

The Realisation of Identity in Dattani's *Dance Like A Man*

Dr Alka Jain

English Faculty

Rani Laxmibai Central Agricultural University

Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

The research paper undertakes to study the selected play of Mahesh Dattani and study the quest for identity of the characters as depicted by him. For this purpose, the research chapter intends to examine Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* portrays characters who are disabled by their weaknesses when pitted against strong patriarchal forces and social prejudices. Their weakness is identifiable in the thoughts, actions, and attitude of the characters in the two Plays. Dattani shows individual identity receding into the background due to the desire of social identification and the need to conform to social codes. In *Dance Like a Man*, the characters appear to be at a loss of personal and social identification and struggle incessantly to establish their individual identity.

Keywords: *Dattani, Identity, Feminism, Weakness, Dance Like a man, Tandava.*

In an interview, Dattani says, "My characters are simply personifications of my perceptions. What moves me actually is an individual's struggle for identity. In fact, more realistic view of things in life is my 'credo'" (Das 2006). The struggle of people like Jairaj and Ratna against the 'identity' enforced upon them is a subject of Dattani's plays.

Dattani raises several questions about the sexual construct of a man and his identity. The play deals with the self and the significance of the other, through the frameworks of gender. The concept of identity is vast and all-encompassing. In philosophical terms, identity comes with awakening of the self, the knowledge of the soul, and the complete harmonization of action, thoughts and attitude. It calls for a realization of the inner being, free from the considerations of outside world.

Dattani also deals with the individuals search for personal and social identity, his perception about himself, and how the world perceives him to be. The quest for personal and social identity leads individuals in several directions. While some people conform to traditions, others may remain within the social fold and strive to change its ways, or decide to leave their communities. Ratna and Jairaj tried to escape from their social communities but were forced to return and identify with their group. In the painful process of social identification, they lost their

individuality. *Dance Like a Man* portrays the crisis of identity faced by individuals caught between the nexus of the self and society. The quest for knowledge of self destroys their tranquillity. These lines from an article attempts to surmise the title, *Dance Like a Man* as symbolic of the dance of Shiva, which humans fail to accomplish. It says:

The play starts with an injunction to dance like/be a man and ends on a note of failure in that the men/men- and the woman/women in question in the play are unable to dance LIKE Shiva or Carter's Jesus which is what would make them/us really human or manly. Thus the play is primarily tragic, dwelling on 'la condition humaine' and realistically Ibsenian revealing what the "Pillars of (Human and Indian) Society" are actually made of, but subtly so, seasoned and tempered by humour and the knowledge that life goes on all the same despite its tragedies, so that the revelation is bearable and doesn't destroy us, unlike the Shiv Tandav which saves and destroys at the same time." (Koshy)

The title of the play *Dance Like a Man* is deeply symbolic. How is one supposed to dance like a man? And what exactly is the dance of a man? On the superficial level, the title suggests the gender bias in society, where to 'dance like a man', signifies 'behave like a man' or do what is expected of a man according to his socio- cultural norms. The title is a critique of the social reality of gender bias and subjugation. The world we live in is divided into two hostile camps, the oppressors and the oppressed, both can be right or wrong from their positions. Dattani always talks about the downtrodden, subalterns in his plays. Jairaj is a subaltern, the different one in the world of male supremacy. He is the 'other', accused of fanning the aspirations of his female self, his emotional, sensual, sensitive being and subduing the male within.

Dattani depicts the pain of characters trying to remove the yoke of the identity forced by society upon them. As Amritlal says, "A woman in a man's world may be considered progressive. But a man in a woman's world is- pathetic" (140). This indicates that for a woman, the acquisition of manly traits is progression, it signifies her movement from the lower to a higher plane. Thus society might for once accept this with large heartedness. But man is already 'superior'. Why should he then be attracted to menial feminine traits is something that the patriarchal guardians like Amritlal fails to understand.

