

# Gender Stereotyping, Identity Crisis and Fragile Relationship in Dattani's *Dance like a Man*.

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## Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the prominent figures in Indian English drama whose plays marked for scathing and piercing skills that he implied in his writings to make direct attacks on the prevailing filthiness and narrowness of contemporary Indian society. Moreover, Dattani used to stage a strong tool to illustrate the societal absurdities, ugliness and, complexity in human relationships. Mostly in his plays preoccupied with the national, social, political and domestic problems. Dattani enthusiastic orientation towards such absurdities can be seen in his own observation: I think there are so many things, tensions, and conflicts that we are dealing with....I am writing these because these issues are inspiring to me. His ability to encapsulate the deep insight and twisted depth of human psychic suffering in his characters had a profound impact on his readers as well audience. *Dance like a man* is one of the plays in which Dattani points out various common problems such as relationship conflicts, ambitions, identity crisis and also flings light on ideological clashes between modern and traditional upholders. The purpose of this study, in this play, is to highlight the problems of an urban middle-class man whose self-esteem and artistic credentials is destroyed by the traditional and ambitious societal upholders. In this research paper, I will focus on the major elements, such as identity crisis, genders problem, ambition and broken relationship that, however, linked the events chronically and occurred throughout the play.

**Keywords: Identity crisis, fragile relationship, Ambition, domination, society, drama.**

Thematically, I talk about areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand 'this' space. They live on the fringes of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe - space for themselves as they can.(Dattani)

Dattani is eulogized by many critics for his contribution as a playwright as well as a stage performer in Indian English literature. He is one of the Indian dramatists whose writings played a profound role to enrich drama form. As far as his dramatic performances are concerned he is also acclaimed a great stage practitioner. Many of his plays occurred at national as well as in abroad theatres that gives him an international recognition to his works. Many of his dramatic works also produced on the radio in India. His distinctive skills and striking performances sprinkle a new enthusiasm and spirit in Indian English drama. Among his popular plays the chief are *Dance like a man*1989, *Tara* 1990, *Final Solutions*1992, *Bravely Fought the queen*1991 and *Where there's a will* 1986. Dattani remunerated with Sahitya Akademi award in 1998 for his work *Final Solution and collected works*. The prolific critic John Mac Rae addressed him the voice of India and glorifies his writings in his following comment:

They are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time, they are the plays which embody many of the classic concern for world drama.

Dattani is to be believed the bystander of society and his writings mainly present the prevailing filthiness, absurdity and hypocrite picture of the mankind world and concerned with the themes of societal problems such as sexuality, relationship conflicts, women subjugation, exploitation and traditional conventions, patriarchy and identity crisis, feminism and others. The conspicuous issues on which he focused prominently are gender discrimination, individuality and communalism, conflicts and religious harmony. *Final solutions* the awarded play in which he, one of his masterpiece and which I usually prefer to read, examine the communalism and fervently criticizes the responsible causes and repercussions of the riots and violence. The theme of women problems and their ambitions, independence, suppression, and suffering and struggle to survive discussed in *Tara*, *Bravely fought like women* and in *where there is will*. His works, that combined varied subjects, and issues, exhibit his extensive perception and understandings of the contemporary society. Like many modern English playwrights such as G.B. Shaw, Ibsen, and others Dattani also uses the theatre a major weapon to present the mirror of society before the audience and bitterly attacks

on contemporary men and women. *Dance like a man* is one of his plays that explicitly speaks about the social dogmas, gender problems, identity crisis and conflicts between modern and traditional ideas and altogether about patriarchal stigma in Indian society. Here he concerned mainly with an individual's incomplete ambitions, identity crisis and his crumble relationship with the family. As Dattani says that his plays largely focused on the theme of individual versus society. In this play, writer demonstrates that how a dreamy eye and ambitious man, Jairam, exploited by his father, wife and lastly by society. Mostly in his plays, Dattani broadly speaks about urban society rather than rural milieu. His interest towards urban class is expressed by him in the following lines:

I think one has to be true to one's own environment. Even if I attempted writing a play about the angst of rural Indian society, it wouldn't ring true; it would be an outsider's view.... I think there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society (the milieu I am a part of) and these automatically from the content of my work. (Dattani)

