani presents them as human beings—who are accorded a sub-human status—seeking room and individuality in city space.

Dattani’s play articulates the voice of these oppressed beings of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged into darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of the hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order (Aggarwal 34).

Commissioned by the BBC radio, the play was broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* on 9 January 1999. The play was first performed on stage at the
Museum Theatre, Chennai by MTC production and Madras Players on 8 August 1999.

**Predicament of Being a ‘Hijra’**

Often used in a derogatory manner, the term ‘hijra’ is translated as eunuch, hermaphrodite, transgender, third gender, transsexual, transvestite and effeminate male, but neither a male nor a female. An archetypical ‘hijra’ is raised as a man who undergoes ritual removal of the genitals to become a ‘hijra’. One can be a eunuch by birth, being born as an intersexual or hermaphrodite or by virtue of being born as a male with feminine gender attributes. The latter undergo ‘nirvana’ or a sacred castration ceremony that turns them into a ‘hijra’, whom society regards as neither male nor female. However, they prefer to be considered as female.

The title of the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* refers to the Hindu ritual of wedding ceremony in which the bride and the groom together take seven vows while going around the holy fire as many times. The title is suggestive of marriage and the play portrays the consequences of three weddings in the course of time—the first and the second marriage of Subbu and the marriage of Uma Rao herself. While unveiling the truth behind the murder of a ‘hijra’ by the “scholastic sleuth” Uma Rao, the play vividly depicts the cruelty and ridicule to which the eunuch community is subjected even in a big metropolitan city. Dattani strives to expose the fringe issues that are generally ignored by mainstream society where even the education system has failed to bring necessary social change of acceptance of this deprived section of society. The hijra community is always treated with disdain by the so-called civilized urban world which is reluctant to accept their existence. The ingrained and rather pathological
aversion only widens the chasm between this community and the mainstream. The play begins with a reference to the wedding.

[Sanskrit mantras fade in, the ones chanted during a Hindu wedding. Fire. The sound of the fire grows louder, drowning the mantras. A scream. The flames engulf the scream] (Collected Plays 7).

The play revolves around this murder mystery but it also voices the predicament of the transgendered persons as victims of social prejudice. In the end it is revealed that these stage directions refer to the wedding of Kamla, a transgender, with Subbu, son of a minister Mr. Sharma and the subsequent murder of Kamla as she is burnt to death.

The play is a pseudo detective story where the sleuth is the scholar researcher Uma Rao. She persuades them to open up so that she can access the inner world of ‘hijras’. This can be made possible with the help of a woman detective. Uma’s “sisterhood” with them through the assured femaleness of the ‘hijras’ would facilitate this. She does not seem to know enough about the intricate world of the ‘hijras’, hence she has social sympathy and a craving for human rights and justice:

Dattani credits her with intelligence, sensitivity and determination enabling her to fulfil the task. Thus she becomes the agent of change. This social agent is cauterised by an open mind, a consciousness that dares to think differently, reacting against social conditioning, questioning the existing social norms and their rationality and merit.

(George 147)

The play brings forth the issue of body selling where the body becomes the main asset for survival. The play presents different viewpoints about the
transgendered through characters from various walks of life. In a way, all characters constitute the microcosm of the quintessential urban Indian. Dattani very objectively and rationally reveals the hypocrisy and prejudice of our social system towards these people.

Dattani, through this play, searches for a new space in urban society that these transsexuals can occupy as their own. The play also successfully brings to the fore the deep-rooted scorn and the seething anger that they nurse towards society for the degrading and inhuman treatment meted out to them. When every person has his own space in the urban centres, the plight of the ‘hijras’ is poignant as the city space is devoid of strong religious values to which their identity has a close affinity. In the preface to the first volume of his *Collected Plays*, Dattani himself supports this view: “I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background” (Dattani xv). Among other issues Dattani deals with, the focus on the attitude towards eunuchs is a reflection on the values of the contemporary world. As already pointed out, Dattani’s drama is a primarily a manifestation of the urban response to issues that plague our society.

