



GENDER IS PERFORMANCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI'S BRAVELY FOUGHT THE QUEEN AND DANCE LIKE A MAN

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Abstract: Sex is one's biological identity whereas gender is one's identity based upon social and cultural constructs. Gender is a performance-based identity which keeps on evolving, says Judith Butler. Women and men are victims of patriarchal conventions where they make people follow societal conventions. Mahesh Dattani and his plays have been remarkably known for presenting forth the issues of gender identity. Taking up his two plays *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man*, the paper will be assessing the performances of gender with laid down gender constructs seemingly standing out against the stereotypical mentality of the society. It is not the sexuality of a person that presents their gender, but performances that define gender. Gender is historically constructed and it is on that basis we term an individual as male and female. However, gender is not history-bound rather open to changes. Earlier, women were subjected to different kinds of violence in society but Dattani's plays stand out in this point proving women as performing to be stronger than ever, wherein strength and courage are only associated with masculinity. Similarly, dancing does not make a man weaker and it has nothing to do with his sexuality. The article will examine how men and women in Dattani's plays challenge the stereotyped gender norms and social conventions.

Index Terms: Gender, Gender Identity, Gender Performance, Sex, and Sexuality

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender and sex always go hand in hand, as society perceives. It is always about acting and performing gender and according to the sexuality, which one is born with. Nobody knows at the time of the birth of a child, what he/she is going to act like. It can turn out to be acting according to one's sexuality or acting outside one's defined gender. Men and women are two genders, and it is either you perform as a male, or you perform as a female. Performance can actively change over time, which means gender is continuously going through the process of evolution. The actions of a male can be different from that of female gender and there is always a room for outperforming your gender. Society ridicules such performances, which is unjust, because that is what makes up for your identity. One's sex can be one's biological identity, but performance defines one's gender. Performance is gender and gender is performance. Gender is your identity, but concerning performance and performance may vary from time to time. Gender can evolve because it is associated with performance, but sex remains intact and sex cannot influence gender.

2. DISCUSSION

According to Judith Butler, “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space, through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 179). Therefore, gender is an act, a performance and a repetition of that performance inhibits gender. If you abide by your gender then you are good enough for society, but once you outperform your gender, it can have punitive consequences.

There are many instances where we see women performing the roles of men, outside of their conventional roles and vice versa. The society has assigned the male to be the rule maker while the female to that of a conformist. If a person does not perform his /her gender, society call them with names and term them as “Other” or “unnatural”. The society does not approve an individual as natural unless their sex and gender match. The truth is both are two different approaches to one’s identity. Can we say that sexuality and gender are two different matrices in the same container? Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble (1990)* has been overt about sexuality and gender. They are two very different concepts emerging out of the same container. It is common to have this belief that sex and gender are the same until I uncovered concepts on gender and sexuality from the point of view of Butler. She is defiant about her arguments and remarks on gender and sex.

What is the basic difference between sex and gender as proposed by Judith Butler? Sex is a biological construct of a body, the reproductive organs, and a person's genitalia governing their anatomy. Gender is associated with identity, the social and the political constructs that make up a person's visible identity. Your biological anatomy might be that of a male but you act opposite. Gender does not your sexual acts rather it governs your performance in society. This is what society does not adhere. To live and exist in a society one has to perform one’s gender in sync with one’s sexuality.

Gender is associated with identity but it tends to change with performances. There are many instances where women who society considers docile and domestic have shown valour and courage on the battlefield. Does this make them an outcast? Is it right to call them names and demean them? If you are performing somewhat differently from your gender, especially men, you may be termed as transgender, cross-sexual, and even homosexual. Until and unless you perform your birth-assigned gender, society will not welcome neither people have good behaviour towards you. With the concept of gender have arisen many more concepts like gay, queer and lesbian that critics deconstruct now and then. Society rejects those performances and practice outside of their gender constructs. As already pointed out men are always expected to be the dominant one, where women grab the position of the one being dominated. It takes a lot of courage and defiance power to follow one’s instincts instead of conforming to the societal conventions about gender. Women, on the other hand, are never in a narrative where they are dominating the male and attaining the domineering position.

What happens when gender conflict arises within a society where sexuality is restricted to a mere biological identity and not the representation of the person? We are all aware of the issues of gender conflict arising in the plays of Indian playwrights. Dealing with themes on gender and identity is a recurring theme in the works of fiction. Mahesh Dattani, an Indian playwright deals with issues on gender identity, gender discrimination, gender equality and gender crisis, collectively his plays revolve in and around gender. What better than understanding the concept of gender through his narratives?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The concept of gender as performance and its representation has been possible through Content Analysis. I have taken two dramas namely *Dance Like a Man* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. As the name suggests, it is unlike a man to dance and for a woman to fight in a stereotypical society. The very title of the plays presents the conflict of gender that we are going to witness through this paper.

Dance is considered effeminate, something, which is not practised and should not be practised by a man, otherwise he is considered gay. Dance is not the only medium to decide the gender of a person. Dance is an art, which should be kept outside the shackles of gender identity; it is neither masculine nor feminine, any gender can practice it without determining one’s identity based on dance. Dance has always been a subject associated with femininity and considered to be taken up only by women. It is preconceived to be taken up by prostitutes and the marginalized women for survival, not quite welcomed by the patriarchal society.

