

Gender Stereotype: Dance Like A Man

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Abstract

While most of the plays of Dattani deal with similar concerns about women, gays and other marginalized sections of society, *Dance Like a Man* is different than others. It is one of the most pleasant plays of Dattani and purports not to show the scum of society. Rather, it is about dance and the artists that are involved in the great art. The central theme of this play revolves around identity crisis and how the new generation fights with it. Most of the plays of Dattani are so ideological that the characters are often hung up in the ideological set-up that their playwright has created for them. They have no life of their own but *Dance Like a Man* is different. There are some social issues which are voiced through the play. The play also highlights of a southern Indian town and a traditional south Indian family immersed in the tradition of dancing.

Keywords: *Identity crisis, manly world, feminine pursuits*

The concept that *Dance* is only for women led to emotional and mental destructions to some families and sections of males. Often, our Indian traditional society constructs gender roles which deter the artistic pursuits. Dancing when carried out by male has been shown to trigger cultural apprehension. It is due to the notion that dance is seen as a feminine pursuit. Dance is a very remarkable circumstance that contributes to a result in this play. It means different characters with different mentality and desires. The couple Jairaj and Ratna wants to succeed their career as great dancers and for them Dance is not merely a leisure activity but become life and soul for the both. It is not only their strong emotions to devote in that career but also a mechanism that will nourish them to yield the desired success. Subjectively, for Jairaj, Dance is a form or a means to express emotions and stands as the device of confrontation, contempt, revolt, contradiction on a precise way of life that was determined by his gender restricted father, Amritlal. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri says *The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him 'womanly' – an effeminate man- the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned.*¹

The iconoclastic nature of Dattani seems to be missing from this play as music and dance, particularly of Indian variety are not disrespected but valued by the characters of the play and there is no mouthpiece of Dattani which hurls an insult on them. Lata, daughter of Jairaj and

Ratna is shown by Dattani as a carefree girl who likes to dance and is quite accomplished as a classical dancer. She brings home her future husband Viswas to her parents to introduce him to them and to get their consent. When he visits her home he comes to know that Lata comes from a distinguished family of classical dancers as both her parents were into it. Dattani carefully constructs the play towards the questions of identity crisis which prop up later in the play. The first act is a pleasant trip through the ancestral home of Lata and her parents. The house decades old and has plenty of old items that it looked like an antique house. Through questions on many of these items Lata goes over the history of her parents and her grandfather, telling it to Viswas. The antique items in the house are all those of Jairaj's father. He loved them and prized them quite a lot but his son did not share his enthusiasm for them. Jairaj always fought with the problem of identity crisis. His father, being a freedom fighter always urged him to engage in more 'manly' profession than dancing but Jairaj followed his wife and followed his dancing career. John Beynon in *Understanding Masculinities* observes: *The [still] widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterizes archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as 'Just like a woman!' and in the kinds of features found in popular magazines along the lines of 'How manly is your man?', with a list of attributes to be rated or boxes to be ticked. Masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast, are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional.*²

This is shown in Jairaj's unconcern about the family heirlooms which were quite prized by Amritlal, the father of Jairaj, as they made him remember the heydays of his heroic resistance of the British in India's freedom struggle. However, reflecting the issues of the post-independence free India generation, Dattani makes Jairaj unconcerned of those items and issues. Jairaj does not care for freedom fighters and their contribution. He cares for art and dancing. This conflict which becomes an identity crisis for Jairaj is shown well by Dattani. Jairaj being the son of a Gujarati businessman always had an identity crisis as he was torn between the artistic world of his wife and the business world of his father. He was always torn between the 'manly' world of his father and the 'feminine' world of his wife. And the greatest tragedy of his life was that he never quite knew if he even liked the world of his wife which he had chosen over that of his father. Anita Myles, a feminist and a novelist says: *Shifting through past, present and future depicting different time periods, the plot simultaneously moves between generations as well as hinting time and again at the problem of generation gap. Amritlal Parekh, the father of Jairaj was determined to pursue his interest at any cost.*³

On the other side, Jairaj and Ratna were worried about a musician who was to perform with Lata. He had broken his ankle and his presence in that very important dance performance was impossible. Hence, the other participants were worried about who will fill his place. It was Lata's maiden big performance and hence it was the talk of the house and they were thinking about nothing else. Ratna being tensed called her husband 'not enough of a man' at his failure of solving this problem. This is where Dattani brings up the unresolved issues of the family. Dattani hated the gender stereotypes. In many of his plays too he speaks of those who have suffered under these social stereotypes. In the present work, he speaks of the pain of those sons who are more interested in things which are considered feminine by Indian society than things which are considered masculine or fit for a man to do.

Dancing and singing are ancient Indian traditions which are more alive in traditional manner in south India than in the north and thus a Gujarati businessman in this play is not able to understand what a Tamilian can. With this story he brings up the case of gender stereotypes. And in breaking these stereotypes he also brings up the issues of identity crisis a man faces, who is more interested in artistic pursuits rather than ‘manly’ pursuits like fighting for the country. His identity as a male is questioned when he wants to dance. This is why the play is titled, ‘Dance like a Man’.

As in the context, the double vision of Jairaj is clearly explained by the given para:

*Caught between stereotype roles that his father expected of him and his own rebellion to find his individual space, Jairaj is a typical example of a man with what the post-colonial critics often describe the colonial subjects as having double consciousness or double vision. It is a feeling of being trapped between cultures, a feeling of belonging to neither of the cultures rather than to both the cultures one has inherited and finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo.*⁴

In the play, Amritlal is the classical patriarch who is trying to enforce his will over his family and thus distorts the life of his son forever. He taunts Jairaj for not being enough of a man. Amritlal appears in the play as a conservator of stiff gender roles. He appears as the father whose jurisdictions find proclamation only in restricting the son’s desire with his own supposed grounds of caring for him. This can be clearly visible from the context extracted from the play as given below:

Amritlal: Where is your dance going to lead you? I would like to see what kind of independence you gain with your antics.

