

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man*: A Study of Gender Discrimination

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most remarkable dramatists of Indian English Literature. He is the true observer of society and he writes only what he sees and not what should be. He deals with the burning issues of the society in his plays. His plays are being staged, published, and translated in India and abroad. He is gifted with versatile personality. He is a writer, director, actor, dancer, and teacher. He has been awarded with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to Indian Drama in 1998. His most distinguish quality is wide range of themes that he deals with his writing. His plays have the universal appeal. He often deals with subjects that are considered as taboos and are under carpet. In many of his plays, he deals with various issues like gender discrimination, homosexuality, communalism, and child sexual abuse. The best thing is that he never advocates any change and never convey a message. He wants to evoke a spirit of self-analysis among the audience through his plays. Gender discrimination is one of the major themes depicted by writes in literature. It is the most burning issue in Indian society. Dattani has also dealt with this issue in his play Dance Like a Man. Thus, the present paper discusses the issue of gender discrimination in the play Dance Like a Man.

Keywords: gender discrimination, exploitation, patriarchal, taboo, social stigma

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Introduction:

Drama is an imitation of life. It presents the true picture society on stage. Mahesh Dattani, as a dramatist, shows the mirror of society and not the way to eliminates the evils of society. He accepts in an interview by Anita Nair: "Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre" (4). He presents the real-life conditions related to urban cosmopolitan and middle class Indians. What Dattani observes can well be seen in almost all his chief plays where he has tried his best to assimilate both matter and manner. He presents the theme like gender issue, homosexuality, the new dynamics of man –woman relationship, and life of urban middle-class people.

Gender discrimination refers the unequal treatment of society on basis of gender. It is the situation in which people are treated differently simply because they are male or female. The Oxford Dictionary defines discrimination as "the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the ground of race, age, or sex." It is often considered that men are superior to women and it is also evident that most of the time we talk about the discrimination of women not men. But sometime men are also discriminated in the society. It is important to talk about the discrimination of men also. Dattani's play talked about the same issue. Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* moves around Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj Parekh, RatnaPareskh, Lata Parekh and Vishwas.

Amritlal Parekh, the head of the family, is a freedom fighter and social worker. His son Jairaj and daughter-in-law, Ratna, are Bharatnatyam dancers and want to pursue their career as a dancer. On the other hand, for Amritlal dance is a profession of prostitute. He gets ready to give Ratna permission to make dance as her career, if she pulls Jairaj out of his passion to be a dancer. Amritlal comments after knowing that Jairaj will wear the costume of a lady, he criticizes: “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic” (CP 45). The line shows the notions of the society that demands man should behave like a man. It shows that man cannot even expect to wear a dress of a woman.

When the play opens Jairaj and Ratna are seems to be worried about Lata’s performance as her mridangam artist is injured badly. Dattani has used flashback technique to reveal the pitiable condition of Jairaj. When the play pens, he was at 62 years of his age. When Jairaj was a child, his father allowed him to practice dance by thinking that it is his hobby but when Jairaj tells him that he wants to pursue his career in it, Amritlal regrets by saying that: “I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an ...obsession” (CP 414-415). He wants his son to “grow up” and says “I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you” (CP 415). He hates Jairaj’s passion for dance and even his guru ji. He does not like his long hair and questions the gender of guru ji by saying that only “womanly men” grow their hair long. On Jairaj’s asking to allow Devdasis to practice in his home, Amritlal opines that Devdasis are selling off their bodies in the name of tradition. This dance form has a social stigma attached to it. Dattani, in an interview with RanuUniyal, says:

[I]t is a dance form of the Devdasis, it’s prostitute dance and people from respectable families did not perform or practice that dance form. It is doubly difficult for man, you know, what business does a man have learning a prostitute’s dance. So it brings about gender roles, what is expected of genders as well. And also the tensions between the couple and how they solve, how they felt they used their relationship to develop their careers, dances and how they reconcile to the fact that the time wasn’t right for them” (Dattani 182)