‘Hijras’ do not want to be considered as “gay” and “lesbian” which are basically sexual orientations and have their special niche and acceptability in the urban setup. What they want and look for is a gender identity that goes beyond the physical desires. Having undertaken an extreme step of removing their genitals, as a form of severe renunciation, they claim the religious status of ‘sanyasis’ or ascetics; yet because of compulsions of a hungry stomach, many ‘hijras’ work as prostitutes in cities. Many get their income from performing at ceremonies of marriage and childbirth, begging and soliciting sex. They are often encountered on some celebratory functions or festival on trains, at traffic signals and market places
demanding money. Though the ‘hijras’ are most often uninvited, the hosts usually pay them generous fees for performing at a wedding and at the birth of male babies. Their performance generally involves music, singing, and suggestive dancing bordering on lewd gestures.

According to the old Hindu beliefs, the eunuchs are believed to possess occult powers, and their blessings—and curses—are both considered potent. It is a common belief that blessing from a eunuch brings good luck and fertility. Paradoxically, it is quite ironic that these occasions in which their presence is desired as a blessing are never personal experiences of love or procreation for them. According to the Indian civil law, marriage with any eunuch is illegal as the law recognizes only two sexes, and homosexual activity is a punishable offence. Though in his soul a ‘hijra’ is always a female, the biological body cannot bear a child as most of them are castrated males. But people are tolerant of ‘hijras’ for fear that earning their wrath will bring misfortune and cause infertility.

According to Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy Mckenna, “Gender is an anchor and once people decide what you are they interpret everything you do in the light of that” (6). While sex is the biological component, gender is the psychological and social component. However, in certain situations the biological aspects are in contradiction with the social and psychological aspects of gender. These situations reverse biological determinants of gender identity and gender role. But the day to day humiliation and rejection by society which ‘hijras’ have to face is the result of something which is deeply rooted in the psyche of people who call themselves normal. People are afraid of what is beyond their understanding and what is different. In a society driven by herd mentality, whoever is not a part of that collective has to
bear the scorn of society. References to eunuchs or ‘hijras’, can be found in very ancient literatures of India and elsewhere in the world too.

The play is a “whodunit” in which Dattani presents a scholar sleuth Uma Rao who is pursuing her Ph.D. on the transsexuals (Choudhuri 44). He purposefully highlights her familial status. Daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University, wife of Chief Superintendent Suresh Rao, and daughter-in-law of Deputy Commissioner of Police, Uma’s persona has all the trappings of a social status. Above all, she is portrayed as an individual who is confident and has the courage to invoke justice and give voice to the marginalized of society. The play questions the human rights of equality that are supported by the Indian Constitution--which all the people Uma is related to are supposedly aware of.

After the reference to Kamla’s murder, the scene shifts to the office of the Superintendent of Police, where Uma goes to meet a transgender, Anarkali for her thesis work. The play brings to the fore innocence of Anarkali, who is the accused in Kamla’s murder. At the very beginning of the play, Dattani acquaints the audience with the atrocities faced by this community. The issue of their sub-human treatment is very well articulated in the play by simply using the pronoun ‘it’ for the ‘hijra’ Anarkali, rather than the personal pronoun “she”. Constable Munswamy disdains the ‘hijra’ community and mocks Uma when she uses the pronoun ‘she’ for the ‘hijra’.

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. (Collected Plays 7)

Again
MUNSWAMY. If you don’t mind me saying, what is the use of talking with it? It will tell you lies. I will bring it. (Collected Plays 7)

In India the ‘hijra’ community is deprived of several rights though the Constitution guarantees equality before the law on the basis of citizenship. However, the Indian civil law still recognizes only two sexes. The ‘hijras’ are denied even the basic human rights because they do not fall under the two recognized gender categories of male and female. According to the report from an international conference on the law of transgender and employment policy:

There is a broad consensus among the medical research that transgenderism is rooted in complex biological factors that are fixed at birth. This research confirms what transgendered people know and experience on a much more personal basis: being transgendered is not a choice nor a lifestyle, but a difficult, uninvited challenge.

(Sukthankar 169)

Dattani through the character of constable Munswamy makes it very clear that not only transsexuals are separated from the mainstream but they are the most marginalized of the marginal. Munswamy was unable to understand Uma’s sympathy for the eunuch. For him they were objects to be loathed, to be abused but not to be sympathized with. They are less than human for him. He even tries to dissuade Uma to give up the research and take up some other case.

