

Change of Gender Equation in Dattani's Dance Like a Man: A Critique
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Abstract

Dance Like a Man is one of the best known plays by Mahesh Dattani. In the dramatic writing, Dattani is intent on achieving what Indo-English novelists sought to realize in their fictional world. His focus is on the issues of gender equations and changes in a world that is defined by traditional tacit rules and conventions. He is also a master at defining complex characters, relationships and situations. John Barth's idea, "there are tales within tales within tales",¹ fits appropriately in his plays because he enmeshes his plots in such a beautiful manner that there appears a strange gripping story in every play which operates on multidimensional levels. In his plays many untouched and grey areas of right and wrong, to put it simplistically, get attention and many find multiple levels of associations with the characters.

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Although in each of his plays Dattani explores different themes through different narrative forms, one can see certain continuities both in his thematic concerns and formal device. For instance, Dattani often uses the family unit as his locale and narrative enclosure. He takes the action of his plays out of the streets and makes them the triggering points of the tension in the homes which cause the fragmentations of the families. *Dance Like a Man* is a play which brings to the fore the fragmentation of the family, the deceit, discord and the power equations within the family with sensitive and psychological insights.

Dance Like a Man is a stage play in two acts and was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 22 September 1989, as part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. The play deals with one of Dattani's pet concerns - gender - through one of his principal passions, dance. The automatic assumption, when one refers to gender as a principal concern, is that the exploration would be of women's issue. Says Dattani of this play: "I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid-twenties ... a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women ..."² Characteristically, Dattani raises a few unlikely questions about the sexual construct that a man is. The stereotypes of gender roles are pitted against the idea of the artist, in search of creativity within the restrictive constriction of the world that he is forced to inhabit.

Dattani uses the family home as the setting. The home, its tangible, physical presence becomes crucial to the very existence of three generations of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their habitation. The meaning of this space, however, alters with each generation. Amritlal carries the baggage of his own times and tries to manipulate the next generation -Jairaj and Ratna - to carry it forward. Jairaj and Ratna, ironically, do the same with their own progeny, and try to pass on their preferences to Lata. In this handling down of cultural context a number of revelations are made and several 'hidden' stories are told that begin to reveal the fissures in these spaces and cracks that widen enough to crumble the entire structure.

The narrative looks into the life of Ratna and Jairaj, dancers based in Bangalore, now past their prime, reflecting on the past and the way the past affects their present, and is to affect the future. Dattani here explores two key aspects - the general inhibitions of a man taking up dance, which *is* usually and 'traditionally' performed by women, as a career and the relationship between a husband and wife who have grown apart and have done enough harm to each other, and their daughter Lata on whom they have thrust their frustrated ambitions. Lata, meanwhile, would marry Viswas, a man who wants nothing to do with their art and whose father owns half the buildings on Commercial Street and makes Mithai. Dattani creates a range

of layers in this play, in a language close to everybody speech, and humour that is easily accessible to any viewer, as the human predicament is explored subtly. Lillette Dubey has done more than one hundred fifty productions of this play with her group all over the world, making it an all time success, "It is beautifully crafted. The way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor's talent" mark it as unique, as does the "strong characterization and the seamless Movements in time."³

The main themes of Dattani's work encompass issues not conventionally associated with the theatre or drama. He focuses on problems of everyday of learning to live with individual demons as well as those issues which are fostered by society such as communalism, personal Prejudices, class discrimination, domestic abuse, gender bias and peculiar Positions born out of conventions and traditions. Personal prejudice dominates *Dance Like a Man* whereby the old generation wishes to impose itself on the new one. Jairaj and Ratna live within patriarchal structure: the domain of the patriarch Amritlal, Jairaj's father. His antipathy to a great many things that concern the activities of his son and daughter-in-law draws the boundary lines for their behaviour within his sphere of influence. Dance for him is the prostitute's profession, improper for his daughter-in-law, and absolutely unimaginable for his son.