Dattani shows how Jairaj loses his personal happiness and dignity along with his identity. He resorts to alcohol to drown whatever little consciousness he has. Jairaj lacks determination and perseverance and submits to the hostile forces to become a subdued prisoner of his past. Failing to grapple with his losses, he cries silently at night and chooses to remain mute when his wife tramples his dreams. He does not challenge or question her, till it is too late. Jairaj's life is a lament, his psyche is damaged, his identity is vague, his thoughts are anchored to the past, and his presence is a vacuum. He is but a living dead.

Having crushed her husband's dreams, Ratna steps upon her own ambitions, in her haste to succeed. After all the compromises she makes, life is far from rosy for her. She causes a great deal of heartburn to Jairaj and impinges upon her daughter's freedom. Ratna becomes an unhappy woman, after deceiving her trustful companion Jairaj. She does not realize the importance of values, ethics, and morals which are essential for a harmonious existence. She suffers from greed and jealousy. Lack of humanistic and ethical values is the cause of Ratna's

ruin. She is neither a great dancer nor a good human being. She is never the same after the death of Shankar. Ratna lives with a disfigured identity.

Critics like Matthew Arnold have rightly asserted that literature attains value, because of its engagement with the moral and spiritual issues of its times. Dattani portrays the burning issues of the lack of individual identity and individual happiness, in the increasingly urbanized and westernized world. In *Dance Like a Man*, Vishwas is a modern, westernized man, with little knowledge of the art and culture of his own country. Dattani hints at the lack of a cultural pride amongst the youth. Vishwas fails to understand the intricacies of Lata's performance. Whatever he gathers, is from the critics opinion of the performance. This trend of deviating from one's own cultural tradition towards western art forms signifies a loss of national and cultural identity.

Towards the end of the play, Amritlal Parekh's imposing, old house is brought down to be replaced by multi- storey buildings, signifying the loss of all that is old and traditional. In the rapid race for growth and economic progress, homes are replaced by houses, trees are cut to make way for roads, and open spaces are converted into clubs and swimming pools. Like Jairaj who is breathing his last in the hospital, his home where the happy memories of the dance rehearsals lay, was also ready to be pulled down.

The title *Dance Like a Man* has deeper connotations than merely defining human identity at the personal or social level. The constant reference to Shiva, the lord of dance and Chennai Amma's constant reminder of devotion to Shiva, is of great significance in the play. Jairaj wanted his son Shankar, another name for Shiva, to do *Tandav Nritya* on his grandfather's head, "The lord of dance, beating his drum and trampling on the demon" (Dattani 159). How is one supposed to dance like a man? How is the dance of a man, different from the dance of a woman? The dance of Parvati, called *Lasya*, is the dance of creation by nature (*prakriti*). It involves graceful body movements. The dance of Shiva is a dance of destruction and transformation. The article, "Cosmic Dance of Shiva", from *The Times of India*, recreates the image of Shiva doing tandava:

Shiva dances in 'Rudra Tandava' or the dance of destruction in an aureole of fire, creating wild thunder storms all around the universe, even shattering the Sun, the Moon and stellar bodies with his matted hair, marks of ash on the forehead, trident, drum, lifting his left leg and balancing over a demon of ignorance, with snakes crawling over his arms, legs, and braided hair that depict egotism. His upper right hand holds an hourglass drum or 'dumroo' standing for the male-female vital principle, while the lower gestures us to "Be fearless". A skull on his head depicts conquest over death. Goddess Ganga, epitomising the holy river, sits on his hairdo. His third eye represents omniscience, insight, and enlightenment. (K. P. Shashidharan)

The dance of Shiva is for the welfare of the world. The objective of *tandav nritya* is to free the world from the bondage of *maya* (desires). Shiva destroys to regenerate. He brings ultimate bliss and happiness to the soul. Shiva wears serpents as ornaments, signifying the control of the five senses which are like hissing serpents. He calls for the control of the mind, and the burning of desires in the fire of meditation. Only then can Shiva be achieved. Jairaj wanted his son to do the tandav, but why not he himself. He and Ratna are unable to control the hissing serpents, the feelings of sorrow, dejection, regret, anger and jealousy. They value

materialistic achievements in the field of art- reviews, money and fame, ignoring its spiritual and meditative qualities.

