

A Critique of Gender Roles in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract

Bharatanatyam is an ancient Indian classical dance form that originated from Tamil Nadu. It was performed by devadasis (prostitutes) in royal courts in the early period. Later, the elite Indian class separates it from devadasis and makes it more like a commodity. A man's passion towards such kind of an art form creates commotion in a patriarchal society. His manhood is questioned and he is considered as inferior to the exaggerated version of masculinity. The breaking of particular roles which are destined to each gender in a society leads to tension within the patriarchy. Mahesh Dattani's play Dance Like a Man explores themes like gender discrimination, stereotyping, gender roles and identity crisis. In reality, the problems of men due to gender discrimination is not discussed effectively. This play tries to give a clear picture of a male victim of gender discrimination through Jairaj's character. The current research explores the problems in reversing gender roles, question on masculinity and involvement of society in carrying gender stereotypes as portrayed in Dance Like a Man.

Keywords: Dance, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Masculinity, Stereotyping and Gender Discrimination

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani, a well-known Indian playwright, actor and director born in 1958 in Bangalore, India. His major works include *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara* and so on. Most of his writings are based on themes like patriarchy, identity crisis, feminism, sexuality, women subjugation and many other social stigmas. Dattani received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays*. He is one of the prominent faces in Indian theatre. He portrays Indian families as his medium for telling conflictual nature of modern Indian society.

Discussion

Each and every duty in a society is divided and assigned to people according to their gender from an earlier period. This is to ensure the submission of women in front of men by framing them as weak and good for nothing. As some people realize that gender has nothing to do with one's choices in life, a change in gender roles can be seen nowadays. Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance like a Man* gives us a clear picture of problems in reversing gender roles.

The setting of the play is in a big house at the heart of a city. The major portion of the play deals with the life of Jairaj and his wife Ratna, two Bharatanatyam dancers. *Jairaj's passion towards dance during his teenage is first approved by his father Amritlal as he believes that it is just a fancy and will end after sometime. But Jairaj takes dance as a serious profession and he continues to practice it even after knowing his father's dissatisfaction.* According to Amritlal, dance is a feminine activity and he dislikes Jairaj's



Guruji who has long hair like females and who even walks like a female. He says that “normal men don’t keep their hair so long” (Dattani 417). Amritlal is a pseudo liberal; on one hand he fights for freedom and even agrees his son to marry a girl from another community but on the other hand he is unable to think of his son as a Bharatanatyam dancer. He is the representative of a patriarchal society which embraces the ugliest idea of gender discrimination.

Amritlal’s notion of gender roles is pseudo progressive as he states that “A woman in man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in woman’s world is pathetic” (Dattani 427). He believes that a man’s happiness always lies in being a man who embodies the masculinity that the world needs. The very idea of gender role that he holds is contradictory to his liberal tag. He is not able to understand where his son’s happiness lies. He is disappointed with his son for two reasons; he carries his obsession towards Bharatanatyam within him and also allows his wife Ratna to perform dance and to learn dance from an old Bharatanatyam dancer who was once a prostitute. He wants his son Jairaj to fit in the traditional set of masculinity who do a proper job and controls his wife.

In a patriarchal society a man’s masculinity is determined in terms of “strength, authoritativeness, emotionlessness, practicality and opposite to all these are considered as feminine” (Saraswat 153). The person who breaks this tradition becomes a mocking figure in the society. In Dattani’s play *Dance Like a Man*, he explores the problem of being opposite to the traditional idea of masculinity. Jairaj is criticized by his wife Ratna as well as his father for not being a ‘man’.

In the first act, the reader understands that Lata, their daughter, has to perform dance which can make her career a blow, but their mridangist has a fracture in his arm. Jairaj and Ratna become upset due to this. Jairaj suggests that they can ask another mridangist Seshadri to come for Lata’s performance. But Ratna denies this as Seshadri rehearses with Chandra Kala, Ratna’s enemy, and points out that Seshadri has an illicit relation with Chandra Kala. Meanwhile, Jairaj tries to console her by saying “there is plenty of time” (Dattani 401). Ratna becomes furious and start to quarrel with Jairaj and even calls him a “spineless

boy” (Dattani 402). She says that “you stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house” (Dattani 402). Ratna is unhappy with their life and she throughout shows her dissatisfaction. Dance hasn’t given her that much what she expected. She is blaming Jairaj for this and believes that his father’s curse makes them nothing. Ratna’s dissatisfaction is due to lack of financial support that Jairaj hasn’t achieved in his life. Instead of obeying his father he follows his passion but is not capable to make enough for Ratna and his family. Jairaj’s questions to Ratna for all of her queries leads the reader to think what is the basis of ‘being a man’. He asks her “would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter?” (Dattani 410). The question is whether a man becomes a ‘perfect man’ if he sacrifices his wife for getting livelihood. In a way he is asking that whether he becomes a man if he achieves sufficient wealth for his wife through any means.

