

‘Being a Man’: A Critical Study of Masculinity in Mahesh Dattani’s ‘Dance Like a Man’

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Abstract

Drama is one of the oldest forms of art with its roots in religious rites and social ceremonies making it the perfect site for investigation. Dattani’s play ‘Dance like a Man’ enumerates the story of the Parekh family especially focusing on three men, namely Amritlal, Jairaj and his to be son-in-law Viswas. Through these characters Dattani brings out what it means to be a man and the dynamics of power and ideology underlying it. In the present day, studies on masculinity are equally as important as feminist studies. In my paper, I will attempt to categorize and illustrate how each of these three characters in the play embodies a different type of masculinity as enumerated by Connell (1995) and how these characters simultaneously become cultural prototypes and stereotypes that serve as the image that other men in society are expected either to follow or stay away from.

Keywords: Masculinity, Drama, Hegemony, Patriarchy

Any piece of literature written by an author is meant to charm or edify the reader, which is completely done by the language of the text. It is through the use of language that tales are spun, unforgettable characters created, a milieu of emotions evoked and the reader is transported into a world of alternate reality which is arrested in time. In this world the reader completely surrenders to the universe created by the author through words. Be it in the rhyme of the poet or the dialogue of the playwright or the prose of the novelist, language forms the foundation for all literary ideas. Therefore, for an in-depth understanding of a text it is imperative to also study the language of literature. Stylisticians in the last few decades have discussed and analysed literary writings such as novels, poems and plays (Raymond Chapman 1973, Ronald Carter 1982, David Birch 1991, Paul Simpson 2004.). However, drama received very little attention in contrast to fiction and poetry from stylisticians and literary critics. But, this trend has undergone a change in the past few decades because of the inception of tools and theories from discourse analysis and pragmatics (Short 1998) and a substantial majority of linguists, as referenced above, have spent time working on analyzing drama. The term "drama" encompasses both social and theatrical implications. One of the ways of conceptualising drama is, literary fiction written by writers to amuse and evoke emotions from their audience. Conversely it can also refer to the 'drama' of life the instinctual social changes observed in public settings such as petty debates, factionalism

conflict, judicial investigation, and tragedies (Cooper 1955). Drama tends to show different versions of itself and here masculinity is one of them.

Men tend to be masculine because there is an unequal division of labor in the present social systems where men and women perform different roles. The social positioning of men is what is understood as masculinity. The definitive characteristic of masculinity is manliness or the possession of manhood. The concept of masculinity is completely created by society. The notion of masculinity varies culturally and socially. Different regions have different definitions of masculinity. According to Kimmel Michael (1995) masculinity “is not a constant, universal essence, but rather an ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors that vary dramatically. It is an idea which is created, modified and redefined over time and across different cultures. Masculinity is all about authority, domination, physical toughness and heterosexuality”. Masculinity tends to manifest itself through some preset notions and norms which are associated with power. Mass media is one of the prominent transmitter and recipient of masculine identities both locally and globally. It also carries the power to influence the thoughts and beliefs that has overpowered and inherited by the society since a very long period of time. Masculinity and femininity are two binary concepts having qualities which are opposite to each other. Masculinity is more practiced than defined. Scholar like Connell (1995), opine that it is a prerequisite of masculinity to avoid and repudiate all behaviors usually associated with femininity that is, a man must constantly engage in the incessant surveillance of his masculine performance to ensure the maintenance of a benchmark of sufficient socially prescribed and accepted masculinity. It is to be noted that the concept of masculinity in India is not inflexible or rigid. It is dependent on various factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, caste, linguistic features and the way the society and men in it socialize. The primary reason for the adverse effects of masculinity on society is because of gender discrimination. The desire to exercise one’s power and authoritativeness over a person, group, society, especially the female population gives rise to masculinity. But the concept of masculinity has vast connotations other than just showing power over a particular person or on society. Due to the fact that masculinity is informed by both external aspects that relate to women and internal aspects that relate to other men, it is referred to as masculinities instead of in singular terms. Whitehead and Barrett (2001) have stated that “masculinities are those behaviors, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with men and thus culturally defined as not feminine”.