Dattani takes the play to a high level by the reference to Shiva and his *tandav nritya*, elements which show that the purpose of human life lies in the evolvement of human identity and the realization of the principles of humanity. Dattani, an essential humanist, believes in the peaceful co- existence of human beings, and advocates that true bliss can be attained through the principle of ‘live and let live’. Dattani’s Jairaj only hopes for a regeneration, waiting for his son’s *tandava*, while he himself wants to remain an audience, without participating in the ‘dance of a man’.

Amritlal, Jairaj, Ratna, and Chandrakala Devi are people without identity. Their future remains dark because they do not walk past their temporal sorrows towards a new life. They are unhappy and frustrated. Jealousy, ego, and hatred leave them hollow and empty. Dattani’s characters are parched of true happiness and contentment. Happiness comes from a control of the senses, which seek material wealth and fame and focus on the needs of the soul.

Modern Indian citizens are chasing material happiness like their western counterparts and are ignoring human values and ethics. The duty of society is to facilitate individual growth, but human society has become a dominant power structure killing individual freedom to maintain its supremacy. Social justice and the radical reorganization of society for regeneration of humanity is the need of the hour. Shiva is the destroyer of the demonic *maya*, which instigates human beings to do injustice to self and others. True human identity is attained only after discarding *maya*. This is why, one needs to ‘dance like a man’, like Shiva. From time to time, man needs to do the *tandava*, to destroy the evil and regenerate life. The process is cyclical and continuous.

Dattani depicts that within each individual, the female and the male self, co- exist, with the female self being restrained. It is considered unmanly for a man to cry because crying is considered a sign of weakness, attributed to the female self. Similarly, a woman who controls her emotions is considered ‘unfeminine’. This division of humanity, into male and female identities, is legitimized through social rules and regulations.

For a country like India, steeped in philosophical and spiritual knowledge, spirituality and philosophy are not merely subjects of learning, but a way of life. Hence, the implication of the philosophical significance of Shiva becomes very important. Shiva, the *Ardhnareshwar*, stands for duality. Within a human being the two selves, male and female should exist in harmony and balance. Only then can he be truly human. The subjugation of any one self will lead to disharmony and destruction. The body and mind must work harmoniously for the realization of the soul. If the body, does not entangle itself from worldly desires, the soul shall not get *moksa* (liberation). Similarly, sorrow and happiness, birth and death, need to be dealt with equanimity. The universe exists on the principles of duality. The sun arrives in full splendor and paves way for the dark night, only to reappear, the next day. An individual can attain Shiva, only if he accepts duality with faith. The death of Shankar, symbolize the death of humanity. There is no transformation and regeneration in the couple’s world

Jairaj and Ratna fail to achieve this balance in life. They needed to pursue their art with single minded devotion, just as Chenni Amma says, “Let the divine in you be possessed by the

spirit of dance. And if the two meet, you will be transported to another world, taking your audience with you” (Dattani 134).

Dattani shows that human identity is not a passive force, but an active and autonomous participant in the process of change, which is timeless. The play ends with the following memorable words, “Do you remember how we once used to dance . . . you and I . . . so perfectly in unison. Not missing a step or beat.” And “Then we had all the grace, all the brilliance, all the magic to dance like gods” (Dattani 165). Ratna and Jairaj, complemented each other in the past, when they danced together, just like Shiva in his *ardhnareeshwar* pose. It was only then that they danced magically and beautifully, merging their differences, and forming one identity as a whole. The body and soul must dance in unison, in order to unite with the divine and to merge with the supreme identity.

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