MUNSWAMY. Madam, once again I request you to take up some other case. Look at this man. He cut off his wife’s nose. He will give you an interesting story. (Collected Plays 8)
Here Dattani clearly portrays the space shared by the hijra community in a
city. They are marginalised and labelled as criminals, Munswamy points out that it
would be simpler and more honourable for her to study mainstream crime. He
represents the prejudiced attitude of society towards transsexuals. Inhuman treatment
and sexual exploitation completely isolate them. Society accuses them of behaving in
vulgar fashion and exploiting people for their benefit. However, no one tries to look
deeper beneath the surface and fathom their loneliness and helplessness. Anarkali’s plight
emonstrates that they are easy targets of an exploitative and unjust system which
rands them the way it chooses to. Even their crude language is a “shock tactic”
which seems to stem from the pain and trauma of being on the remotest margin of
society. Anarkali is imprisoned under the false charge of murder of another
transgender Kamla in the male cell of the Central jail. She abhors talking to anyone.

ANARKALI. I don’t care if you are the mother of all the whores in
Bangalore. I said I am not in the mood! (Collected Plays 8)

Another dialogue:

ANARKALI. Go away. After serving all these sons of whores, my
mouth is too tired to talk. (Collected Plays 8)

In the prison not only the jail authorities but even the inmates abuse her and
joy tormenting her. The play poignantly reveals the sadistic tendencies of the so
alled normal people towards the transgender.

MUNSWAMY (hits the bars again). 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! Aaaagh! (Collected Plays 9)

Being sexually different, their agony and isolation are turned into a spectator sport for the tormentors. Even the hard core criminals are treated with more respect than the ‘hijra’ in the jail. People take upon themselves the responsibility to punish the ‘hijras’ for something which the poor souls never did. The Jailer does not restrain other criminals from beating Anarkali and instead instigates the fellow prisoners to torture her just for the sake of amusement. It appears they are completely devoid of human feelings in dealing with the helpless victims whom nature has made different.

Being on the fringe, the ‘hijras’ are always misunderstood by society. They are projected as liars and criminals. Just because Anarkali is a transsexual, Suresh cannot come to terms with the fact that she can be innocent. Her biggest crime is having been born as a transsexual and not as male or female. Had she been born male or female, the attitude of the people may have been different towards her.

SURESH. ...Don’t believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars. (Collected Plays 9)

Suresh’s scorn towards Anarkali and her ‘hijra’ community is evident from yet another dialogue:

SURESH (off). What’s that you said? Sister? (Re-enters.) There is no such thing for them. More lies. They are all just castrated degenerated men. They fought like dogs every day, that Anarkali and... (Collected Plays 10)
Anarkali knows the truth of Kamla’s murder but she also knows the fact that her existence in the social set up is insignificant and if she utters the truth she will be even more vulnerable. Anarkali comes out with a number of unsaid things about the situation of transsexuals in a social scenario that stay shrouded beneath layers of myth and cultural beliefs.

ANARKALI. What is there to tell? I sing with other hijras at weddings and when a child is born. People give us money otherwise I will put a curse on them. *(Laughs.)* As if God is on our side. *(Smokes.)* I did not do anything to Kamla. She was my sister. *(Collected Plays 12)*

ANARKALI *(sympathetically).* Oh. *(Smokes.)* If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister. *(Collected Plays 13)*

ANARKALI. They will kill me also if I tell the truth. If I don’t tell the truth, I will die in a jail. *(Collected Plays 14)*

After meeting Anarkali, Uma plans to visit Champa, the head ‘hijra’ and ponders over the nature of ‘hijra’ community.

UMA *(thoughts).* Nobody seems to know anything about them. Neither do they. Did they come to this country with Islam, or are they a part of our glorious Hindu tradition? Why are they so obsessed with weddings and ceremonies of childbirth? How do they come to know of these weddings? Why do they just show up without being invited? Are they just extortionists? And why do they not take singing lessons?

*(Pause)* Is it true? Could it be true what my mother used to say about them? Did they really put a curse on her because they did not allow her
to sing and dance at their wedding? Or was that their explanation for not being able to have children of their own? Or ... a reason to give to people for wanting to adopt me? (*Collected Plays 16-17*)

The play also reveals some unknown truths about eunuchs. One such revelation is about the existence of a well structured community which follows a kinship system of a guru and the principle of sisterhood. When Uma sets out to prove the innocence of Anarkali, she learns about the kinship of Kamla, Anarkali and Champa. She acknowledges developing an emotional and humanitarian bond with these three transsexuals in the course of time. This results in Uma’s decision to save Anarkali from being victimized.