Men are defined by the socially constructed and substantiated social aspects of being "male". It conveyed through certain features like social interaction, way of speaking, behaviours and assigning of works considered acceptable for both gender. These are put into the schema of the child from their childhood by the surroundings they grow up in, parents, society, and family members and so on. It is further reinforced by the media through the promotion of gender stereotypes and masculine beliefs and ideas. The entire idea is to exhibit authority and exercise control over the other gender that are considered historically weaker and hence dominate them. It is vital to repeatedly reinforce the suppositious and fragile nature of gender identities to maintain masculinity traits. The traits of masculinity are imposed rather than conveyed. Men over time feel that masculinity is normative and the traits become evident with their biological development.

To know about gender and masculinity it is important to grasp the understanding of sociological, psychological and hierarchal aspects that manifest the notion of masculinity. Men tend to have feeling of power, authoritativeness, control and superiority complex within them irrespective of their actual possession of it. Even institutions like colleges, university, schools, religion, police, and sports have induced violence, power, hierarchy and domination as the philosophy and rule. The concept of masculinity is common across all over the world. According to research and studies it has come into light that all men of all age across world from rural to urban have almost same traits of being rigid and dominant to certain extent. The educated man seems to show more equitable and flexible masculine traits. The traits of masculinity seem to change with change in the dynamic and become different with respect to society, culture, age, economy and thus it is considered as multi-faceted. Women and men are subjected to it, and it directly corresponds to domestic violence, and male children are preferred at birth.

Connell (1995) hierarchically categorizes masculinity in four types:

1. **Hegemonic Masculinity:** The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first proposed by Kessler (1982), while working on a field study on social inequality in school of Australia. It caught attention of people and researcher as discussion on men's bodies and masculinities was having intellectual conversation (Connell 1983). The notion of hegemonic masculinity implies that women are patronized and granted power over other men. It is normative in nature and practiced by minority of men. For men practicing hegemony is matter of pride and most of them enact it to subordinate women. Implication of hegemonic is not violence but exercising power and domination which is developed from culture, persuasion and institution. This form of masculinity is dominant and cherished culturally the most. It is heterosexual, curbs emotions and physically strong.
2. **Complicit Masculinity:** as the name suggests means the kind of masculinity that complies that is to say that though he does not himself perform hegemonic masculinity yet is not opposed to it either. However, it needs to be mentioned that he is an admirer of the qualities illustrated by hegemonic masculinity.
3. **Marginalized masculinity:** takes into its fold the outliers of hegemonic masculinity owing to some aberrations like class, ethnicity, race, disability etc. but still subscribe to the values perpetrated by it.
4. **Subordinate Masculinity:** in contrast to the all the aforementioned forms of masculinity this type exhibits features which are completely antagonistic to hegemonic masculinity. These men could be seen as slightly or mostly effeminate. In other words, if the legitimacy of patriarchy was brought to question then the configuration of gender practice embodied by subordinate masculinity would be the answer which designates a dominant position to men and a subordinating position to women.

Mahesh Dattani is a well known writer and playwright. He is the first person to be awarded with Sahitya Akademi Award for playwright in English. Some of his most popular plays are *Final Solution*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara*, *Thirty Days in September*. Renowned directors like Lillete Dubey, Arvind Gaur and Alyque Padamsee have directed his material. Dattani is often referred to as avante garde feminist who

does not only focus on the plight and suffering of women but also depicts men and masculinity with nuance and complexity within Indian society.

