

Issue of Gender and Society in Mahesh Dattani's Play
Dance Like a Man

Dr. Bhumika Agrawal

Associate Professor

Department of Humanities

Priyadarshini Institute of Engineering and Technology

Nagpur-16

Maharashtra

bhumikaagrawal1975@gmail.com

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the issue of gender and society in Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*. It discusses herd mentality of conservatives that fosters that the art of classical dancing is meant only for women. An authoritative father Amritlal Parekh becomes uncomfortable to see that his son Jairaj finds comfort in learning classical dance. To stop his son from furthering perfecting the art, he plays a conspiracy in association with his daughter-in-law Ratna. The paper describes the foul game of Amritlal, Jairaj's failure, Ratna's opposition and then support to Amritlal Parekh, Ratna's involvement in fulfilling her dreams through her daughter Lata and suffocation of all the characters due to presence of each other in their lives. The dominating characters of the play use weak people as scapegoats to accomplish their goals and in the end are caught in their own traps.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, *Dance Like a Man*, gender discrimination, patriarchy, classical dance, hegemony, women emancipation

If women hold up 'half the sky', their voices should equally matter in the social history of a country. But is that voice audible in our land? This interrogative statement was replied by a socialist Theresa Rebeck as, "It's time to hear both sides, to hear all voices, to build a culture where stories are told by both men and women. That is the way the planet is going to survive, and it's the way we are going to survive."¹

Rebeck's reply advocates the importance of gender equality to keep human survival balanced and healthy. The issue of gender discrimination is strongly rooted and integrated in Indian consciousness since ages in spite of the fact that Indian women did enjoy equal status and rights during the early Vedic period.

The behavioural pattern of females in India can be traced to the days of Manu of 200 BCE in '*Manusmriti*' which states that, "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent."²

Mahatma Gandhi too expresses his concern for the crippled position of women, "We have kept our women away from the activities of ours and have thus become victims of a kind of paralysis. The nation walks with one leg only. All its work appears to be only half or incompletely done."³

In the light of above expressions, one feels that the mind-set of society and the world at large needs to be transformed. Theatres and other forms of mass communication can play a prominent role to root out gender discrimination from the society. Many playwrights and writers have been incessantly working on this issue. One such playwright of present times is Mahesh Dattani who deals the issue of gender discrimination in his play '*Dance Like a Man*'. The play revolves around the issues of gender discrimination and patriarchy. It was directed by Lillette Dubey. About her experience of the play, she says, "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 actors' talent, makes it as unique as does the strong characterization and the 'seamless' movements in time."⁴

The theme of the play is based on herd mentality that fosters that the art of classical dancing is meant only for women. The historical and socio-cultural factors that led to this misconception are many. In Indian society, dancing by male is not considered a much-respected art. When the men don ankle bells and start to dance, they are put down as effeminate upstarts in an exclusively female domain. One section of the society holds that dance is a delicate and graceful art and hence its domain should be limited to females only. If a man dances delicately and gracefully, he is not given manly respect in the society.

The country may be celebrated on the world stage for introducing a clan of incredible artists in various fields of liberal arts ranging from literature and music to philosophy and theatre. However, humanistic disciplines that were once synonymous to those 'great' and 'intellectual', no longer seem to be a lucrative preference for the young scholars. Besides, there is parental pressure on boys to choose medical or engineering line instead of dance to have a lucrative career. Leela Venkataraman, a dance critic says, "I think by the '80s the space of the male dancer had been completely encroached upon by women. This was very unfortunate as the pressures on these men when compared to women were far greater. They had to earn to support their families through a profession which society no longer had any respect for."⁵

The Indian society hasn't yet fully evolved to a point where it can recognize or easily accept a male pursuing liberal arts course. Certain professions have been linked to either gender, and people find it difficult to deviate from the set guidelines. Unfortunately, those who try to break the web of illusions the society has weaved, are criticized and discouraged to the point where they are completely shattered and broken. Due to all these misconceptions, social approbation and economic sanctions, the art of dancing is considered to be reserved for females. V. Krishnamoorthy, a Bharatnatyam and

Kuchipudi male dancer laments, “Even when I did get the odd programs, the organizers would insist I get a ‘real’ girl along for a duet. There was no scope for the solo male dancer.”⁶

Paradoxically, Indian culture is full of evidences and examples which prove that dance is a masculine art. According to Indian scriptures, the originator of dance, Nataraja, the patron deity of dancers is a male. There are many personages in Indian mythology who were associated with the art of dancing. Shiva is considered to dance ‘*Tandava*’. Krishna was a great dancer and his *raas-leelas* with Radha were quite popular. Arjuna was told by Indra to judge the better amongst the celestial dancers Rambha and Urvashi which gives the testimony of the fact that Arjuna was an expert dancer. In Mahabharata, it is mentioned that Arjuna taught dance as Brihannala to Uttara while he was in exile.

