

Mahesh Dattani's plays- Dance Like a Man

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the notion of social issues like Gender inequalities, sufferings and depression faced by both men and women with reference to the Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani's play "Dance Like a Man" (1989). Dance Like a Man has generously expressed the social issues of contemporary Indian society. The theme of the play is dealt with tradition, relationship, career, and society. The plot revolves around Jairaj and Ratna and their daughter Lata and her fiancé Viswas. A fine metre traces the past of Jairaj, Ratna and Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father through the technique of flashback concept. Jairaj and Ratna are exposed to the wrath of Amritlal Parekh who fails to understand their passion and their devotion towards dance and particularly of Jairaj. Mahesh Dattani indicates the typical Indian views about dance through Amritlal Parekh who believes that dance is made only for females. Dance Like A Man is also deals with the dogma of being a man in the 1940s, of the Indian society. Although the story revolves around a dancer couple and their family, but the emotions of the play lies in the emotional and social dance. Jairaj did dance to the tune of his father, his dancer and intelligent wife and to the tune of this society.

This play deals with the recent, and ancient, history of India in personal terms, probing three generations of conflict against a background that evokes the highest achievements of ancient Sanskrit theater and classical religious dance. Some of the turns in this story are harrowing, and the bitterness of the characters can be deeply unsettling.

On the surface, Mahesh Dattani's play, *Dance Like a Man* explores relationships within a family. As the plot dives deeper into a sea of emotions, however, the story unravels, bringing to the shore the ideas that swim against those in mainstream society. Introduced through Lata, in the 1990s, the story weaves between the past and the present through the characters of Jairaj, Ratna, Amritlal, Lata and Viswas, engendering conversations about dreams, desires and sacrifices that come under the lens of gender and patriarchy.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, patriarchy, Dance Like a Man, relationships, emotions, family

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is one of the popular dramatists in Indian English Literature, who has the honour of winning Sahitya Akademi award for *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays* in the year 1998. Mahesh Dattani is a Bangalore based dramatist and director. The themes of his plays have attracted the attention of a great number of readers and audiences in theatres. He has tried to bring hidden issues of society such as plight of women and transgender, gender discrimination, homosexuality child sex abuse etc. into light through his plays. He has shown the problems of city life in India in a significant manner in his plays. He has a striking artistic mind that makes him different from other dramatists. The Oxford Dictionary defines discrimination as "the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex". Gender based inequality has been the ancient practice in India and also across the world. Gender inequality has been in the roots of our society since the birth of civilisation. It is a practice which shows that mankind is still in the

hands of discrimination which is particularly leading to the fragmentation of the society in spite of the technological improvement. Men and women are compelled to face the darkness of discrimination which often results in the suppression of their desires and subsequently the progress in life. The artist explains the dark side of life and creates awareness among people.

In this two-act play, Dattani has tried to knit the story around three generations and their conflicts. Jairaj and his wife Ratna, both professional dancers, meet Viswas, the man their daughter Lata wants to marry. In the conversations that follow, fissures in the relationship between Jairaj and Ratna explode, leading them back to their youth, bringing back conversations surrounding toxic masculinity and gender discrimination. The patriarchal figure, Amritlal is a freedom fighter from the 1940s. He does not like his son, Jairaj, becoming a dancer — something he considered a female profession. Decades later, we still find ourselves asking the same questions on the stigmas that prevail in society. “There has been a progressive shift in certain pockets of society, but the population still cannot wrap their heads around the idea of gender-neutral professions.”

“Things are changing now, and it is because we have more voices of support when we want to do something different; this makes all the difference.” This is like peeping through our neighbour’s window, trying to see a family address problems that are present everywhere.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Mahesh Dattani's play- Dance Like a Man and depiction of** the gender discrimination in a society, the injustice done only on the term of gender and the preference given to a male child over a female in an Indian family.

Ethos : Mahesh Dattani's play- Dance Like a Man

Men ignite to hold the reins of authority over women, children and other members of the family. Gender inequality has been present in society since the birth of civilization and up to date humanity is in its shackles. The Dramatist says “gender is constituted by some acts which when repeated come to form and give shape to a “coherent” gender identity”. Amritlal Parekh, Head of the Family: Dattani portrays an Indian family in which Amritlal Parekh possessed unquestionable power over Jairaj and Ratna. Parekh being the head of the family, he declared himself to be responsible head for taking important decision of all their life. He is a reformist and freedom fighter yet a prudish and conservative. He was supporting India to get free from the Britishers. Ironically he controlled and framed strict regulations over his own son’s wishes. He rejects the freedom of his son who wanted to become a Bharatnatyam dancer- “Do you know where a man’s happiness lies? In being a Man”. Father implements his wish on his son and wants him not to take up dance as his career because it is not a ‘male oriented’ profession. Man is declared to be the bread earner and he is expected to be in such a profession in which self-esteem is concerned with it, in Indian society. In the other term, man did not get freedom to undergo art form like Bharatnatyam. Jairaj’s father equates the art of dance with prostitution. “The craft of a prostitution to show off her wares- what business does a man have to learn from such a craft? No use when compared with dance”.