Amritlal's character, if analyzed from psychological point of view is a "product of life and art"⁴ both in recent times he is no more studied in isolation, plucking it away from it's functional matrix, but "the nature of the external world which the character encounters and the kind of demands that the external world makes as the character struggles to deal with the range of his or her needs".⁵

Each of the themes that is dealt with in the best dramatic tradition, there is no preaching, no dogmatism, just a guile, often laced with irony and gentle humour, and a direct presentation. In *Dance Like a Man*, it is humour which gently illustrates the barely perceptible, yet crucial swinging of Power between Jairaj and his future son-in-law, Viswas, just as it is an essentially humorous situation where a statement made by Ratna to her father-in-law seals Jairaj's fate as a dancer, cementing his father's determination that his son will be a man, not a Bharatnatyam performer.

The episode of Chenni amma, withered old devadasi, who trains Ratna the 'art of abhinaya' uncovers differences in male and female experiences, social positions, behaviour or whatever. It pinpoints gender differences that exist in the patriarchal world and the relations between women and men that regularly seem to involve domination and subordination. The dynamics of these relations are produced, reproduced and transformed in the various contexts of everyday life.

The issues of marginalized identities as well as aspects of hegemony and male chauvinism, which have been largely rendered 'invisible' by virtue of their ubiquitous presence in daily life becomes again visible when the patriarch Amritlal authoritatively claims his right to dominate his son and daughter-in-law, "Your husband happens to be my son. And you are both under my care. It is my permission that you should ask for" (420). He considers himself as a freedom fighter and he has enlisted certain unwanted and ugly practices that bring shame to our society, which includes not only the system of dowry and untouchability but also the tradition of devadasi. He wants to build ashrams for these unfortunate women.

The ideology of the younger generation today clashes with the formalized restraints of the older generation, as a result, "... relations of subordination and super ordination have become very painful."⁶ Bharatnatyam is the obsession of Jairaj and he does not want his art to be down by his stubborn narrow minded father for his fancy pretentious ideals. Jairaj considers his father 'gullible' that spent all his money in reconstructing India and giving personal loans to friends and relatives but never to him.

Amritlal undoubtedly gives space to his son and daughter-in-law in his house but at the cost of their individuality. The ramification of his dichotomies remains incurable as from now onwards they have to live in his house by following certain conditions. He realizes that they have come back more out of necessity than any real intention of patching up what they have undone. When Amritlal fails to dissuade his son from dancing, he makes a pact with Ratna to help Jairaj in growing adult and she will then never be stopped from dancing as Amritlal says, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (427).

Amritlal and Ratna are representatives of two different generations always colliding with one another on the issues of gender, restriction, creativity and obsession for something, and usually the women are the recipients of this patriarchal oppressive power of the society. The play dispels this notion and explores the nature of the tyranny that even men might be subject to within such structures. The character of Jairaj struggles to prove his manliness despite his choice of Bharatnatyam as a profession, has no problem in taking on the role of a conventional husband. The title of the play and the main focus is on the construction of male stereotypes and the questioning of an essential identity or quality of maleness or masculinity.

Marriage is the socio-religious sacrament which gives authenticity to the institution of family. The sacrament has lost its meaning and significance. Only form is left; the content is lost. The 'necessary' love between husband and wife has

been reduced to mere clichè in the context of modern social reality. Ratna and Jairaj is a couple who live the life of trivialities. Their marital relation remains crumbling and both of them lose no opportunity in humiliating and devastating one another's status.

The structure that Amritlal passes on conditionally to his son causes irreparable harm to him and his marriage to Ratna. The narrative of the play looks into the lives of Ratna and Jairaj who are past their prime, Bangalore based dancers, ruminating their past and the way that past affected their present and about the effect of their present on their future would be. When Ratna and Jairaj are introduced, they appear busy in finding out the solution for their problems and the biggest problem is that they are not able to find a substitute mridangam player to accompany their daughter Lata at her performance at a high-profile dance festival, and who are returning from the hospital after meeting the mridangist, while their prospective son-in-law Viswas is waiting for them in their house.

