

A New beginning: A Study on Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man

Pilcy Peter

Department Of English, St. Joseph's College, Trichy – 620002, India

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani has always been considered as a playwright with a distinctive approach

Towards life. His plays alter with the themes of patriarchy, gender discrimination, homosexuality and makes him the spokesperson of all the marginalized people who are forced to lead a horrible and degraded life – not merely for shocking the public but with a specific purpose of arousing awareness about these invisible problems mainly the repressed desires, innermost emotions, loneliness, feelings of different groups, etc. This paper attempts to bring out the trauma of a professional dancer in the play *Dance Like a Man* written by Mahesh Dattani. It creates awareness of eternal conflicts of one's desire and the courage to break the barriers of voiceless life. The repressed life of Jairaj and Ratna transfigures into a life of freedom. The play takes the ground that the vulnerability of an individual against the enforcement of society and the success of art in life through the union of mind and heart.

KEYWORDS: Gender discrimination, patriarchy, jealousy, individual freedom

Presenting the old age image of patriarchy, Amritlal is a despotic father who does not try to understand the emotions, the aspirations and the problems of his son. He apparently tries to control and assess Jairaj according to certain absolute standards of masculine behaviour. The son decides on a career as a dancer. But the father has a prejudiced view of life and looks at the art of dance with a jaundiced eye. The son's identity depends upon creating a boundary between himself and his father, on distinguishing himself outside the axial lines which have defined the father's world, while the father is hard bent to impress him with his ideals and wants him to perpetuate those ideals. Amritlal speaks "I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I did not realize this interest of yours would turn into an.... Obsession" (415).

Through the depiction of the conflict between Amritlal and Jairaj and its disastrous effects on Jairaj's professional as well as marital life, the dramatist exposes the hollowness of the traditional patriarchal authority with its unwritten rules and thus express his protest against such stubborn, narrow-minded male parents in Indian families. Amritlal's latent fear is that dance would make his son 'womanly' – an effeminate man and that would ultimately blemish his reputation in the society. If any individual chooses a profession contrary to his or her ascribed gender role, social confrontation is the next step that he/she encounters.

It is believed that the celestial nymph Urvashi came to earth as a devadasi to train the temple dancers in their dance. These dancers were seen as servants of the gods and were symbolically married to the deity of the shrine. Their first dance mostly took place in the temple in front of a king who rewarded them for their performance. However, despite the enormous variety in the life experience of devadasis, some of whom married, and some of whom single-mindedly pursued their art. C.S. Lakshmi points out, "Any system that is dependent on patronage for survival will assume some form of manipulation, coercion, force or exploitation". Opposing to Amritlal's priority to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices Jairaj reminds that "if you really wanted any kind of reform in our society, you would let them practice their art" (416). Here we see a son who stands for the individual choice though it doesn't last forever.

Throughout the play, Jairaj and his wife are found commenting upon each other's weakness and every discussion between them quickly deteriorates into an angry argument. In the first phase of their marital life, the period before they leave their house, everything goes on smoothly. They show consideration for each other's wishes and feelings and seem to be supportive to each other. To take an example, in the first act of the play, Ratna is able to oppose the views of her father-in-law on the issue of her weekly visits to Chennai Amma, a devadasi, only because she knows in her heart of hearts that her husband has no objection to this step of hers, as she explains to her father-in-law: "My husband knows where I go and I have his permission" (420). But the relationship between the husband and the wife undergoes a drastic change just after Jayraj's return to his ancestral abode. Ratna loses her faith in Jairaj and she is no longer proud of her husband, as she tells him: "You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty eight hours.... You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house" (402). He blames Ratna for his failure as a dancer and becomes jealous of her as she has earned more name and fame than he has. He says about taking his self-esteem: "You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private (440).