Dramatist has clearly indicated that Amritlal Parekh felt really bad and ashamed of Jairaj because he being a ‘real man’ is in the profession of lower quality. He considered Jairaj a cause for the shame for the family, because he judged Jairaj on the floor of masculinity in which he didn’t allow himself to fit in. He says, “Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an obsession”. Adverse Judgement

and Inclination: Dattani introduces ironic element but still an adverse judgement and inclination are always visualized under the surface. When Amritlal Parekh compares dance with womanly mannerism, it evokes comical work yet underlined with satirical work. He expresses his doubts towards “guru ji” who teaches dance in an effeminate ground which disgusts and irritates Jairaj - “I have never seen a normal man with long hair. I have also noticed the way he walks” (417, Act I).

Dance Separating Men and Women

Dattani has pointed out the irony that on one hand Amritlal Parekh brings the equivalence of the dance with prostitution and withholds Jairaj from dancing and on the other hand he accepts and permits Ratna to dance. This concept indirectly suggests that men and women are not given equal power and position in Indian society. The skill of dance is considered to be of least and inferior thing in India and hence it is said to be meant only for woman. Amritlal very smartly makes Ratna feel that Jairaj can never be as good as she at dancing and demands the grace and beauty to be only as the quality of womanly identification. He says, “A woman in the man’s world may be considered as being progressive.

But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic, yet being progressive is ... sick”. Consequences and Repercussions of Gender Conflict: Mahesh Dattani towards the end expresses the sad and very painful reality; the consequences and repercussions of gender conflict which overwhelmed Jairaj. Innocent Jairaj has been lowered to empty space and loneliness “spineless boy” as his obstinate father and the society made him realize that he is worthless and fit for nothing, not even for the dance, at last. He blames Ratna for taking away his self-possession, self-esteem, respect and confidence which once again adverts towards gender inequality as a husband without a single thought blames his wife for his decline. “You took it away bit by bit. You took it away when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it away when you arranged the lightening so that I danced in your shadow”. Tara: Mahesh Dattani has represented the issue of marginalised women in his another play Tara. This play manifests the discrimination against girl child in society. The play opens with Dan who is busy typing and addresses the audience directly. He is writing the play called Twinkle Tara and the play understudy is called Tara and that Tara means star. Chandan recalls the memories of his childhood with his sister Tara. Both had shared one body which means that they were conjoined Twins. He exposes the existing patriarchal mindset of society which prefers a boy child to a girl child.

Women and continuation of tradition and ritual

In Mahesh Dattani’s plays women ensure the continuation of tradition and ritual where men go to work. These are stereotypical gender rules of which Dattani makes full use. In this play Dattani outlines an immediate conflict between husband and wife regarding her father. Bharati also looks more concerned than Patel about Tara’s diet and health. Patel is seemed to be concerned about Chandan’s career. He wants him to follow his footsteps. Chandan seems to have different plans and wants to be a writer whereas Tara would like to be “Strong, Healthy, Beautiful”. As the play progresses, we see Tara being asked to exhibit her artificial leg. In the ensuing dialogue between Tara and Chandan we are made aware of lot of facts but most importantly that Bharati fusses over Tara and Tara shows what she sees as lack of interest in her father towards her. Roopa makes her re-entrance on the stage and inspected Tara’s leg. Roopa is being bribed by Bharati to be friendly with Tara. Roopa runs off to tell her friends that Bharati wants to donate her own kidney. Patel does not approve of it that arouses quarrel between husband and wife and the husband bitter comment that her father’s money was always Bharati’s strength.