*Dance like a man* is a stirring two-act play that narrates the story of a traditional Gujarati family in which the protagonist found himself a scapegoat and feels in the whole play as a victim of society. He follows his dream in his life but the interpretation of external forces compelled him to step back and somewhere destroys his whole vision of life. The projection of an individual and its ambition to become a dancer correlates the character with of R.K. Narayan in his prominent work *The Guide*. Rosie in the novel wants to become a dancer but certainly, she was opposed by his husband. Similarly, in this play, Jairam's, the protagonist, goal to become a classical dancer remain unsuccessful and ruined by his father and somehow by his wife Ratana. The play revolves around the protagonist and reflects that how a high spirited man becomes a solitary artist and drunker. At the outset, we come to know briefly about the attitude and temperament of the characters that insofar reflects writer's profound understandings of characterization. His characters represent the urban middle-class people and their attitudes, emotions and however, he thoroughly examines the relationship between man and women, parents, and children that makes his writings remarkable. The deployment of characters fused with multiple skills is observed the backbone of his writings. Dattani claims:

Every time audiences (critics too) have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silence in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me. (Dattani)

The writer uses techniques such as flashback and stream of consciousness in this play that has taken back to the audience and readers into the past unconsciously and bring them back intermittently with the events of the play. The story particularly revolves around the two old dancers who remain unsatisfied with their desire to fulfill and later their daughter is used by them as an instrument to complete their dreams. Jairaj, the protagonist, belongs to a conservative family without mother where he confronts obstacles and burden of social stigma from the beginning in his own house. He wants to become a dancer but his father was not in favor of his choice because, for Amritlal, it was against male superiority and believed in society a degraded art that is designed only for women. Amritlal was a freedom fighter in his early life and greatly respected in his locality. He wants his son to choose the profession of businessmen that is regarded a great choice of men in society. Both father and son were ideologically different and their perception to see the world was also contrary and that becomes the cause of their conflicts. The perception of Amritlal towards classical dance was very conservative and narrow. He says:

The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares- what business did a man have learned such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learned such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic? (Dattani)

Nevertheless as a good observer of society Dattani minutely gives the description of class locale and dominant orthodox and ethical ethos. Amritlal consistent defiance of choosing dance as a profession and Jairaj single-minded views about his ambition presents the generation gap between families that become the serious disease and somehow deteriorated relationship between father and son. Indian society is confronting the challenge of patriarchal dogma from the very outset and yet it has been imbibed by people that Dattani believed should be erased and cured for a better society. It is said that every parents does better for their children and always tries to make their future perfect but somehow they should also concern about their children ambitions. Samuel Richardson speaks in his novel *Clarissa* that: Children must obey their parents but on the other side parents must not go against children's inclinations in something. Although like every father Amritlal was also a good father in something e.g. he brings dance instrument in his house because Jairaj was interested and also constructed the cricket pitch lawn for his son but when he comes to know about Jairaj obsession towards dance he strictly opposed it. Amritlal is a traditional, typical and old patriarchal father whose ideology was bounded with certain societal credentials and creed that he grabbed from his early generation. Although he preserved

liberal ideas and also played an important to wipe out the evil empire of British in his age and he defies his son choice and shackles his freedom by not allowing him to pursue his dream to become a dancer. When Jairaj is prevented by his father on the basis of his social stigma Jairaj reminds him his progressive ideas bitterly:

Where are your progressive ideas now? ... Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn't fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. Why you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us. (Dattani)

Amritlal was the man of Indian patriarchal conventions that was the inseparable part of society. In the play, everything in the house directed by him who is to be assumed the head of the family. He represents himself the well-wisher and head of the house and also desires from others to follow his rules and laws. He does not permit anyone in the house to follow their will if it goes against him. Amritlal counter response to defend himself against her son shows only his dual standard and hypocritical views. He says:

You are mistaken. Gaining independence was part of our goal ....As you know, our priority is to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to our society. (Dattani)

Despite this, he indicted Ratana, his daughter in law, the responsible person of his son's obsession towards dance. Ratana was very erudite in this art and she has also dreamt to become a popular dancer but after getting married to Jairam she is lost her identity and ambition to become a good dancer because of her Amritlal devilish perceptions. With Jairam, she was not allowed to follow her dreams and this causes despair and frustration in her life too and she also scolds Jairam and accused him of all the problems. She is also used as an instrument by Amritlal to deviate his son from such womanly ambition. He speaks to her that if she can convince his son not to follow dance art and destroy his obsession he will permit her to dance.