Jairaj was full of passion about dance. As S. Pandya observes for him dance id “defiance, revolt, negatin of a particular way of life that was decided by his father, Amritlal” (Pandya 177). Dance is his life so he decided to revolt against his father and leaves home but return after two days because Ratna’s uncle had bad eyes on her. When they returned, Amritlal makes them clear the terms and conditions to stay. Ratna married Jairaj not because she has high opinion about him but because Jairaj will allow him to dance after marriage. Amritlal knows it and takes advantage of this secret and allows her to dance only if she convinces with him in preventing Jairaj to perform dance. And Ratna did the same. She arranges the weak light for the performance and persuades him to perform his weakest point. In this way Jairaj’s popularity decreased day by day. He was manipulated by his father and his wife. He starts drinking to forget his pain. He bursts out and says:

You destroy me first, then give the impression that there wasn’t much to destroy in the first palce, then blames it all on my father, then suggest i make myself useful by being your stage prop, then use the words’reget’ and expect me to shrug my shulders, resign myself and believes that my calling in life is to serve you” (CP 444).

In this way, Jairaj is discriminated, subjugated not only by his father but also by his wife Ratna.

Methods

The research paper demands thematic analysis. I have read the whole play line by line and I have also done critical study of this play. So, I have done thematic study and finds my results on the basis of this method.

Discussion

Mahesh Dattani “unravels the complicated dynamics of human relationships as his character struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, culture constrains of gender and repressed desire” (Kanakaraj 209). The play conceptualizes the gender issue. It reveals the social mindset that defines the role of male and female. There is a immense social pressure on men to pursue his career in the field of doctor and engineer, when he takes up dance as his career. Dattani highlights through this play the two major aspects; the general inhibitions to a man taking dance as a career and that too a dance which is usually and traditionally performed by women.

Dance is a profession that is considered to be related with woman not man. It is very hard for the parents of Indian society to allow their son to pursue his career in dance, especially boys. Amritlal allows his son to practice dance thinking it as his hobby but he opposes his son when the same hobby becomes his obsession. The title itself says ‘Dance Like a Man’ means to act like a man. It means to adopt the career which suits man. According to Amritlal Bharatanatyam is “the craft of a prostitute to show off her wares” (CP 406) and who practices this form, cannot be a ‘real’ man. He does not like guru ji simply because he grows her hair long. And according to him only ‘womanly’ men grow their hair long. This shows the gender stereotype that if a man dance and walk like woman, his gender is suspected. It is this society who makes the rules for man and women to behave according to their gender and if anyone tried to break this rule his gender is suspected.

It is very ridiculous that Amritlal is a social reformer and his duty is to remove the evils aspects from society. But he did not allow Devdasis to enter into his room by saying that “I will not have our temples turned into brothels” (CP 416). When he discovers that Jairaj wants to learn ‘kuchipudi’ and for this, guru ji advices him to grow his hair long, Amritlalbrusts into anger and says; “If he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head andthrow him out on the road” (CP 418) This shows how brutally Amritlal controls the life of Jairaj. For him growing hair long is the work or woman not man. Amritlal expects form Jairaj that he should follow some norms of society and like a patriarchal mindset, he also wants his son to earn money and feed his family as it is his duty, especially ‘manly duty’. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri comments: “The underlying fear is obvious that dance would make him ‘womanly’ – an effeminate man- the suggesting of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned” (Chaudhuri 68).

Dattani admits: “I wrote this play when I was learning Bharatanatyam 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” (5). He raises few questions about man’s sexuality he reveals the problem of gender discrimination and patriarchal code that is prevailed in our society. He presents these issues not as a reformer but as an observer. In the last line of the play, Jairaj says, “we were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God” (CP 447).

Conclusion

To sum up, the play *Dance Like a Man*, illustrates the truths about the Indian society and nation. It raises a question before audience- can a man adopt the classical Bharatanatyam, a dance associated t Devdasis, as a profession? It also questions on society double standard attitude who talks about the discrimination of woman but not man. Society wants woman to come forward and fight for her rights. But it never talk about the discrimination, and subjugation face by man. In Indian society, every activity is gendered. Through this play, Dattani has tried to expresses the voice of the discriminated section of the society whose identity is hidden in the cover of myths and social prejudice.

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