The low status of the transgender is brought forth as Uma walks in the squalid streets behind the Russel Market; the dark hidden lanes depict the unbridgeable distance between this community and society in general. Uma’s efforts to explore this dense world result in unearthing many unsavoury truths. Dattani, through the character of Uma, makes their feeble voices heard, resulting in a new social awareness and acceptance. By letting Champa and Anarkali speak of their woes, Dattani gives them an audience as they articulate their silent screams.

When Uma plans to provide money for Anarkali’s bail, she is showered with blessings to become a mother by Champa, the head of the ‘hijra’ community:

CHAMPA. Oh, may you have a hundred children! I knew that you are really a social worker. (*Collected Plays 24*)

CHAMPA. Oh! May you have a hundred sons! As soon as that bitch is out, I will make her the head. Now that Kamla is gone, who else do I have? (*Collected Plays 25*)
During the meeting when Salim comes in search of the marriage photograph, Champ uses Uma’s presence to avoid an encounter and further enquiry. But this makes Uma realize that there is something suspicious in this case.

UMA. What was he looking for? Unless you answer that question, I am not giving you the money. Not only that, I will tell my father-in-law that you killed Kamla. (Pause.) They will arrest you and Anarkali will be the head hijra while you rot in jail.

CHAMPA. A photograph.

UMA. What kind?

CHAMPA. I don’t know. He says he wants a photograph that Kamla has. Of Kamla and him together. (Collected Plays 27)

Uma’s effort to extract the truth from Champa, Anarkali and Salim is successful. Nonetheless, she helps Anarkali by providing money for her bail. The hypocrisy of society is projected through Uma’s husband, Suresh who is no better in the constable Munswamy. It is apparent that he does not consider eunuchs as man:

SURESH. No. What I mean is she...he is not in our custody.

(Collected Plays 33)

Suresh also discloses the fact that without any proof, the police have put Anarkali behind bars. Law does not shield the transsexuals. They are governed by whatever other human beings in power decide for them. They are pronounced minors without evidence. If they are victimized, the whole blame is put on them, not the abuser. They have no personal identity. The only identity they have is
being transsexual. The police did not know whether Anarkali was the culprit but they knew that one of the eunuchs had committed the crime; so whoever is in their custody does not really matter as long as the person is “one of those.”

SURESH. May be. Who knows? If she runs away to another town, who can trace these people? Anyway, we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her. It could be any one of them. *(Collected Plays 33)*

The transgendered female eventually finds sympathy and support from the heterosexual married woman, Uma. However the overwhelming power of the dominant male world subjugates all women. Uma’s husband Suresh is dismissive of using the ‘she’ pronoun for them. Uma is not able to convince him. He rejects the remotest possibility of a transgendered world as being socially acceptable, his prejudiced mind viewing ‘hijras’ as criminals.

When Uma goes to meet Anarkali, she finds her with a broken nose. Champa hints that they are scared of some person holding a high position whom even Uma’s father-in law cannot put in jail. When Uma insists on hearing the truth Anarkali very poignantly comes out with the story about the position of eunuchs in society and reveals it is Uma’s husband they are living in terror of:

ANARKALI. One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband. *(Collected Plays 35)*

In the second wedding of Subbu, son of Minister Mr. Sharma, the presence of eunuchs makes the minister uncomfortable but the intervention of Uma calms the situation. The play ends with the final revelation that the Minister had the young hijra Kamla, who was married to Subbu, burnt to death. Subbu kills himself with Suresh’s
1. But nothing changes, the world remains the same. The truth behind the suicide is
shed up.

UMA (voice over). 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.... (Collected Plays 42)

Powerful people bend the law to suit their own ends. They do not care for
body- society, police, law and order. They do whatever they feel like to those
people who cannot fight back or who cannot raise their voice against atrocities.

Though it is not clearly written anywhere who actually killed Kamla but the following
words of Mr. Sharma point towards the culprit.

MR SHARMA. Yes. I see a search for the truth.

UMA. Do you think I will find it?

MR SHARMA. If you look in the right place.

UMA. Which would be?

MR SHARMA. You know the saying about the musk deer? He
searches everywhere for the source of the heavenly fragrance, not
realizing it is contained within his own body.

