



Gender Mirroring in Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's dramatic career started in an era when the Hindu society mingled on caste and gender and mobilize for facing new challenges. Mahesh Dattani holds a mirror in his plays, depicting the reality as it was but at the same time, his plays fragmented the gender roles. Dattani in his play "Dance Like A Man" portrays the two significant passions dance and man. He uses dance to enquire multi-aspect of gender concerns related to human existence. The play investigates what happens when a man becomes part of a woman's world of dance as the perception of dance provides an intense conflict to the image of maleness. In the play, the Gujarati family of Amritlal Parekh is having a 'southi daughter-in-law,' Ratna who is pursuing her career as a Bharatnatyam dancer. The daughter-in-law being a dancer is not problematic but the problem starts when the son of the family chooses dance as a profession. All three family members—Amritlal, Jairaj and Ratna appear to be progressive. By choosing dance as a career, Jairaj and Ratna succeed in getting an opportunity to change their gendered roles assigned by their family.

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Gender is something that is largely controlled and assigned by society, it is a process of identification. Gender is the set of roles that you perform and that is determined by your society not by your sex. We all do not belong to either male or female gender, we are identified as male or female and because we are identified as male or female, we became masculine or feminine. Sex is the identity that is assigned to your body based on certain sexual characteristics, while gender simply refers to the social values given to men and women in a society. Mahesh Dattani is the most energetic and rattling dramatic voice in the current Indian English dramatic era. He has adorned and furnished the tradition of Indian Drama with his observation and alteration. With the advent of Mahesh Dattani on the dramatic world, the structure of Indian drama begins to change. Initially he has authored a good number of dramas different in themes, techniques, and devices. In addition, his plays are very successfully presented on theater boards. Mahesh Dattani's plays are characterized by some theatrical and thematic innovations. He is confluence of art and craft. He has not only intellectual power and ability to produce a play in text but also has an ability to get it staged successfully.

Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, first staged in 1989, *Dance like a Man* is a story of Jairaj and his passion for classical dance. Swinging between past and present, Dattani's portrayal of gender roles that we practice in Indian houses and the theme of gender moves in a pathetic way that Dattani says of his play *Dance like a Man*, "I wrote this play when I was learning Bharatnatyam in my mid twenties. [...] a play is about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women..." (Quoted in Asha Chaudhuri 67) It raises the question, "Can a man take up classical Bharatnatyam, a dance traditionally associated with devdasis, as a profession?" It shows how Jairaj Parekh, a son of Amritlal Parekh, tries to dismantle the stereotypes of gender roles by adopting Bharatnatyam as a profession and how the patriarchal society represented by Amritlal Parekh thwarts his efforts by using the power of authority and money. It presents different attitudes towards the classical and traditional Bharatnatyam dance. These attitudes are presented through the characters of

the play— Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj Parekh, Ratna Parekh, Vishwas and Lata. The play shows that “the imagery of gender affects both men and women profoundly, if differently” (Michele Barrett 106)

Dance like a Man is a play that deals with one of Dattani’s major concerns gender through one of his rampant passions, dance (Chaudhuri 67). In the Indian society, every activity is gendered. It is considered that the traditional Bharatnatyam dance is a dance of women and, therefore, a man’s agony for the dance is considered against the societal norms. In the play Jairaj Parekh, the son of Amritlal Parekh, chooses the traditional Bharatnatyam as his profession out of interest. Being a true lover of the dance, Jairaj marries a Bharatnatyam dancer, Ratna. Even before their marriage, they used to perform dance in Jairaj’s house. Amritlal Parekh allows his son to rehearse the dance thinking it as his hobby. But he opposes his son when the same interest becomes his passion. He seems to agree with Plato that art effeminates the man if he plays the role of the woman. That’s why he does not like his son practicing the woman’s dance. Being the guardian of the patriarchal society, Amritlal expects Jairaj to play the role of a man, to dance like a man. To him to dance like a man means to act like a man; to act like a man means to behave like the man. In a patriarchal society a man is expected to earn his livelihood by adopting a career suited to men. He should earn enough money to cater all the needs of his wife and children. But to Amritlal, Jairaj ceases to be a man as he depends upon him for survival and for paying money to the musicians.

While regretting his decision to allow Jairaj to dance he says, “I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I did not realize this interest of yours would turn into an obsession.”

On the other side of the play Lata and her father see the keen desire of the characters to override the gender norms and realize the true self. The Parekh family wants to evaluate Viswas as their prospective son-in-law and invite him. As one of the musicians meets with an accident so Ratna and Jairaj must go to see him in the hospital. This gives time to Lata and Viswas to talk to each other. Many facts about Ratna and Jairaj come out. Lata shares with him that her parents are of a different type. They live in a traditional house which is almost forty to fifty years old. The old traditional house is representation of patriarchal strength. Jairaj’s unwillingness to sell the house is in a way clinging to the patriarchal roots that give him strength of being something. Lata tells Viswas that her father and mother took lessons from the same guru and as a child she enjoyed the performances by her parents. She also shares that her grandfather, Amritlal was a freedom fighter, a social reformer, and a stern person where as his father is a —bit more pliable than usual. It seems that even she does not rate this quality as something masculine. Lata feels that being pliable is not a masculine trait because she was contrasting the image of her father with her grandfather and she found the latter more encouraging than the former. Being a freedom fighter and social reformer is more domineering than to become a dancer. In their communication the life of the grandfather as a symbol of patriarchy seems to breathe without a fail. Lata: I guess Daddy is a bit more. Pliable than usual. Like you. Viswas: You think I’m pliable?

Viswas (sighs): I suppose I am.

Lata: Don’t worry. I won’t take advantage.

Viswas: But your mother does.

Lata: Does what?