Jairaj: The independence to do what I want.

Amritlal: 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. Why must you dance? It doesn’t give you any income. Is it because of your wife? Is she forcing you to dance? (*Dattani, 118*)

Jairaj sacrificed much for Ratna and fought with his father for Ratna but Ratna blames him too for ‘not being enough of a man’ and not having enough ‘spine’. Thus, Jairaj is blamed by everyone for not being ‘enough of a man’. The gender stereotypes that the society has made have become like a cage for Jairaj. Dattani shows how gender stereotypes can ruin some lives and bring strain into the relationship of a father and a son, between husband and wife. Images of a dancing man slipping into clothes of a woman, and that of a weak and fragile man, are vividly juxtaposed. The identity crises emanated from these gender stereotypes are also handled well by Dattani.

The central theme in *Dance Like a Man*, another of Dattani’s play, is that of the nerve war between father and son. The play takes up the issue of gender stereotyping. The society dictates how men are supposed to behave in a certain way but Dattani, through his gentle play, makes us realize that some men may feel differently and they should not be demonized by the society. As Amritlal wanted his son to be a man doing manly things, he took help from his daughter-in-law. As time passes, the gap between Ratna and Jairaj grows and fame and recognition favoured Ratna. To make his son adapt to his own gender, Amritlal tries many things to negotiate Ratna in doubting Jairaj’s “manliness” as in the context below:

Amritlal: Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

Ratna: No.

Amritlal: In being a man. (Dattani, 139)

Amritlal: Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.

Ratna: How?

Amritlal: ...Help me and I'll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done. (Dattani, 140)

Amritlal also hatched up plans with Ratna to make Jairaj a 'manly man'. In response to his support, Ratna continues to become a dancer. According to Amritlal, "A woman in a man's world may be considered being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is ----pathetic." (Dattani, 140)

Later, Jairaj become the victim of professional jealousy leading to *argumentum ad passiones* as in the conversation:

Jairaj: Whose fault is that only you get invitation to dance?

Ratna: Not mine.

Jairaj: For one whole year I didn't dance-turning down offers because I didn't want to dance alone.

Ratna: I didn't ask for such a sacrifice. Tell me what you want. I'll do anything.

Jairaj: I want you to give me back....give me back my self-esteem.

Ratna: When did I ever take it?

Jairaj: Bit by bit. Insisting on top billing in all our programmes. Making me dance my weakest items. Focusing the entire.... Show...

Ratna: Face it, Jairaj. It's me they want to see dancing. (Dattani, 160-161)

Ultimately, the play is about a dancing couple: two great artists who have devoted their life to the art of dancing and are immersed in it completely. Their world is pleasantly disturbed when their daughter brings in a guy whom she wants to marry. This makes them trip through time to remember their lives and some secrets come out and there are revelations but unlike most of the Dattani plays the outcome is pleasant. The play is bitter-sweet just like life is.

Alka Tyagi, a critic in her article *Diversity of Themes* opined as -
The Plays of Mahesh Dattani writes: *Dance like a Man is a play set in Chennai where dance is an integral part of life and favourite mode of aesthetic expression. Ratna wants her daughter Lata to achieve distinction as a danseuse as she herself had been thwarted in her desire to make her mark as a dance artist because of the repressive patriarchal dominance exercised by her father-in-law, Amritlal, who expected all the members of his family to prostrate themselves before him. Rebellion surfaces in the family the very moment Amritlal breathes his last.*⁵

Lata is a classical dancer and dancing is in her genes. It is their story which is the primary focus of the play. Ratna came from a dancing family and married Jairaj just to let her continue her dancing life. Jairaj was a quiescent man who could be cowed down by anybody.

Ratna thought she could handle him. That is why she married him. But on the other hand she constantly berates him for the same spineless nature against his father, Amritlal. Ratna constantly abuses Jairaj for not being a man enough and for being spineless as when he married Ratna and started performing with their guru in the home. Jairaj's father Amritlal turned them out of the house. Here Dattani is trying to show the plight of men who are sensitive to the independence of women and adjust their lives according to their desires. Ratna wanted a man exactly like Jairaj, someone who would not create any obstacles for her in her dancing. However, on the other hand, she constantly berates him for the same quality, for the similar lack of spine and strong decision making. Just like Jairaj is a yes man in front of his wife, he is also a yes man in front of his father. Ratna must have taken into account when she was marrying him but though she appreciates having her freedom with a husband who followed his wife's dreams instead of his own, she cannot tolerate the overarching influence of Amritlal, her father-in-law, even after his death.

Mahesh Dattani is trying to reflect a perennial theme, a universal problem between fathers and sons all over the world, in all times and places. The play takes up the issue of gender stereotyping as well. Again, man suppresses woman quite often and in general, our society has been accepting it as tradition. This suppression and this oppression are visible inside the family everyday that even the children at home experience vividly right from their beginning days. Hence, this issue has become quite normal and accepted as our custom, rather than considering it something to be solved. In another case, the society dictates how men are supposed to behave in a certain way but Dattani makes realize through this very play that some men may feel differently and they should not be demonized by the society. In short, *Dance Like a Man* shows diverged characteristics with well depicted storyline which will absorb the readers automatically in its world through its perfectly illustrated dialogues, making one to contemplate on it for long. One can experience the best of talents of the artists. Through this play, certain basic questions about the world is put up, with the compulsion to have a reality check on whether this world is really progressing or deteriorating with each passing day.

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