

Family and Mutual Consideration in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract:

For human being family is the oldest of all the social institutions which enables him to remain united for one reason or the other. It was with the invention of the system of private property alongwith the increase in population that compelled man to take a step forward towards the institution of family and thus consequently of society. It not only fulfils our social, economic and physical needs, but also serves as a great source of love, affection, security, dignity, and above all preservation. The institution of family while assuring security to its members, also requires something from its members for its survival. As the family members remain dependent upon one another, this give-and-take relationship among its members becomes the foremost principle of its survival and continuity. Man, for his survival, has to live in a society or a family and once he imbibes himself into that system, he is supposed to abide by the social and familial norms.

*The paper aims at analysing Dattani's **Dance Like a Man** where even the setting of the play is embedded within the mechanism of the middle-class Indian family which seems to have no mutual understanding, and this is the context from which he operates. He explores how the characters situate themselves firmly within the periphery of family in specific milieus and delve deep into the nature of their settings. He displays how the family home and its tangible physical presence becomes crucial to the very existence of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their habitation, which often results in fissures and cracks that widen enough to crumble the entire family. Dattani here also explores the relationship between a husband and wife who have grown apart and have done enough harm to each other, and their daughter Lata on whom they have thrust their frustrated ambitions. Moreover, the play presents the lack of mutual understanding among the family members who pass their lives in distrust and disagreement with one another. Though the central characters might get success in fulfilling their aims, they fail badly on the filial arena.*

Key Words: *Family, mutual understanding, distrust, relationship.*

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For human being family is the oldest of all the social institutions which enables him to remain united for one reason or the other. It was with the invention of the system of private property alongwith the increase in population that compelled man to take a step forward towards the institution of family and thus consequently of society. It not only fulfils our social, economic and physical needs, but also serves as a great source of love, affection, security, dignity, and above all preservation. The institution of family while assuring security to its members, also requires something from its members for its survival. As the family members remain dependent upon one another, this give-and-take relationship among its members becomes the foremost principle of its survival and continuity. Man, for his survival, has to live in a society or a family and once he imbibes himself into that system, he is supposed to abide by the social and familial norms.

By living in society, man grows moral; his every act is judged in the light of social norms and traditions which have undue importance so far as the human affairs are concerned. Whatever he does in the social, economic or moral sphere has a relevance to others and vice-versa. In fact, certain do's and don'ts play the role of a constitution for the smooth sailing of social system. Man's rights and obligations as an individual, as a family member, as a constituent of society, and further as a citizen change from time to time and from place to place.

The institution of family is the basic, fundamental unit in the social structure. All other institutions, be they economic, religious or educational, come out from the family. The institution of family consists not merely of the marital partners, because marriage, a precursor to the family, does not have the social significance of the institution to which it contributes. Marriage is merely a union of two people of which society takes much notice; but this is because social recognition is important to establish the legitimacy of the family which society hopes, will follow. The family, consisting of the marital partners and their offspring, goes beyond to include close recognition of the partners, parents as well as of their siblings. Thus, the family is an outcome of the harmonious relationship between social forces as well as sexual ones.

The institution of family of one country or society differs from the other in its form and structure, as well as in its norms and traditions. In almost every civil society, the system of family is patriarchal with some exceptions, but they are quite different from one another, so far as their sexual behaviour, action and interaction among its members, cultural influences, traditions and rights and obligations are concerned. A family is composed of individuals of both sexes, and a variety of age groups. It, perhaps, more than any other institution, is concerned with the problems of birth, growth, adulthood and death. The important changes which occur throughout the life of the individual usually involve his family intimately. The periods at which these alterations happen and the recognition which society gives them are almost universal over the earth.