In the drama, *Dance Like a Man* which is in two acts, Dattani presents the issue of gender identity with a tint of patriarchy into it. Patriarchy and power go hand in hand; similarly, the play indicates power in the hands of patriarchy. Amrital Parekh, the head of the family is a father of Jairaj and father-in-law of Ratna. He is rather conservative and stern when it comes to his name and fame. Although he is a freedom fighter, who helped free Indians we find him manipulating the lives of his children. His son Jairaj wants to become a Bharatnatyam dancer but his father considers dancing made for women and not for men. He continuously schools his son on the idea of “being a man” showing disgust with his son’s idea of dancing. Amrital is seen deeply stuck with the idea of dancing like a man and hence the title *Dance Like a Man*. One can see the sternness with performing one’s gender in this play, which otherwise is not welcomed by society.

The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* is another play on the issue of gender identity in three acts. As the name suggests, it is again unlike a woman to fight and appear on the fronts. Women can perform on fronts and even inside households. Many people may not welcome the idea as our society being a male-centred one cannot bear women overpowering them. Women may be weak biologically, but they can defend themselves and outshine their identity through their performance. The play *Bravely Fought the Queen* has several instances where the female characters raise their voice against dominance and fights back.

There are other issues as well apart from gender identity, its homosexuality, discrimination against women, and female subjugation but that is not what this paper is all about. It is all about the performance of gender. There are two female characters, one is Dolly and the other one is Alka, part of the same family and they both are married off to Jiten and Nitin respectively. In this play, the wives suffer the pangs of domestic violence and subjugation at the hands of their respective husbands. In the play, their husbands suppress both the women until they both raise their voice and fight against like a queen for their rights. As this patriarchal system believes that women as a being are meant only to be looked down upon, played upon and dominated upon, whereas men are meant to authorize their power over them. Times have changed and tables have turned because it is no longer acceptable. Society can be the lawmaker and weave down rules and conventions for men and women but it has always to be in the hands of individuals to perform their gender as they please, even if it is outside the societal norms. This does not make a man less of a man and a woman, less of a woman.

4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

In the beginning section of the book *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler, gender has been given many different detours. “Gender intersects with race, class, ethnic, sexual, regional modalities of constituted identities. It becomes difficult to separate gender from political and cultural intersections” (Butler, 6).

Gender is indeed associated with performance and identity but it is always the political and cultural constructs that play an active role in shaping the gender identity of a person. In the above two dramas analyzed from the point of view of gender performance, we see how the characters Jairaj in *Dance Like a Man* and Alka and Dolly in *Bravely Fought the Queen* outperform their gender. What society expects from a woman is to be meek and weak and carry on with domestic work, this is what her performance has to be as her gender states but in the drama *Bravely Fought the Queen*, we see the female characters outperforming their gender and not abiding by societal norms. Is there any kind of punishment that needs to be meted out to them for outperforming their gender? It does not always have to be the society that must govern the lives of individuals but it should be one’s own choice to perform whichever gender they choose to without suffering the attacks of *being different*.

In the book, *Gender Trouble*, Simon de Beauvoir says, “No one is born with gender- gender is always acquired” (Butler, 142). This justifies that gender is not what one is born with but gender is always constituted over time. One is born with predefined sex but gender is about what they practice. Gender is acquired and performed and not something, one is born with. Sex and gender are two different nodes of the same plant but both differ in their outlook. When gender becomes an act, then outperforming gender should not make a person feel an outcast rather it must be welcomed and appreciated by society.

Working and performing outside the constructs of one’s assigned gender does not make abnormal or unnatural. Jairaj in the drama *Dance Like a Man* was told that dancing makes a man effeminate and that it is made for girls and prostitutes. How can dancing make Jairaj less of a man and fighting like a queen make the two women more of a man? One’s sex should never rule a person’s identity but their performance should make up their identity. Right from the birth of a child, even before the child knows to talk and walk, their sex rules their identity. It becomes the child’s gender but gender is not just about identity. Gender is about performing and that should shape the identity of an individual. Sex is unchangeable but gender can always be changed. It changes over time with repeated acts and performances and that is what defines an individual’s identity. How can social and

cultural constructs decide that it is mandatory to perform your sex above your own choice? However, sex is not about performance, it is the gender that one can perform. Society and politics can only influence gender performance at times but it can never influence a person's individuality.

The characters that I have taken into account to present my argument on gender performance is instated where the characters are seen doing gender rather than their "sex" which does not make their sexuality vulnerable. Performing outside your gender still protects and reserves your sexuality, wherein your sexuality does not influence your performance. Sex is only an aspect of personal identity but it is the performance of the person that makes for a whole of a person. It is evident how the women who are termed as the biologically weaker section has certainly proved their potential in the drama *Bravely Fought the Queen* with their performance. On the other hand, where men are categorized as strong both physically and sexually, Jairaj stands out from this matrix and outperforms his gender by taking up dance as his profession which patriarchy quite looks down upon. If a man doesn't perform his or her gender which is also his sexual identity, they're called gay, the colloquial term being *hijra*, a derogative term assigned to someone taking up dance or even dressing up as a woman. Performance is an autonomous entity outside the shackles of biological identity. You can be sexually male and still your performance can evolve your gender identity.

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