The play 'Dance Like a Man' revolves around the story of three generations and their internal conflict, struggle, sacrifices, personal ambitions, compromises. The characters in the play are trying to sort their life problems which mostly focus on dance. The story is mainly about Jairaj and Ratna, who have past their prime as Bharat Natyam dancer but it is contrasted with their daughter Lata who is about to start her carrier establishing herself as dancer. The success of daughter creates conflict, jealousy and tension in the family and thus the audience comes to know about the dark secret the parents had. The suppressed emotion brings so much of drama in the drama raising conflicts between the parents. The characters were forced to bring out their truth and the back story behind it. But the mode of expressing those truth and memories in play is comic instead of tragic. There are five characters who appear on stage: Jairaj and Ratna, parents of Lata who is betrothed to Viswas and the patriarch Amritlal, Jairaj's father. There are a few other minor yet significant characters that move the plot ahead and add to the fabric of the play's universe. Operating within the milieu of the late 80s the story forms a bridge between the past and the present with the help of the titular character who engender conversations dealing with desires and dreams and sacrifices which are viewed through the lens of patriarchy and gender.

Viswas is betrothed to Lata and the play opens with him accompanying her to meet her parents. Within the first few turns of the opening scene Viswas gives away his true colours which are not in line with his projected image of a progressive man. He is both shocked and disapproving of Lata's parents for going out on an emergency despite having an appointment with him. He passes a sarcastic comment on Lata's parents having to attend an emergency, mocking their profession saying, 'Dancers stay at home till it's show time' (Act I, page no 448). He also demeans their profession in comparison to doctors and firemen. He also expresses his expectation of his future in laws to wait on him hand and foot. He further goes on to cement his patriarchal mindset by expressing his views about marriage and calling Lata a burden to her parents that they want 'to get rid of'. According to him marriage is a transaction where dowry is discussed in subtle apparent terms. His opinion of women is not too great either as he relegates the mothers to talking about only 'kanchipuram saris'. In one instance he makes a joke of selling his wife to a sheikh treating her like a commodity over which he has ownership. He questions and criticizes her parents and implies them to be inefficient and avarice. Despite his progressive exterior he inherently does believe in the concept of caste. He says that he does not mind marrying outside of his caste but also does not fail to mention his father's displeasure about it. He also continues to say 'through' his father that a woman's primary job post marriage is to only pop out children and take care of them. He even makes a joke out of the sensitive topic of adoption saying that they could treat an adopted child as a prototype for practice before having their own biological children comparing the whole thing to a 'dress rehearsal'. Beneath his liberal and modern thought process lie the seeds of racist and ethnic bias which are made clear when he talks about his presumptions about South Indians and Gujaratis respectively. In saying that his father would rather have him marry a 'Southie' than a 'daughter in law who doesn't make tea' makes clear the low regards family has for South Indians. His shock at coming to

know that Lata's father is Gujarati also does not go unnoticed. He also mocks Lata's father for being dominated by his wife and his quick to disassociate himself from him when Lata compares their pliability. He is quick to assume that Lata's father dancing would become topic of contention between her 'social reformer' grandfather. Later by making his mother his mouthpiece Viswas warns Lata about the tests of domesticity and modesty that she is going to put her through and he expects her to pass. He further extensively mocks Lata's father by calling him a 'weirdo' and not considering dance a real profession siding with her grandfather and believing that his ire was just and deserved. Despite his initial agreement and self confessed lack of knowledge about the vocation he expresses his displeasure after attending a performance which he felt was 'too erotic' in nature.

