

## Marginalization of a Man in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

### 1. Vikas Lathar

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English,  
NIILM University, Kaithal

### 2. Dr. Ved Parkash

Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
NIILM University, Kaithal

### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a famous playwright who deals with various social realities in their complexities and intricacies through his plays. He is master of portraying the social issues from different perspectives. His widely acclaimed and staged play *Dance Like a man* deals with the theme of gender dynamics in an unconventional way. It depicts the struggle of male dancer against the patriarchal norms of society. The society does not approve his passion for dance as dance is traditional associated with femininity. Social forces try to push him towards masculinity. But he faces identity crisis and marginalization. The present paper seeks to explore how Dattani has dealt with the theme of marginalization of a man in patriarchal social structure in the play.

**Key Words:** Dance, Gender, Identity, Marginalization, Masculinity, Patriarchy.

Mahesh Dattani is a renowned playwright in contemporary era. He is credited for infusing a fresh energy and spirit in the genre of Indian Drama in English. He has touched the hearts of audiences worldwide through bold and sensitive themes of his plays. He won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998.

The play *Dance Like a Man* interrogates the issue of gender from a different perspective. It challenges the notion of gender roles and tries to dismantle the gender binary structure constructed in patriarchal society. It also focuses on complexities of human relationships and

personal choices. It is a story of a male dancer named Jairaj who faces identity crisis and marginalization due to patriarchal forces. The play depicts that a male can also be victim in patriarchal social structure.

Like his many plays, Dattni chooses family setting for the play. The play spreads across three generations which increase the intensity and range of the theme. It revolves around the lives of a dancer couple Jairaj and Ratna. Both want to assert their identities as dancers. The play explores the challenges they face while asserting their identities and their responses to meet these challenges. Dattani also exposes various facets of human relationships in the play. The play also challenges notion of family as an ideal and innocent social institution. It shows how family can also act as an oppressive force for its members.

The main theme of the play is Jairaj's struggle with society which does not approve his passion of dance. He tries to create a space for his male dancer identity in the patriarchal social structure. His father, Amrit Lal, who is a freedom fighter and social reformer, represents the patriarchal mindset of society. He does not like the idea that his son should adopt dancing as a profession. Reflecting traditional mindset, he does not treat dancing suitable for a man. Moreover, he does not respect the dancing profession as he treats it the profession of prostitutes. Jairaj reflects: The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares-what business did a man have leaning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic?"(Collected Plays 406)

Amrit Lal feels that dancing is a hindrance in the way of his son to achieve masculinity. He does not like the lifestyle and get -up of dancers. He does not like that Jairaj should grow long hair like a woman. Hence, he opposes and discourages the dancing passion of his son. The play also underscores the process of gender construction in the society. It is a well known fact that biological male and female are turned to social man and woman by the process of gender construction. Society creates binary of gender along with gender stereotypes. Social roles are assigned to both the genders. The roles associated with female gender are considered of lesser value in society. All social institutions like family, school etc take part in the gender construction process. Children are brought up according to patriarchal social norms. For example, a boy is expected to take part in competitive physical sports to develop his masculinity. Amrit Lal regrets the fact that he allowed Jairaj's hobby of dance to grow into passion. He feels he should have encouraged him to take part in competitive sports like cricket instead of dance. He says, "I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our own lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn't realize this interest of yours would turn into an...obsession" (Collected Plays 414-15).

After finding the atmosphere of his home oppressive and suffocating due to his father's attitude, he decides to leave his home along with his wife Ratna hoping to create a space of his identity. He and Ratna take shelter into the home of her uncle. But, unfortunately, the clouds of patriarchy overshadow his search of identity. Her uncle demands sexual favors from Ratna in exchange of

his support. The attitude of her uncle reflects the patriarchal mindset which treats a woman as a sex object only. Being a woman who is financially dependent and a dancer, Ratna faces multiple layers of marginalization. This again unmasks the ugly face of society. Her dancing profession makes her vulnerable to the sexual exploitation. This also shows how society demeans a divine art like dance. For her both home and outside world are oppressive. He decides to return back to his home back as he considers it safer and honorable for his wife Ratna. He justifies his return and says to Ratna:

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... (Collected Plays 410) The return of Jairaj to his home proves a turning point in his life. It turns out to be a major setback to his search of identity. Ratna considers this as a defeat for Jairaj and puts question mark on his masculinity. It may seem surprising to audience as protection of honor of Ratna was the main reason behind his return to home. The behavior of Ratna exposes the deep rootedness of patriarchal norms in our society. Dattani brings out the point that in the patriarchal structure, masculinity along with many privileges also puts many burdens and pressures on a male. He is expected to dominate, protect and earn livelihood income for family. This is the reason that the pressure to have successful career is more on male than female in our society. Failure in establishing career may lead to sense of frustration, depression in a male's psyche. Due to social conditioning, even a woman expects a man to be financially sound and independent. Jairaj has to return back to his oppressive home because he finds it difficult to survive in outside world. His financial dependency on father forces his return. The conversation between Ratna and Jairaj reflects the deep rooted patriarchal norms in the psyche of Ratna:

RATNA. You! You! are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's 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...  
 (Collected Plays 402)

After Jairaj's return, Amrit Lal changes his strategy and plans a conspiracy with Ratna to discourage dancing art of Jairaj. He smartly chooses Ratna as his partner in conspiracy against Jairaj because he knows that being a woman and wife; she also does not like the choice of Jairaj's profession internally. Due to patriarchal social conditioning, she also wants her husband to show masculine traits. Amrit Lal knows that she has married his son not due to his love of dance. In fact, she wants to use her marriage as a ladder to get success in her dancing career. So he asks her to discourage dancing art of his husband consciously so that Jairaj may grow up as real man. He believes that a man's happiness lies in, "being a man" (Collected Plays 426). Replying the query of Ratna why he wants to prevent him from dancing, he says, "A woman in a

man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (Collected Plays 427). In return for her help, he allows her to pursue her dancing career freely. So, Ratna prefers her career to his husband's dreams.