For his father it was his profession that curtails him from being a ‘proper man’. Once Jairaj practices in the hall with Ratna in front of their Guruji and that irritates Amritlal. When Ratna informs Amritlal that Jairaj is going to grow his hair by the advice of Guruji, he becomes furious and points out that if Jairaj grows his hair an inch longer, he will shave his entire head and throws him away. The idea of ‘masculinity’ which Amritlal carries doesn’t include long haired men. Jairaj’s intention to learn Kuchipudi, another form of dance which needs female apparels and costumes creates disappointment and anger in Amritlal. He warns Jairaj that he will stop Guruji from coming to his house as long as both Jairaj and Ratna are under his care. Amritlal wants Jairaj as a grown-up man. He is upset with Jairaj’s extreme obsession in dance as he considers it as a feminine activity.

Once they leave the house of Amritlal and come back after two days by accepting their defeat, Amritlal makes it clear that if Jairaj can earn through dancing he is happy but if they again ask him money, it is disappointing. On certain conditions Amritlal allows them to stay at his home again though earlier they leave the home by vowing that they never come back. Amritlal seeks Ratna’s help to evolve Jairaj as a man. He says that “help me make him an adult...help

me I will never prevent you from dancing” (Dattani 427). He wants his son to be a ‘proper man’ like every other man. **The tension and anger of Amritlal towards his son’s profession is the reflection of a patriarchal society that evaluates a man’s masculinity through his profession, appearance, ability to make money and so on.**

Jairaj’s passion towards dance and his father’s ruthless attitude towards him can be seen as an example of **how a patriarchal society suppresses a person’s desire in the name of gender.** When Ratna joins with her father-in-law to make Jairaj worthy for her, she is actually ruining his skills. She sidelines him by making him dance his weakest items. Jairaj is unable to perform alone when Ratna gets pregnant as his self-esteem has already shattered by Ratna bit by bit in stages. **He says “you took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadows” (Dattani 443). She makes him less important in stage as per her father-in-law’s instruction.** In order to make a ‘proper man’ out of a passionate dancer, both Amritlal and Ratna prevent Jairaj from doing what he wants. They take away his freedom to choose in the name of gender. He ends up as an alcoholic due to his frustrations and blames Ratna for his situation. But Ratna cleverly frames Amritlal at first, and then Jairaj himself as the reason for his own destruction. She accuses Jairaj that once he denies an invitation to dance alone as he is afraid of revealing his “mediocrity” (Dattani 445). At first, Ratna says that she lets her father-in-law to reshape his son to whatever shape he thinks a man needs and also, she expects the result but in vain. **Ratna is selfish as she marginalizes her passionate husband and kills her son Shankar (she gives little amount of opium to his son for assuring that he is not going to wake up until she comes back from a performance and that leads to her son’s death) for her own career.**

Jairaj’s love towards dance reflects in many dialogues in the play. He wishes to teach the dance of Shiva which **he calls as “the dance of a man”** (Dattani 441) to his son Shankar, here the reader can see a frustrated and failed dancer. He even wants his son to do “tandava nritya” (Dattani 442) on Amritlal’s head which he considers as a revenge on his father for destructing his career and passion. Jairaj fails to follow his mind due to gender discrimination of the

patriarchal society. When an army wants a woman to perform dance and Ratna fears to dance in-front of them, Jairaj wears his wife’s costumes so as to pretend him as a woman and perform dance. From here, the reader can understand that a society always wants women as dancers. But the army appreciates his performance and even loves it more when they realize that it is a man. Jairaj is showing his ability and skill through this performance. He implicitly gives the reader the idea that he is as good as women dancers or even better than them. But society restricts him through his father and wife from being a successful dancer.

Conclusion

Dance Like a Man is a perfect amalgamation of a man’s desire to rebel against the existing gender roles and his failure in doing so. Jairaj is the epitome of the **‘imperfect masculinity’** in the so-called world of **‘perfect people’**. The patriarchal society decides the gender roles and compels us to confine in that. Dattani questions this idea of gender roles through the character Jairaj who wishes to become a successful Bharatanatyam dancer. He even questions that what makes **a ‘perfect man’** who fits in a patriarchal society. The play also explores the pathetic condition of a great dancer who has to bury his desire due to the extremity of gender roles. Dattani’s Jairaj is frustrated and disappointed as he fails to rebel against the patriarchal society and its notion of gender roles. However, the play opens up a wider discussion on the issue of gender discrimination not in a traditional way of discussing feminine issues only, but the problems of males who want to be a part of reversing gender roles.

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