Uma laughs

You don’t believe it is true? (Collected Plays 37)
The last scene of the play is extremely important for its emotional frenzy. Mr Sharma doubts the intentions of Uma as she is suspicious about the events. Mr Sharma doesn’t want Champa and her troop to enter in the main premises. Uma intervenes by saying, “No, It is a bad luck to turn away a hijra on a wedding or a birth” (38). Champa blesses Uma, “May you have hundred sons” (38). As the hijras begin dancing and singing, Subbu comes forward looking at them. Anarkali’s dance haunts her with the memory of dead Kamla. Subbu snatches the gun of Suresh in a state of frenzy refusing to compromise with the restrictions imposed upon him from outside. He yells “‘I’ I’m leaving you all! You can’t keep me away from Kamla” (39). Subbu forgets everything and demands the photograph, the last memory of his union with Kamla. Champa gives him the photograph with sympathy, “Give it to him. Take it my son” (40). As he looks at the photograph the past gets alive, in a state of great depression, Subbu aims the gun at his father and reveals the secret of Kamla’s murder. He cries out “You killed her?” (40). Mr Sharma pathetically requests Champa to persuade his son to forget Kamla. Subbu takes the gun and shoots himself. With his death, the real mystery of Kamla’s murder starts echoing.”What does it matter, who killed Kamla?” (41). The reality was so bitter that it was difficult to be exposed in public.

Subbu kills himself when he recognises the diabolic power of his father to control his life and the society around him in which there is no room for the transgendered female. The end of the play is depressing but it drives home the idea that articulation of silent screams against oppression is a great challenge:

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. (*Collected Plays 42*)

Though it is not explicitly stated in the play but it is subtly conveyed that Suresh and his father were involved with Minister Sharma in his conspiracy of murdering the eunuch Kamla. As they get no eye witnesses or proof from the site of the murder, the involvement of the police looks certain. Moreover, they are not prepared to investigate the case or take some action against Minister Sharma even after Subbu’s suicide. The case is not even filed or reported in the newspapers, it becomes quite clear that the police is siding with the Minister. Suresh’s words, while he prepares to go to the Minister’s house on the wedding of his son Subbu, make the reason for this silencing of crime abundantly clear.

SURESH. One day, I too will have a five-car escort...There is talk, that father will become the commissioner soon.... (*Collected Plays 36*)

Suresh’s ambition of a “five-car escort” clearly demonstrates that Anarkali suffered just because of this power politics in which her position was merely on the margin. In our class-divided society there is no place for the transsexuals. They are harassed and treated as sub-human. Some of them do retaliate by resorting to aggression but the vast majority live in a world of their own that is almost impenetrable to the other people. Their seclusion, however, is a necessity for them. They cannot be integrated in society, so they have to find ways to survive. They have to virtually snatch their share from the others to keep themselves alive.

A ‘hijra’ is considered physically and psychologically ambivalent. People see them as freaks who hide their sexual identity. Therefore, they are a stigmatized community. By letting them speak, Dattani draws attention to this neglected and
reviled segment in the city space. Presenting a realistic situation, Dattani shatters the
notions of middle class morality and challenges its assumptions. Fears of abuse and
ignorance have been stated as the causes of alienation of the transgendered. The play
suggests that attempts to gain knowledge about eunuchs and better understanding of
their social space may help to uplift these people who are the most scorned of all the
marginalized sections in our country. What they long for is self respect,
understanding, identity, justice and compassion, and this is the message that the play
conveys.

In her autobiography *The Truth About Me*, A. Revathi a hijra, a woman, a
daughter, a guru, a chela, a sister, a wife, a lover, a sex worker, a parental figure and a
sexuality-rights activist based in Banglore highlights the tragic predicament of this
community in the so called progressive environment of the cities. She works with
Sangama, a sexual minorities human rights organization for individuals oppressed due
to their sexual preference. Her observation brings out the neglect of the hapless
community of transgenders by the state:

We want the Indian state to do the same: provide us with counselling,
put us on a course of hormones and assist with sex change surgeries.
Since law and society in this country do not acknowledge out right to
live as we wish, we are forced to beg, take up sex work and suffer as a
consequence. Today sex-change operations are carried out in a few
private clinics, where surgical procedures are seldom followed, and
which do not extend the sort of care we require afterwards. Many of us
end up suffering all sort of infections. (Revathi 262)
There is a ray of hope for hijras as with time the traditional Indian mindset is changing. Over the last few years India has seen its first transgender fashion model Nikkiey Chawla, a transgender television presenter Rose Venkatesan, a transgender entrepreneur Meet Kalki and various Bollywood movies in which hijra’s are portrayed good like in Jodhaa Akbar a hijra, instead of hamming up the usual comic role, was portrayed as a trusted lieutenant of the female lead.