The play 'Dance Like a Man' strikes hard at the society that prescribes certain roles to each gender and treats them as idiotic. Jairaj, the male protagonist of the play becomes a victim of gender restrictions. Usually women become victims or suffer due to the patriarchal culture. But this play focuses on the plight of a male who tries to break the conventional roles allotted to his gender by the society. In this process, he loses his identity as an artist in society. Jairaj's dreams are shattered as his father considers that Bharatanatyam is an effeminate thing that belongs to female gender. A man practicing the dance is entirely unacceptable for the people of the society. His father, being a spokesperson of the society fears that his son would lose his identity as a male. Jairaj cannot accept that he has lost his individuality as an artist, but he comprehends his own self at the end of the play and his self-discovery brings a revelation of the essence of the art which has nothing to do with the practitioner being either male or female. Mahesh Dattani's works are noted to be of paramount importance in the field of Indian contemporary theatre. They question an amalgamation of social and gender-related issues. His play *Dance Like A Man*, set in the post-independence scenario, mirrors numerous concerns inherent in the fiercely heterosexual Indian society.

The characters and their respective struggles to live up to the gendered expectations of the patriarchal, bourgeois society – the 'dancing' man and the repercussions he faces for following his considerably 'feminine' passion of dancing, the rigid questioning of the 'maleness' of his identity, an over-ambitious woman failing in her role as a 'nurturer', money controlled power structures, a society reeling under the pre-independence clutches of tradition and the dominant nature of patriarchy are issues starkly reflected in the play.

Dance Like A Man revolves around the couple, Jairaj and Ratna, both Bharatanatyam dancers, and maps the struggles they had to face in the course of their Bharatanatyam careers. Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's autocratic father opposes their dancing and becomes the epitome of patriarchal subjugation in the play.

The themes which Dattani explores in his plays are far from conventional and centrally focuses on male stereotyping and gendered identity crises. The title is suggestive of the central challenge faced by the male protagonist, Jairaj, "[if] he [can] dance like a man", as the very notion of dance is opposed to that of maleness and considered only as a female enterprise. Jairaj finds his passion condemned, his gender questioned and his identity stigmatized.

Gender is deemed performative and seen to be a cultural process and a pre-established pattern of behaviour which in the play brings Jairaj's plight to the fore. The widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize masculinity and femininity. Dattani comments gravely on gender binaries and highlights the bias society fosters against the act of dancing in the play, voiced by Amritlal – "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world, pathetic". Jairaj is thus seen to struggle under the weight of patriarchal subjugation, repressed desire and traditional constructs.

Amritlal tells Ratna later, "Do you know where a man's happiness lies?", "In being a man". Ratna too, hurls her abuse at Jairaj, "You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house". His own view of his masculine identity is shown to be at conflict when she accuses him of being incapable of supporting them.

In this flux of autocratic patriarchal expectations and so-called "progressive thoughts", Jairaj, both as a dancer and a human being, is made to finally sacrifice his passions and desires, though initially he tried to keep Amritlal from stopping him

pursuing Bharatnatyam when he says – “*And I will not have my art run down by a handful of stubborn narrow-minded individuals with fancy pretentious ideals*”.

Amritlal also has an issue with Jairaj’s interest in growing his hair long. Jairaj wishes to have long hair so that it’ll enhance his *abhinaya* and thus his dance. Amritlal, however, reiterates the patriarchal voice that long hair is a signifier of femininity and that female beauty is a threat to Jairaj’s holistic masculine identity as demanded by society.

Conclusion

The play “Dance Like a Man” brings to light the painful and hurting reality about men and women who are meant to be the victims of gender conflict. An individual’s quality, their desires, capability and success are based on the yardstick of gender, particularly in the Indian society. Mahesh Dattani’s another play “Tara” is considered as one of the popular works. He touches various issues related to gender discrimination by taking the subject of conjoined twins. Tara is not merely an individual character but emerges as an archetype, an icon of the Indian girl child who is vanquished and subdued in the factory of tradition and modernity. This play moves us deeply as Mahesh Dattani not only unravels how girls are subjected to discrimination in an educated society but also stresses upon the fact that how discrimination is encouraged by people in Indian society.

Individual is as much a part of his own inner conscience, as much as he is a part of defined social code. The perpetual clash of human motives with the tradition of family, prejudice of society and the code of culture constitute the dramatic structure of the play Dance Like a Man.

The play is a mega success in depicting the plight of marginalized women. This play depicts the discrimination against women which starts from the womb of mother. The incidents of female foeticide are common in our society. The patriarchal society considers a girl as a burden on her parents not only financially but also socially and emotionally. It can be concluded that Mahesh Dattani’s thinking that the man with the passion and love to dance is considered to be lower and inferior in quality and status whereas woman has no rights and voice in the family. Gender inequality is the social evil which has overwhelmed the Indian society and it can be erased only when the people change their support to gender inequality. We should understand that gender inequality is a ‘mere social construct’

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