Further, he considers his wife to be the only person responsible for the fate of their son, Shankar. Lata, their daughter has a great talent who is deeply affected by the thwarted ambitions and frustrations of her parents' youth and expectations they place upon her. Bharatanatyam dance is fading under modern India's withering glare. But through their daughter, the aging couple struggle to keep the art form alive. From their talk, it is evident that the relationship between Lata and her future husband is characterized by mutual understanding, respect, support and thus love, which we do not find in Ratna - Jairaj relationship. Here there is a trouble because Jairaj wants to dance and wants Ratna to be a mother first. Ratna wants Jairaj to be the provider and be a man. The general inhibitions to a man taking dance as a career and that too a dance which is usually and traditionally performed by women: the relationship between a husband and wife contrary to all public impression of being happy and well suited couple, grown apart and have done enough harm to each other; how their own thwarted ambitions and frustrations affect their own daughter who is in love with a man who has nothing to do with the sense of art scene at all. Ratna is an ambitious lady. Dance is her only dream and aim of life. She unravels before us as a woman who has been used her husband to further her own vastly superior

dancing talents. Ratna is a woman of many devices. She is a partly devoted wife, loving mother and defiant daughter-in-law. How vainglory, self-centeredness, and opportunism of the members of a family can turn out to be a menace to other members of the family and their interpersonal ties has been conveyed successfully through the relationship between these two. The play also captures the tension arising in a family when the woman of the house is more successful than the man.

Dance is a movement – medium potent with meaning and energy, has traveled across centuries ensuing histories of people and lands. If you paint or write poetry or dance or practice any other art for the joy it gives, it may make you a nobler human being. But if you do it just to earn honour and glory of the mindless multitudes, it will degrade you as a human beings. Dance occupies a special place in the world of fine arts and in the human society. It possesses a multidimensional aspect. It has got spiritual, moral, social and intellectual values. It connects man to God and God to man, also man to man. It facilitates joy, relaxation, unity, learning, healing mental and physical fitness and awareness of one's own various emotions. Sometimes the people you imagine to be the least capable of doing something are the ones who end up doing things no one imagined. This is a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women. The protagonist, Jairaj who fights against the prevailing social values to win respect, wishes that the cultural art of Bharatanatyam may perpetuate and the man who may dance a woman's dance form, does so like a man, Dance in one's own style, emulating neither Ratna's feminine and graceful style of dancing nor Amritlal's time nor the tune of his society but performs it in one's own way like a man. To be able to revise, protect and continue any art form, the artists should rise above human weaknesses. Art can only be protected in the hands of such artists.

Dancing and dressing up like women would make a scar on men's identity. In *Dance Like a Man*, for instance, he critiques the manner in which patriarchy lays down rigid codes of behaviour for men and women, seeking to contain them in predefined molds, compartmentalizing notions of masculinity and femininity, allowing for no union of the two into one harmonious whole. The play problematizes the concept of manhood, revealing its tragic implications for both men and women when men transgress social norms by crossing over into, what is perceived as predominantly a woman's world. The main protagonist withers under the weight of the emotional burden of his identity, authority of his father and the domination of his wife. Jairaj's enthusiasm for life and dance dies with Sankar. Conventionally, masculinity is based on the male's greater physical and mental strengths and such elements are used as yardsticks to judge the male. Jairaj's character stands in opposition to the stereotypical male who has to deliver as the breadwinner and saviour of the family. Being the guardian of the patriarchal society, Amritlal expects Jairaj to play the role of a man, to dance like a man. To him to dance like a man means to act like a man; to act like a man means to behave like a man

Joshipura says "Lovers of freedom should not impose their views upon others as long as the practices of others are not positively adverse to society. Instead of reacting to life without awareness, choose to respond with care and wisdom. The play ends on an optimistic note where the young generation does not have to be answerable to the older one. In death, Jayaraj and Ratna are able to forget and forgive the petty rivalries that made up their lives. As they embrace and dance together, they achieve the complete

harmony of body and spirit, dancer and dance that is so much an art of the traditional dance form.

References

Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.

Jung Annes. *Unveiling India*: New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1985. Print.

Kuthari, Chaudhari Asha. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005. Print.

Sandel, Michel. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.

Sha, Shakar Guari. *Current Indian Perspectives in Indian English Literature*: New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006. Print.

Walder, Dennis. *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*. London: Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*. England: Penguin Books, 1964. Print