Dattani's most of the plays are concerned with the apparatus of the family that is entrenched within the middle-class milieu of which he himself is a part. He refers the same the preface of Collected plays:

I am practising theatre in an extremely imperfect world where the politics of doing theatre in English looms large over anything else one does. Where writing about the middle class is seen as unfashionable... I am certain that may I plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background... in a country that has a myriad challenge to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally. Where does one begin?... the business of holding a mirror up to society. (xiv-xv)

Dattani here maps the context of his work. The setting for all his plays is embedded within the mechanism of the middle-class Indian family which seems to have no mutual understanding, and this is the context from which he operates. His characters situate themselves firmly within the family in specific milieus and delve deep into the nature of their settings. Dattani obviously selects his location within the dynamics of a pre-existing structure of contemporary urban Indian family which, due to the lack of mutual understanding, turns into the sight of the ensuing conflict. With never realities which pile on the older acceptable realities, the members of the family, often destroy the very edifice in which they situate themselves. This makes the family a fractured reality which Dattani presents in his plays concretely by splitting up his performance spaces into multi-level, multi-dimensional spaces. Writes John Mc Rae:

Mahesh Dattani takes the family unit and the family setting- again and again he uses the family home as his locale and he then fragments them. As relationships fall apart, so, in a way, does the visual setting. Not for him the single room set. Rather, he experiments,

with great technical daring, using split sets ‘hidden’ rooms, interior and exterior: he stretches the space and fills it with every available direction... (55)

In the play *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani makes the family and the mutual understanding of its members the central theme. The family home with its tangible physical presence becomes crucial to the very existence of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their habitation, which often results in fissures and cracks that widen enough to crumble the entire family. The structure that Amrit Lal, the head of the family, passes on conditionally to his son causes irreparable loss to him and his marriage to Ratna. They in their turn, try to pass on their own ambitious dreams to Lata, who, however, is a different type of a mettle, she is a talented dancer, but, is quite happy to marry Vishwas, the rich mithaiwala’s son, who for his part is suave and comfortable with his complete ignorance of Bharatanatyam- the passion of the preceding generation.

Dattani looks into the life of husband and wife- Ratna and Jairaj, dancers based in Bangalore, now past their prime. Both reflect on the past and the way, the past affects their family life. Dattani here explores the relationship between a husband and wife who have grown apart and have done enough harm to each other, and their daughter Lata on whom they have thrust their frustrated ambitions.

For the family drama opens with a living room in an old-fashioned house. Vishwas and Lata enter the room. The occasion is going to be a kind of assessment by Jairaj and Ratna of their future son-in-law. Lata and Vishwas are busy in conversation which sheds light on Jairaj and Ratna who are dancers, like their daughter Lata. Lata tells Vishwas that her parents are of a different type. The house in which they live is forty to fifty years old and is located in the centre of the city and is a commercial site, but Jairaj is not interested in selling it due to some sentimental factors. Lata informs Vishwas that her father is a “bit more... pliable than usual.” (392). And her grandfather who was a freedom fighter and social reformer didn’t like Jairaj’s desire of becoming a dancer. Despite the fact that the old man resisted Jairaj’s dancing career, the latter had deep respect for the dancer. When Lata goes to the kitchen to make coffee, Vishwas opens the cupboard and “removes a splendid brocade shawl” (394) and tells Lata that he’ll demand the shawl in dowry, but Lata says to him that “he won’t give it to you... It belongs to my grandfather.” (394) When Lata is busy in the kitchen, Vishwas wears the shawl and walks around and imitates the old man in a mock fatherly voice. Just at this moment Jairaj Parkekh and Ratna Parekh enter the room and stare at Vishwas’ antics. Vishwas feels embarrassed and offers some explanation. But Jairaj and Ratna are too worried about their Ratna’s dance performance to listen to his explanation, especially, Ratna Parekh is so disturbed that Jairaj Parekh attempts to calm her down. At this Ratna, even in the presence of Vishwas whom they are meeting for the

first time, begins to blame Jairaj and his father, Amrit Lal Parekh, for their present plight. Here their conversation lays bare their relationship which lacks in mutual understanding:

Ratna: You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours.

Jairaj: Ratna! Don't...

Ratna: You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house...

Jairaj: For forty years you've been holding that against...