The epics and mythological studies have a mentioning that some of the Indian mythological Gods and Kings like Kamadeva, Ganesha, Anjaneya and even Ravana were all the masters of dance, and music. Bharat Muni, the writer of *Natyasastra*, a treatise on many arts including dance, too was a man. These evidences illustrate that dancing is neither a domain of only females nor of only males. It is an art that can be learnt, performed and taught by anybody irrespective of the sex. A noted classical dancer Johar explains, “Dance is not about gender. Dance springs from a deeper human need. The ‘70s and 80s’ over glamorized the female dancer and she has now become a victim of her own image. Today we have grown out of that fetishised femininity.”⁷

Mahesh Dattani wrote the play in the period when the male dancers had started gaining grounds and respect on the stage and in the society. About the play, he says, “I wrote the play when I was learning *Bharatnatyam* 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.”⁸

The protagonist, Jairaj represents a modern man who is an ardent classical dancer. His dominating father Amritlal Parekh is shown to be caught in the false web of socio-cultural norms. He poses himself to be very liberal but advocates gender discrimination. To set an ideal before the society and to earn himself the title of being ‘a liberal’ and ‘an egalitarian, he accepts Ratna, a classical dancer as his daughter-in-law and not because his son loves her. He remains authoritative and wants that his son Jairaj should dance on his fingers and not as a professional dancer. He doesn’t permit Ratna to perfect her dance from Devdasi of temple. Amritlal Parekh is shown to be an embodiment of patriarchal authority who supports gender bias notions.

The dislike of Amritlal for dancing and the immense passion of Ratna for the same create deep conflict in the life of Jairaj. About this conflict, Beena Agrawal states, “The psycho-cultural conflict prepares an intense tragic tension mounting to the disastrous collapse of two gentle persons and consummate artists. The action in the play moves between the past, present and future synchronically dissolving the different time shifts and anticipating the fate of three generations.”⁹

Amritlal Parekh wishes his son to be always under his thumb. For him the individual identity and passion of Jairaj for dance is of no significance. Hence Jairaj leaves home with Ratna to be away from

familial tension. But the couple fails to survive on their own. Hence, they come back to Amritlal to be the victims of his political trap. After understanding that Jairaj can't feed his family without his support, Amritlal makes up his mind to keep Jairaj away from dance. To succeed in his motive, he plays a conspiracy against his son in collaboration with Ratna. He better knows the weaknesses of Jairaj and Ratna. He was sure that if he permits Ratna to continue her dance, she would do anything for it. Hence, he convinces Ratna that if she helps him in making Jairaj a 'manly man', she can continue her dancing. Ratna readily accepts Amritlal's offer to stop Jairaj from dancing. She knows that if she wants to be a successful dancer, she should first dance attendance upon her father-in-law. About this move of Amritlal, Asha Kuthari appropriately remarks, "This is the twist that the playwright gives to the stereotypes associated with 'gender' issues that view solely women at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society."¹⁰

Amritlal thinks that people would laugh at Jairaj for being a dancer. Hence, he wants Jairaj to adopt his family business rather than dance as his career. He therefore discourages Jairaj and tells him,

"Where will you go being a dancer? Nowhere! What will you get being a dancer? Nothing! People will point at you on the streets and laugh and ask." (CP 397)

Amritlal believes that the men who choose dancing as a profession are not masculine. The very thought that classical dance is strictly a female domain is deeply rooted in Amritlal's mind. Hence, he asks Ratna,

How do you feel? How do you feel dancing with your husband? What do you think of him when you see him all dressed and ... made up." (CP 426)

Amritlal possesses a notion that dance makes a man effeminate and unworthy to be called a man. Asha Kuthari reads Amritlal's fear as, "The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him 'womanly'- an effeminate man - the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned. And hence Amritlal must oppose, tooth and nail, Jairaj's passion for dance."¹¹ Amritlal dislikes everything that a male dancer does and wears. He doesn't like the way Jairaj's guruji carries himself. He therefore asks Jairaj,

Amritlal: Why does he wear his hair so long?

Jairaj: Why do you ask?

Amritlal: I have never seen a man with long hair.

Jairaj: All sadhus have long hair.

Amritlal: I don't mean them. I meant normal men.