Both Jairaj and Ratna have been leading a life of self-deceit. Jairaj had a promising career ahead of him when he married Ratna, but under the domineering pressures of his father and wife lost both his promising career and virility. Ratna too suffers from terrible inferiority complex because of her unsatisfactory past and unrewarding present. Ratna picked on Jairaj for marriage as he was a dancer and had promised that she could continue her dance even after marriage but he turned out to be a failure. Thus the tragedy for Jairaj is that he has chosen to pursue a career that is considered 'right' only for women. That is why Amritlal is willing to have Ratna as the dancer and not Jairaj. But in their battle a completely innocent individual, Shankar the baby son of the dancing couple, becomes the victim who was given the double dose of opium, "An old trick banded down from one generation of ayahs to the next" (445).

In this play Dattani has explored two major aspects - the traditionally general inhibitions of man in taking up the dance, which is usually performed by women, as a career and the consequent relationship between husband and wife who have grown apart just to harm each other and in this way they thrust their frustrated ambition on their daughter Lata. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhari observes, "Dattani creates a range of layers in this play, in a language close to everyday speech and humour that is easily accessible any viewer, as the human predicament is explored subtly."⁷ Lata as a little child used to stand near the door and watch her parents practice. It was then that she decided what she wanted to be. Lata feels proud for about the heritage she gets from her parents as she tells enthusiastically, "Some of these instruments are the same ones my parents used.

Lata sees herself as a person with individuality. This fact again comes to the surface when she wins rave reviews and critical acclaims for her sterling Performance of *ashtapadi* from *Geeta Govindam*, choreographed by her father. Viswas who is not very knowledgeable on the subject finds it erotic, as it includes a number where Lata's bosom heaves with breath. Lata represents modern time's "feminine mystique".⁸ The undermining of traditional male roles is one of the major features of this play and ultimately the women characters over-shadow the men. In this play Ratna, the mother lives her life vicariously through her daughter Lata on whom she pins her hopes to fulfill her dancing ambitions.

Characteristically, Dattani raises a few unlikely questions about the sexual construct that a man is. The stereotypes of gender roles are pitted against the idea of the artist in search of creativity within the restrictive constriction of the world that he is forced to inhabit. Jairaj with his obsession for dance is all set to demolish these stereotypes. Jairaj's obsession and Viswas's ignorance about the dance keeps breaking in the humour, especially in their conversation after Lata's successful performance on the stage which was, "tenderly intense and intensely tender" (433).

In the patriarchal world woman is the "incidental" and "inessential" as opposed to the essential.⁹ In patriarchy everything associated with the male sex gets elevated over everything associated with female sex. Woman is never seen equal to man. She has no identity of her own as an individual. In a patriarchal society where male values are worshipped woman is seen either passive or she does not exist. On the other hand man is seen as active and 'victor'. Feminine side is always seen as the negative and powerless. This was the reason that no desire is expressed for daughters in the Rigveda.¹⁰ Even in the post-Vedic civilization a daughter was considered the cause of all problems¹¹ and the son was regarded as the saviour of the family Raising a female child is considered as scaling Himalayas in our society because parents have to remain vigilant lest the virginity of their daughter might not get molested before they marry her somewhere and also they have to part with their hard earned money in the form of dowry.

In the materialistic society of contemporary India, Dattani in his typical style, raises important questions on the very constituents of a man's identity in terms of sexuality, as the head of the family and as an artist. The play reflects on the self and the significance of the other through the framework of gender roles: the prostitute as a dancer and an artist; the man as a dancer; the guru who keeps long hair and has an 'effeminate' walk -categories that the older generation, fed on its perception of the self cannot come to terms with. This clash brings about the play of

property and money in deciding and manipulating the construction of identities that would conform.

Dance Like a Man is thus a play which uncovers the multiple layers of Indian Society, the paradoxes of stereotyped gender roles, the strained relationships of Ratna and Jairaj, presumably a happily married couple is dismantled through shock. *Dance Like a Man* is a brilliant study of human relationships and weaknesses framed by the age old battle between tradition and youthful rebellion. This play does not reflect a quite act of introspection or retrospection only, but it shows a painful remembering, a putting together of the disremembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. This play has been hailed as one of the best works of dramatic imagination in recent times.

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