Similarly an NGO Sangama was set up in 1999 and is funded by the Bill Gates Foundation and the Fund for Global Human Rights among others. It has been instrumental in establishing community networks with monthly meetings and safe spaces such as drop-in centres for all sexual minority groups. Two thirds of their spending goes towards fighting against the spread of HIV infection through awareness programmes and condom distribution. So we can hope that the silent screams of these downtrodden people can be heard by not only law or government but by the whole society so that they can also enjoy the real pleasure of equality as the human rights organizations promise. Mahesh Dattani raises many questions regarding ‘hijra’ their community, identity, connotations of social acceptability in the city space. They face a double jeopardy as they are the victims of nature as well as of the society. They are human beings with no voice, no sympathies, no love, no justice and probably no acceptability in the society.

The play debunks the institution of marriage and has a close parallel in Vijay Tendulkar’s *Mitrachi Goshta* or *A Friend’s Story*. Mitra has a relationship with Nama, another woman. As Mitra is a lesbian, people treat her as different from ordinary human beings. She faces the scorn of the society which ultimately results in death by suicide. Society is the villain here. It refuses to see her as a good human being.
Similarly Kamla was killed as her relationship with Subbu was considered unethical, immoral, improbable and unnatural by the minister Sharma.

For a common reader this situation may be dramatic however such incidents have occurred once in a while in real life as well. The most prominent incident is the marriage of Sonia Ajmeri, a ‘hijra’ with Amrish, an Air India pilot in Ahmedabad in 2005 and the recent marriage of Shabnam nee Gopal Khawaskar, a hijra with Mukesh, a straight guy in 2012 in Nagpur. Such marriages are not common in practice; still these examples are suggestive of the upcoming positive change. Dattani expresses the position of ‘hijras’ in society within the play by making Uma as his mouthpiece, “There are transsexuals all over the world and India is no exception. The purpose of this study is to show their position in society. Perceived as the lowest of the low, they yearn for family and love” (10). It follows that “urban poverty and its visible symptoms (such as precarious employment, insecure access to housing, poor health, stunted literacy level, etc.) are resolutely geographic phenomena connected to the singular, evolving patterns of movement and blockage that traverse and splinter urban formations” (Gidwani & Chaturvedi 50).

The main cause of their ambivalent identity is their body that is the main asset of their existence in the poverty stricken ghettos. Only financial support and acceptance in every field of life can bring some change. The recent Supreme Court’s Decision dated April 15, 2014 is a significant step for the transgender community as now they will be legally recognised as third gender along with male and female genders. A Bench of Justices K.S. Radhakrishnan and A.K. Sikri observed, “recognition of transgender as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human right issue. Transgender are also citizens of India. The spirit of the
Constitution is to provide equal opportunity to every citizens to grow and attain their potential, irrespective of caste, religion or gender” (Venkatesan The Hindu).

Unfortunately Legal experts say that the decision puts transgender people in a strange situation as on one hand they are now legally recognised and protected under the Constitution, but on the other hand they may be breaking the law if they have consensual gay sex as the December 2013 supreme court ruling reverses a landmark 2009 Delhi High Court order which had decriminalised homosexual acts; according to Section 377, a 153-year-old colonial-era law, a same-sex relationship is an “unnatural offence” and punishable by a 10-year jail term. This dilemma of giving identity is clear from the supreme court rulings still we can expect a better tomorrow for these marginalised sections in urban space so that they can come up in society as individuals rather than just people having a body that is nothing but a site of disgust and rottenness as portrayed by Kamla Das in her poem, “The Dance of the Eunuchs”:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... There were green
Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some
Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; ....
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness

Were in each of them.... (Das web)

Both the plays discussed in this chapter clearly depict the direct and indirect body selling; *Harvest* by representing organ selling and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* dealing with the plight of Hijras who are considered criminals as they are a poverty stricken community, who sell their ambivalent identity through their grotesque bodies and are completely dependent on society for their financial needs. Their identity doesn't allow them to take up any other profession. Dattani and Padmanabhan through these two plays give the hidden truth behind this body selling done out of compulsions of the poverty. They reflect serious issues of human life by presenting many visible and many invisible issues by innovative use of their theatre.