A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic.....help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up...help me and I'll never prevent you from dancing. (Dattani)

The constant argument in the play between father and son lastly impelled Jairaj to leave the house so that he can take breath freely and follows his dream by his own will. But outside the house, the circumstances do not suit him and again he stepped back to return to his father house. Jairaj returning to his house indicate his defeat and the surrender of his will and follow the customary law of his father. He has turned from an optimist, confident and determined person into a helpless, impotent drunk man who becomes habitual of whim and everyday scolded in his own house. Ratna also played a crucial role to shatter the dream of her husband Jairaj. She has been portrayed ambitious and materialistic women who don't care about other feelings and emotions to fulfill own desires. She gets married to Jairaj on the basis that he will not create obstacles and barrier in her career and to follow her dream to become a popular and recognized dancer. To pursue her ambition she was ready to do anything. When Amritlal tempts her by saying that she is free to dancer if she can diverge her husband from this art. She accepted it without showing any concern. She scolds and insults Jairam by calling him an ordinary dancer and Spineless boy:

If you dance alone, your mediocrity would be exposed? Yes ask yourself your true worth and you will get your answer. Yes, I did cut you off but then you deserved it! So don't come to me saying I destroyed you. I didn't have to. You did it all by yourself. And don't expect me to feel sorry for you because I'm too busy feeling sorry for myself. (Dattani)

In every line of this passage, we can easily found that how she humiliates her husband and accuse him responsible of her destruction. Jairam finds himself weak and alone creature who is crushed by own loved ones and only resistance comes from his side was his silence attitude. Ratna speeches exhibit her dominating attitude and behavior that insofar overshadows Jairam identity and make him a victim man. She calls Jairaj: ...not a man for her form the day when they came back to this house... In a scene, Jairam in a drunk state reached unconsciously over the stage where Ratana is getting ready to perform. After watching Jairaj in this condition she reproaches him bitterly and furiously like a stranger person: talks about what? Talk about how you insult me in front of other people? How you make me feel ashamed of you? How... how disgusting are you? Nevertheless, she avoids caring her own son and shows negligence towards the child and it causes his death because of opium overdose under the governance of ayah. The protagonist also betrayed outside of his house and this, it is reckoned, compelled him to step back to his father house. At Ratana's uncle house where they took shelter for some days after leaving his father house, Jairaj finds himself hostile and deceived. Ratana uncle demands from Jairaj that he should send his wife on his bad because he is their protector. Such unexpected

demands make him sad and he returned back again to a confined world and reluctantly accepted every law of his father. The decision of Jairam to returning back to his own house opposed by Ratana and he was furiously attacked by her:

Oh, how easily you fool yourself. You think you are covered, don't you? I'm not going to let you off so easily. You can't blame us for your state and get away with it. What do want? Ask yourself. Do you want freedom? You had it and you came back to your prison. (Dattani)

In the whole play, it seems that Jairaj finds himself cramped and surrounded by hooligans. He is dominated by his father as well as by his wife and perceives himself an artist without self-esteem. In a place we can observe his agony when he speaks to Ratana: Will find a musician makes me a man? Further, there are various instances in the play that shows the whole narrative obstacles and situations designed to dominate an artist life.

*Dance like a man* concerned peculiarly with the gender roles and patriarchal dogmas and broken family relationship. The play focused on an individual whose identity remains uncertain in the whole play. While he wants to fulfill his dreams but societal and cultural ethos quashed his ambitions and impelled him to follow the old and existed conventions. By portraying the character of Jairam writer express his concern over Indian society and deteriorated relationship between families. The persona such as Lata, Ratana, Amritlal preserves dominating ethos that has been used them to suppress others. Amritlal and Ratana proved Machiavelli figures in the life of Jairam. On one side to save his prestige and superiority of ideology Amritlal continually subjugated and demolished the dreams of his son while on the other Ratana doesn't show any kind of respect towards her husband and for her own sake she also suppressed and destroy a creative artist and changed him into a melancholy and lonely figure in the play. Such patriarchal instances could be seen in contemporary Indian families where everyman have to follow one person ideology silently without any resistance. Dattani objective behind the representation of such major issues in Indian society is only to awaken the people against all these prevailing filthiness and absurdities in our society. Jairam epitomizes liberal and modern values while Amritlal is the symbol of traditional values.

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