In contrast to Viswas, Jairaj Lata's father is portrayal of counter hegemonic masculinity. He was quite a progressive man who married against his caste, a girl who belonged to the 'devdasi' background and took dance as his career. Despite being told by his father to not grow his hair long as his 'effeminate guru', he chose to grow his hair as it would enhance his look as a dance performer. Jairaj is fine with cross dressing and performing his art, which shows that he did not discriminate the art form on the basis of gender. He is often taunted by his wife, Ratna, for coming back to his father's place from her lecherous uncle's place. Ironically he is humiliated by Ratna for taking her place at an army function dressed like a woman, when the audience seemed unruly and scared her. The audience however were even more receptive of him when they found out that he was a cross dressed man instead of the woman they had signed to perform. Even during the peak of his career Jairaj prioritized matrimonial allegiance over personal glory and also put up the conditional clause for prospective clients that he would only perform if his wife would accompany him. Contrarily, these sentiments were not reciprocated by Ratna. She even went a step further and colluded with her father in law, Amritlal, to keep him out of dancing and to flourish in her career. Ratna even made him dance on his 'weakest items' and arranged the lighting of the program such that Jairaj almost danced in her shadows. She also used to mock him in front of the audience by calling him 'names' and also called him 'disgusting'. Forced out of his much loved career Jairaj turned bitter to the extent where he almost took pleasure in Lata's pain of losing their child. He even to an extent blamed her for it and unlike a good husband did nothing to soften the blow and let her feel the misery of the loss in its entirety. Frustrated, guilt ridden and trauma of losing his only child Jairaj took to drinking to the point of addiction. In spite of his initial bravado of defying norms and living his life in his own terms, he does eventually have to succumb to the patriarchal pressure by his wife and father and reluctantly joined the fold of hegemonic masculinity. On being prohibited from dancing by his father Jairaj abandons his father's house and all the privileges that come with it. In the entire play Jairaj is constantly humiliated and emasculated by both his wife and father. By being the foil to both Amritlal his father and Viswas, Jairaj becomes the Other. In contrast to his more practical father, Jairaj is an idealist. In a Utopian world Jairaj would be the ideal man: unafraid to express himself and not shackled by patriarchy.

Amritlal Parekh, essentially the play's patriarch and the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, Jairaj's father is a well educated Hindu freedom fighter, who later becomes a social reformer. However, staying true to the shrewd 'Gujju' businessman stereotype he bought the evacuated bungalows left behind by the British and sold them to the nouveau rich Indians who

wanted their residences to match their new found place within the ruling class. True to his opportunist character Amritlal ascends in society from being upward middle class bourgeois to upper class bourgeois, in the Marxist tradition. On the other hand, he also displays his traditional, secular, liberal and slightly progressive mindset by wearing a shawl and discarding formal British attire, by letting his son Jairaj pursue Bharat Natyam (Indian dance form) as an hobby, by allowing him to marry out of his “community” that too a “devdasi” as a performative action for his reformer persona which also simultaneously automatically implies his superior position and clearly demarcates the us vs. them divide. On the outside, Jairaj seems an impressive mix: an embodiment of self-made success, strong-willed and the kind of person that is the desirable prototype for the Indian society. But one cannot ignore or overlook his inherent privilege of gender, religion, class, geography and caste. Amritlal though not an overt villain has tendencies that are villainous. Though he did allow his son to take up dance as hobby, neither did he like his ‘effeminate’ guru nor his rehearsal in his home. He is clearly disdainful towards musicians and considers them beneath him. He had only allowed his son to dance thinking of it as only a passing ‘fancy’ hoping he would get over it sooner or later all the while expecting him to have more masculine pursuits like cricket. He sees his son as someone whose privilege disallows him to grow up, not manly enough for his liking and financially inept. He even places the onus of his son’s ‘obsession’ with dancing on his wife. Though he did allow his son to marry out of his community to appear progressive, he constantly keeps reiterating his wife’s inferior social status and regrets the decision privately. He even looks down on her maiden ‘devdasi community’ and thinks of them as women practicing ‘open prostitution’. At one point his son even points out that his participation in the freedom struggle was also performative. His real motive was to gain power and he even accuses him of being equally ‘conservative and prudish’ as the British. While discussing his ‘guru’ he even points out his ‘long hair’ and claims that ‘normal men don’t keep their hair so long’, insinuating that he is perhaps homosexual or gay. He threatens to physically shave his son head and throw him on the street if Jairaj ‘grows his hair even an inch longer’. In his conversation with Ratna he wields his economic authority over the couple and dictates her certain aspects of their lives. He is scandalized to hear that his son is going to learn a new dance form ‘kuchipudi’, in which men have to dress like a woman. He mocks his son of returning ‘out of necessity’ and no ‘real intention of patching up’. He subtly threatens Jairaj to take away all his inheritance if he continues dancing, but to maintain his liberal image he allows him some leeway while also again warning him from growing out his hair. Amritlal further declares that a ‘man’s happiness’ lies ‘in being a man’ that is a man should own all the trappings of normative masculinity with pride. He conspires with his daughter in law giving her the lure of her own dancing career to get his son to stop his pursuit of the same. According to him ‘a woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in woman’s world is pathetic’ which contradictory to his projected progressive image. On being asked by Ratna what he will do of Jairaj after he stops dancing, he answers her that he will ‘make him worthy’ of her, which totally implies that at present he was not worthy of her.