Jairaj: What are you trying to say?

Amritlal: All I'm saying is that normal men don't keep their hair so long.

Jairaj: Are you saying that he is not... (Realizes the implication.) Are you saying ... ?

Amritlal: I've also noticed the way he walks. (CP 417)

Amritlal believes that male and female have their separate spheres. If any gender dares to enter the domain of other, it is against the stream. He thinks that it can be acceptable for a woman to enter the domain of man as in modern world it would be accepted and even appreciated but to follow the vice versa for a man narrows his identity and proves his low esteem. Hence, he says,

“A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.” (CP 427)

Amritlal plays all the tactics to stop Jairaj from dancing. He strongly believes that if Jairaj is to be made worthy of living by holding his head high, he must be kept away from dancing. He becomes so desperate for Jairaj’s future that he convinces Ratna to follow him,

“Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.” (CP 427)

Amritlal always brags that his was an instrumental role to make India free from the shackles of Britishers. But paradoxically he doesn’t help his own son to be free from the shackles of wrong customs of the society. Amritlal’s behaviour is quite diplomatic. Mithran Devanesen questions such men, “Are we the liberal-minded persons we would like to believe that we are, or do we blindly kowtow to unwritten laws of family conduct that is the easier path to take?”¹²

Ratna, being smarter and sharper than Jairaj enjoys her short-lived dance career. But she too proves to be a failure as a complete dancer and as a complete wife. Due to the stern patriarchs like Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj loses his art and Ratna loses Jairaj. Ultimately the couple proves to be the losers. However, they both help their daughter Lata to lose nothing.

Ratna wants to fulfill her unfulfilled dreams as a dancer through Lata. Hence Ratna develops intense passion for dance in her. She imprints on Lata’s mind that dance is everything for her. Lata too starts believing what her mother orders her. Hence when Vishwas, her lover asks Lata if her parents were anxious to know about their son-in-law, she replies

“Actually, they couldn’t care less who or what you are. As long as you let me dance.” (CP 388)

Both Ratna and Lata nurture a fear in their mind that the family responsibilities would spoil their art. Hence Lata takes assurance from Vishwas if he would support her in making her career in dancing after marriage. She asks him,

“Vishwas, when we are married—you will let me come here to practice, won’t you?” (CP 389)

Lata doesn't want that due to family pressure, she should prove to be a failure like her mother. She is not ready to sacrifice her art for the sake of family. But at the same time, she doesn't want to lose her husband or child like her mother did. Hence, she feels that it is better not to have children so that she can concentrate on her career. She expresses her fear to Vishwas,

“And we won't have children” (CP 389)

If we analyze the psyche of all the three artists of the play *Ratna*, *Jairaj* and *Lata*, we find that they are caught in the web of societal pressure, family liabilities, their passion for dance and their desires of reaching to the pinnacle of their career. Our society has to go a long way to accept the idea that individual identity and family both are equally important to lead a comfortable and peaceful life. Any imbalance between the two disturbs the life of an individual, particularly of an artist. Hence Mahesh Dattani convinces the idea that if family and art goes hand in hand complementing each other irrespective of gender, one can enjoy the true essence of life.

In the play, Mahesh Dattani depicts that the society is still grappling with the problems of gender discrimination and patriarchy. Amritlal Parekh exercises his hegemonic power over others. He poses to be the controller of the family but makes the weaker section as the scapegoat to continue his authority. Indra, a critic says that such men compare, ‘a woman to a river and a husband to an ocean’ where after reaching the latter, the former completely loses its identity.¹³

Indra thus interprets Manu that a woman is expected to submerge her whole being in doing her duty to her husband, irrespective of what he is.

In the play, Dattani prominently depicts that due to the wrong practices prevalent in Indian families, the perpetrators and the victims both suffer equally, and, in the end, everybody proves to be a loser. Amritlal Parekh gains whatever he desires but his son *Jairaj* loses everything.

Mahesh Dattani very delicately depicts the psychology of the victims and the perpetrators of patriarchy. He also discusses in the play that the remedy of woman's emancipation from the social and psychological trap is more in their hands than in man's. They should refuse to adorn themselves for men, including their husbands, if they wish to be their real partners in true sense.

It is interesting to note that Dattani doesn't follow the traditional pattern of portraying the women victims who go on shedding the rivers of tears over her agonies. Instead of portraying women as submissive, silent and weak, he gives fair chance to her women to put forth their say. *Ratna* though falls prey to Amritlal's trap; she doesn't give up like *Jairaj*. She continues her battle and fulfills her dreams through her daughter *Lata*.

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