



Marginalization of the female folk in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract

The discrimination of women is present outside and inside households. The patriarchal setup forces a woman to fuse her 'self' with that of a male member - be it the father, the husband, the brother or the son. Thus, the female is marginalised in a familial set up which is carried to the societal level. This paper aims to analyse this disparity in Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*.

Keywords: Influence, Marginalization, Female.

1. Introduction

Among the moral issues of the society that create unrest, Dattani takes up the crisis that follows a marriage in the play *Dance Like a Man*. By introspecting the life of Ratna and Jairaj, dancers based in Bangalore, Dattani 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 Vishwas, a man does not bother about their art and whose father is a prolific business man. Dattani creates a range of layers in this play, in a language close to everyday speech, and humour that is easily accessible to any viewer, as the human predicament is explored subtly.

The play focuses on the merits of multiplicity, transcending mere 'tolerance' to marginalization and empathy, while situating itself historically within the context of the materialistic, acquisitive society of the 1990s. Typically, Dattani poses a few uncomfortable questions-the sexual construct that a man is, and the pigeonholing of masculinity within a Hindu undivided family -are set against the idea of the creative artist searching for artistic fulfilment within the claustrophobic constraints of the world that he inhabits (Chaudhuri 37).

Having suffered for a long period under colonial impact, postcolonial India was in a dilemma whether to revert to the vernacular or continue to develop Anglophonic literature and theatre. Shredding off the colonial hangover, it took some time for the native voices "become amalgamated into stage productions but not without a measure of self-conscious embarrassment" (Chaudhuri 86). Certainly, it required some truly self-assured and well-balanced playwrights and directors to make the dream, Indian English theatre reflect local realities, come true. This sense of local colour in *Dance Like a Man* predominates in the numerous productions of the play, thus, becoming an important subtext. The strong flavour of a

Bharatanatyam household, the opulent saris, the sounds in the background often accompanied by Carnatic background music together build up the intense sense of space that is integral to the shaping of the characters. Lillette Dubey points out that one cannot possibly miss the fact it is Indian, at least in her production, with an overtly accented speech:

In India, the accents are important- they almost place you socially, economically, culturally. And then we stuck with it, whether we performed off Broadway in London or in festivals in France and elsewhere. People said nobody would understand this English. I said, look, I want to be liberated from this yoke of having to speak with a 'BBC' accent. (Dubey)

The play investigates into the encounters of three generations in an ardent way. Blending the background of classical dance and centuries-old traditions is not an easy achievement. Dattani has done it and has gone one step further to present a critique of the societal norms and attitudes around which his characters grow and place themselves.

Dattani poses invaluable questions on the very elements of a man's identity – in terms of sexuality, as the head of the family and as an artist. The play contemplates on the nature and the significance of the 'other', through the "frameworks of gender and gender roles: the prostitute as a dancer and an artist; the man as a dancer; the guru who sports long hair and has an 'effeminate' walk ... fed on its perception of the self cannot come to terms with"(Chaudhuri 88). The notions of property and money decide and influence the identities. Perhaps, the resolution is proposed in the third generation, where the previous sets of groups collapse and Lata becomes a successful dancer and a mother, happily married to Vishwas, the son of a rich 'mithaiwala'.

Dance Like a Man deals with one of Dattani's prime concerns – gender – through one of his main passions, dance. When one refers to gender as his or her main concern, all would assume that issues of women would be explored. However, Dattani probe concerns the problems of a man. Dattani says, "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..." (Dattani). Typically, Dattani raises some striking queries about the sexual construct of a man.

An artist's portrayal of a character, especially gender, becomes a stereotype because of the fact that the artist has to search for models and ideologies within the narrow confines of the world that he is forced to inhabit. Jairaj, with his obsession for dance, breaks away all the stereotypes. This is a blow to the stereotypes associated with 'gender' issues that perceive women at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society. Dismissing such notion, this play explores the nature of the domination that even men might be subject to within the power structures (Saikia). Jairaj and Ratna live within such a 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. For him, dancing is the prostitute's profession, improper for his daughter-in-law, and not even conceivable for his son. He forbids Ratna from visiting the old devadasi, who teaches her the intricacies of Bharatanatyam. He cannot tolerate the sounds of the dancing bells that ring through their practice sessions and is bewildered by seeing the longhaired guru with an effeminate walk and, on top of all, cannot digest the very idea of his son - a man - becoming a professional dancer.

It can be assumed that Amritlal is afraid that dance would make his son 'womanly' - an effeminate man - the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned. Hence, Amritlal opposes Jairaj's passion for dance. He makes a pact with Ratna saying that he will approve her career in dance provided she helps him pull Jairaj out of his obsession and make him a 'manly' man.

Through the perpetual movement in time and space, Dattani entwines the complicated web of gender relationships of societal norms spanning for three generations. The minimal use of characters maximizes the staged impact of the stereotypes through time. The same artist plays Amritlal and the old Jairaj;

Vishwas and the young Jairaj; Lata and the young Ratna respectively. As they assume different characters, the echoing sense of time and transformation illuminate and gives newer meanings to the issues, which Dattani raises and addresses to. Amirtlal, the frustrated patriarch changes into the equally frustrated and alcoholic Jairaj, interviews Vishwas, the prospective groom for his daughter. Meanwhile, Vishwas, the son of a rich mithai-walla, an alien to the world of dance transforms into the young Jairaj who is consumed by his love for the art form. Lata, the most realistic and sensible of the characters also plays the insecure, calculating and choices that are offered to her. She will be haunted as the older Ratna by the ghosts of the past that nonetheless do not daunt her determination to realize her own unfulfilled ambitions through Lata, her daughter (Velmani).

Like the characters, the stage iconography too helps to consolidate and reinforce these strong reverberations. Amirtlal's house moves through time, changes character along with its owner. The old cupboard, the shawl, the rose garden and the rest of the stage set - all leave their impact in the juxtaposition of the stereotypes.

Slowly, we realize that at the receiving end of the politics of gender is not Ratna so much as is Jairaj: kept on a leash by his father, eclipsed by his wife, a failure as a dancer, and an alcoholic. His father and wife have conspired to accomplish their own egoistic ends, to preserve the old stereotypes and emphasize their own sense of security at his cost.

The disaster for Jairaj is that he has chosen to pursue a career, which is considered 'right' only for women. That is why Amirtlal is willing to have Ratna as the dancer and not Jairaj. Amidst these resonances is played out the angst of Jairaj and Ratna who are obviously holding back a deep, dark secret, which will be revealed towards the end of the play. Like in all encounters, a completely innocent individual becomes the victim - their son. Dattani refuses to assign the blame or the status of the 'wronged' party to any one: "I refuse to have protagonists in a fixed role as victim. If you have a victim, it implies that there is a persecutor and it also implies that you will eventually have rescuer" (Chaudhuri 63). Ratna is not, as many would suggest, depending upon the interpretation of the production, the negative presence in the play. Dattani has often been considered as a 'woman hater' by critics, but, according to him:

... my women protagonists fight, scheme and get a piece of the action albeit at great personal cost. These are seen as 'negative' qualities, sadly by some women too. You may talk about post feminism in Western society, but really we have yet to see feminism find expression in Indian society. (Dattani)

The last lines of the play reverberate perpetually "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God" (CP 447).

2. Conclusion

Dance Like a Man is a such powerful drama which provides an insight into the contemporary Indian social scenario, reflecting the aspirations of a middle class south Indian couple who, by their own choice of profession as dancers, epitomize the past and the contemporary Indian culture and gender roles.

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