Some related literatures are:

In the paper ‘Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani’s play “Dance Like a Man” and “Tara”- A Critical Analysis (2020), Biswal, highlights the social issues like gender inequalities and depression faced by the characters in the play. The paper scrutinizes the character of

Amritlal Parekh and the issue he had with his son's dancing. It also highlights how the play shows the gender discrimination throughout and how the characters are forced to follow specific gender roles. The article also deals with the emotional and physical discrimination and presents the deep rooted patriarchal norms. The play takes up various social issues of contemporary Indian society and deals with it them at length. The play's theme deals with society, career, relationship and tradition. It also portrays the typical Indian mindset and their views on dancing through Amritlal whose view is that dance is a form of art only for females.

In the article titled, "Sufferings and Suppressions: Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man*" (2015) by Manglik and Jain talks about how not only women but man also are victims of gender discrimination. The paper highlights how men in the play are being judged on the scales of masculinity. The article analyses and explores gender discrimination done against woman and man in Indian society with reference to play. It also highlights how the primary power is in the hand of males and dominates the family. The article also tells us how the gender discrimination has prevailed in the society since its inception and enslaves society even to this day.

This person Koshi and Bina in their article titled "Mahesh Dattani's "Dance Like a Man" : The Clash of Hegemonic Masculinity in India with its Other(2015)" discusses how the male characters in the play showcases hegemonic masculinity and one has to bear the consequence because of it. The article brings into light the play of power and authoritativeness by Amritlal, the senior member of the family and his traits of hegemonic masculinity. It also showcases the Jairaj's character as Other and how both son and father are on extreme ends of the spectrum. How Amritlal is hegemonic and on the other hand Jairaj is progressive.

Sindhu Nagraj (2021), in the review of "Dance Like a Man" says that even in the age of modernisation we are still stuck on the same loop which prompts us to ask the same questions which have been in place since times immemorial that is despite there being a significant shift in the right direction the pre formed notion of gender neutral professions is still afar.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's play 'Dance Like a Man' is a family drama. The title gives us the impression about the story line of the play which is that a man should pursue only careers which do not make them any less of a man that is, mar their masculinity. The play through its course demonstrates how dance is not considered a masculine pursuit. Amritlal, Jairaj and Viswas are the three main male characters in the play and they show different traits of masculinity. Amritlal, Jairaj's father, is a prime example of 'hegemonic masculinity'. He is a staunch patriarch who believes in a certain code of conduct for all members of his family. He allows his daughter in law certain liberties but with conditions and 'within reason'. He is a believer of gender stereotypes that is, genders have specific roles and limitations and every gender has their role to play with a disliking for the queer. He is drunk on power and does not fail to implement that power on his family with his money as weapon. Jairaj, the next generation, is the Other; he stands for everything that hegemonic masculinity deems improper. He takes dance as his career even after his father is opposed to it. He is progressive without making overt claims about it. On the other hand Viswas, Jairaj's going to be son in law shows signs of 'complicit masculinity' moving swiftly towards hegemonic. Though he is not the bearer of hegemonic masculinity but not opposed to the idea. He too believes that woman and man have particular plays in society,

though he will not come out and say it loudly. He is subtle in his approach. Unlike Amritlal, he does not allow Lata to dance but he does have a disapproving opinion after witnessing it.

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