Viswas: Dominate. Bully your father.

Lata: No. She does not! (Dattani, 392)

The dialogues tell a lot about the gender mirror reinforced by society and how individuals fall prey to the gender norms set by society. Lata says that dancing as a profession is also looked down upon, not only for men but also for women. She wants to see Vishwas’s mindset when she asks him if she can dance after marriage. Then Lata shares with Vishwas that she does not want children after marriage, he replies: —My father almost died when I told him I’m marrying outside caste. Ratna continues her struggle as a dancer and Jairaj as a man. They achieve a momentary relief in the disguise of their son—

the next symbol of patriarchy. They name their son, Shankar, one of the synonyms of Shiva. He conceals high hopes for his father and grandfather as well. For Amritlal, Shankar is an opportunity to fulfill his long-cherished dream of turning his progeny into a real man that his son never became. On the other hand, Jairaj's failure of his dedication to the *Ardhnarishwara* version of Shiva makes him embrace another version of Shiva—the destroyer. Shiva's Tandav Nritya- the dance of destruction and His worship in the form of 'Lingam' symbolize his hyper masculinity. Jairaj decides to teach his son "how to dance—the dance of Shiva. The dance of a man...and make him dance on his [grandfather's] head—the tandav nritya" (DLM 159). But the high hopes of both of Amritlal and Jairaj have been crushed by Ratna when she unknowingly gives overdose of opium to Shankar resulting in his death. His death suggests the failure of the possibility of a patriarchal lineage. The death of the only son proves to be the final setback to the married life of the couple. Soon the vacuum of Ratna and Jairaj's lives is filled with their daughter Lata, the metaphor of matrilineal culture. Like her mother, Lata too has her own insecurities. The first question that she asks her fiancé, "Vishwas, when we are married, you will let me come here to practise, won't you? (DLM 95), shows her professional insecurity after marriage. Her declaration, "And we won't have children" (DLM 96), reflects how the celebrated motherhood of a woman is a hindrance to her professional life. But for Ratna, Lata represents the only possibility to live her frustrated dream of a successful *Bharatnatyam* dancer. Ratna replaces autocratic patriarch Amritlal and the process of role reversal starts. Like her father-in-law Ratna too imposes her dreams on her daughter and makes her feel suffocating. Lata says, "I wish I didn't have to dance to please them. I want to dance to please me. All my life everything has been so . . . cultivated. Sometimes I wish I could just breathe" (DLM 123). Conscious of her mediocrity as an artist and failure as a wife, Ratna does her best for the dance career of her daughter. The consecutive questions that she asks Lata about Vishwas, "He's well off, isn't he?" (DLM 109), "And he will let you dance no?" (DLM 109), reflect the insecurity of her own life but her sincere concern towards Lata as well. A frustrated artist and a concerned mother in Ratna cannot digest any sign of failure in her daughter's career. The way she reacts for not having *mridangam* playing on Lata's performance signifies how she is desperate for the success of her daughter. She arranges rave reviews by spending sleepless nights and managing sweet-talking to the critics. She persuades Dr. Gowda to include Lata's name to perform for the festival of India in Canada. Unfortunately, the success of Lata intensifies the sense of victory in Ratna but of loss in Jairaj. On the other hand, Lata's fiancé, Viswas, comes to swap Shankar but he successfully provides substitute version of Amritlal. Amritlal's patriarchal self seems to have close affinity with Viswas when he sarcastically remarks, "dancers stay at home till it's show time" (DLM 96). It is only laying Amritlal's shawl that Vishwas begins to sound like him, "So you want to be a dancer. Hah! Hah! Hah! Son, you'll never amount to anything. Look at me. Look at what I've achieved" (DLM 99). If Amritlal wants to eliminate dance tradition of devdasi, Viswas raises his reservations against its eroticism. Both share prejudiced approach towards inter community marriage. Amritlal primarily permits but later he regrets the marriage of his son. He says, "One thing I regret. Consenting to your marriage" (DLM 118). Vishwas too accepts, "My father almost died when I told him I was marrying outside the caste" (DLM 96). In comparison to Jairaj's realisation: "I stopped being a man for you because we couldn't survive on our own." (DLM 121), both fulfill one of the important requisites of being a man by making huge money. Amritlal made money from buying and selling bungalows and Viswas by making and selling 'mithai'. Jairaj too perceives that the true heir of his father's rich heritage is Viswas so he decides to hand over the large mansion and the shawl of Amritlal to him. The keen perusal of the play reflects how the culturally gendered identities are inversely functional in their response to dance and finally they face consequences accordingly. Under the burden of his heterosexual masculinity Amritlal is ignorant of the aestheticism of dance. He tries to manipulate next generation Ratna by forbidding her to learn dance from the true exponent, and Jairaj by spoiling his dance career completely. the play is replete with the apparent heterosexual patriarchal value system but myriads of powerful metaphoric suggestions foreground the gay conversion of patriarchy. By gifting his father's hegemonic symbols of shawl and mansion to Viswas, Jairaj gets rid of them and emerges with his own newly gained identity. Viswas too demolishes that mansion and suggests a considerate version of masculinity. The evocative suggestions to Lord Shiva, Devdasi's worship of Natraja and the

vision of man and woman moving into their ecstatic embrace—all advocate for the divine fusion of various substitutions of heterosexuality.

In this game, Dattani openly touches on several sensitive topics along with the gender. The question of the struggle for independence, again touches on the generational conflict between father and son and touches on the topic of the conflict between marriage and career. *Dance Like a Man* shows characters who feel exhausted and feel unfulfilled life, caused by adverse conditions that did not allow them to meet lives according to their own ideas. Structurally in the drama very well time zone interweaving works. It's an element that moves the story excitingly forward to its tragic climax.

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