Ratna: You're right, I am worrying about nothing, because nothing is what we are:

Jairaj: (quietly) You are going mad. (402)

It is in this way that the past is brought to bear its mark on the present and the audience come to know that there was a lot of dislike and disregard between son and father. Jairaj tells Vishwas that he has removed all his father's memories including his garden. He declares, "I removed his memories. The gardens. He had plenty of spare time. He used to do a lot of gardening. A rose garden. Creepers climbing the walls. When he died, I had everything removed. Pulled it all out from the roots". (406) He will remove the last memory of his father by giving the shawl to Vishwas.

When Ratna comes back, Jairaj, once again, digs up the past and answers her charge why he could not leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours:

While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle, because he was offering us food and shelter? Would you have preferred that? Do you think your uncle made such interesting proposals to all his nieces? No: that would be a great sin. But you were different. You were meant for entertainment. Of what kind was a minor detail. So, what was wrong with going back to my father? At least my father didn't make... (410).

Thus, he clarifies that her uncle was the main reason behind Jairaj's returning to his father's house. Both of them agreed that to leave Amrit Lal's house was an impulsive decision for which they both were to blame. But with the mention of Shankar, the rift in their familial relationship is revealed once again and for this chasm too, his father Amrit Lal Parekh is held responsible. When he picks up the shawl to keep it into the cupboard, he vents his anger on his father:

Your last memory. Soon I'll be rid of you too. Then I won't see you wearing this shawl, walking about this room... I won't see you wearing this shawl. I won't see you wearing

this shawl walking about this room. (paces up and down while the lights are dim.) I won't see you wearing this shawl walking about this room. Walking about - wearing this shawl. (412-13)

Thus, this shows that the mutual understanding between husband and wife is on the verge of discord and no-healthy relationship exists between the duo.

This lack of mutual understanding between Jairaj and Ratna resurfaces again when, after Lata Parekh's dance performance in the festival, all the newspapers like Herald, The Times, and The Express publish favourable, rave reviews about the dance performance. A verbal duel between Jairaj and Ratna takes place regarding the rave reviews. While Ratna believes that the reviews are the result of her efforts, but Jairaj asserts that Lata deserved them, "Those critics gave her good reviews because she deserved them. They weren't doing you any favours." (440). In this way we find that Jairaj and Ratna, as husband and wife, have no mutual love or understanding and their relationship is tension-ridden, distrustful and suspicious. And this lack of mutual understanding between them continues till the last act of the play. When Ratna returns from a dance programme with a splendid Bharatanatyam costume, and a shawl covering all this, Jairaj follows her in a drunken state. It is clear that Ratna continues her dance practice and performs on the stage where as Jairaj becomes only a stage prop. Ratna scolds him for his drunkenness and asks him to do something useful before it becomes quite late. But Jairaj holds her responsible for this plight and demands from her to return him his self-esteem which she took away from him, bit by bit:

Ratna: Do something. Do anything, but stop this mockery.

Jairaj: Do anything except be a dancer. Do something useful like choreographing items for you, or playing the flute.

Ratna: You are not even good at that anymore.

Jairaj: Whose fault is that?

Ratna: You go on drowning yourself in country liquor and asked me whose fault is that?

Jairaj: Who's fault is it that only you get invitations to dance?

Ratna: Surely not mine

Jairaj: For full one year. For full one year I refused to 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 in return. I will do anything except sacrifice a year of my life in return.

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

Ratna: When did I ever take it?

Jairaj: Bit by bit. You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. 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. (443)

The mutual disagreement and distrust between husband-and-wife results in the death of Shankar, their little son, whom Jairaj had hoped to teach the dance of Shiva when he becomes a young man. But his desire remains unfulfilled, as the child dies in his childhood. The ayah in an attempt to keep the child away from weeping for his mother, administers an overdose of opium and unknowingly kills the child. Jairaj holds Ratna responsible for this mishap, for she was always ambitious about her name and fame as a dancer resulting total failure in discharging her duty as a mother as well as a wife.

Thus, the play presents the lack of mutual understanding among the family members who pass their lives in distrust and disagreement with one another. In case of the relationship between Jairaj and Ratna, the distrust between them is born out of Ratna's ambition. The unison and 'Jathi,' that are required in any successful dance item, are lacking in their family life. They might have got success in dancing, but have failed as a family- a wife and husband.

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