After her deal with Amrit Lal, she consciously manipulates to discourage the dancing art of her husband. She does efforts to demean his dance. He is made to feel ashamed in public and his dignity as a dancer is hurt. All this is done to make him real man. But unfortunately, he is turned into an isolated and frustrated human being suffering from identity crisis. The process of pushing him towards masculinity results into identity crisis. His identity crisis and frustration is reflected when he blames Ratna for crushing his identity and dignity:

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. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting. (Collected Plays 443)

Ratna assert for creating her name and fame in dancing. She marries with Jairaj so that she can use resources and dancing hobby of Jairaj as a ladder to touch the heights of her career. Some audience may feel negative about her character. But being a woman belonging to lower class, it is compulsion for her to use Jairaj for her career in the patriarchal world. Being brought up in patriarchal society, she also likes to see her husband with masculine traits-assertive, dominant, independent. The play shows that patriarchy creates gender binary and the binary helps in sustenance of patriarchal system. Critic Beena Aggarwal remarks, "Dattani in the conspiracy of Ratna explores the invisible horrors of gender discrimination. He discovers those aspects of feminine psyche where woman is not a silent sufferer but a conscious individual endowed with a passion of self-identity" (163).

Motherhood is an important aspect of a woman's personality. Culturally the role of child rearing and nurturing is assigned to a woman. But in the modern world, when a woman tries to create a space of her outside home in the patriarchal world, she faces the double burden of handling household responsibility as well as professional responsibility. It becomes very difficult for her to make balance in two spheres. Some feminist considers motherhood as an obstacle in women empowerment and liberation and a source of exploitation in patriarchal world. In the play, Ratna could not make this balance and due to her professional ambitiousness, she unfortunately loses her son Shankar. Jairaj puts blame for child loss on her. She has to suffer from this guilt throughout the life. Jairaj says, "No matter how clever an actress you are, you can't convince me that you are playing the part of devoted mother very well. You wouldn't even know where to start" (Collected Plays 445).

Music has been an important element of Dattani's plays. Being an artist, Dattani has successfully portrayed the psyche of artists in the play. His characters look real world people. Appreciating the art of Dattani, critic Bijay Kumar Das comments, "Dattani is a good observer of human beings in the profession of singing and dancing. That is why in these two plays, *Morning Raga*

and *Dance Like a Man* he has dived deep into the hearts of the characters to reveal their true feelings” ( 77).

Both Jairaj and Ratna transfer their ambitions to her daughter Lata. It creates additional burden on their daughter Lata to perform. Their condition of them is not different from many parents in world. It is a common observation that parents usually try to complete their unfilled dreams through their children. The play also highlights the postmodern nature of the society in which media creates hyper reality. It controls the mind of people.

Ratna also tries to influence critics in the favor of her daughter so to put a positive image of her daughter as a dancer in the public. She feels excited after getting positive reviews of her daughter’s performance, “I heard. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! The dancer of the decade! And why shouldn’t she get reviews like these? I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging things. Sweet –talking the critics. My hard work has paid off, hasn’t it? Hasn’t it?” (Collected Plays 439) Dattani depicts how gender stereotypes are perpetuated, reinforced and transmitted from one generation to next generation through the social processes like socialization etc. Various social institutions also play crucial role in this transmission. Gradually they become part of our collective consciousness. In the play, there is scene when Viswas, after wearing the shawl, of Lata’s grandfather mocks of her grandfather’s behavior imaginatively. And strangely his attitude and expressed views resemble closely with the dead man. This shows that how attitude and social norms and stereotypes travel through generations. Although Viswas and Amrit Lal belong to different generations but both are part of similar patriarchal structure of society. This is the reason his mock behavior reflects the reality of patriarchy which finds a man unfit for creative and artistic roles. Viswas says after wearing the shawl, “So, you want to be a dancer. Hah! Hah! Hah! Son, you will never amount to anything in life. Look at me. Look at what I have achieved...What’s that you say? There is more to life than money? You ungrateful wretch...Where will you go on being a dancer? No where! What will you get being a dancer? Nothing!” (396-97)

In the end, it can be concluded that Dattani has effectively presented the complexities of gender dynamics by presenting the struggle of a male, Jairaj, who wants to pursue his passion for dance in a traditional patriarchal society. The play attempts to deconstruct the gender binary and exposes the hypocrisy and tyranny of patriarchal social structure. The play shows both the male and female are victim of this system. Critic Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri has aptly remarked:

They play focuses on the merits of multiplicity, transcending mere ‘tolerance’ to recognition and empathy, while situating itself historically within the context of the materialistic, acquisitive society of the 1990s. Typically Dattani poses a few uncomfortable questions-the sexual construct that a man is, and the pigeonholing of masculinity within a Hindu undivided family-are set against the idea of the creative artist searching for artistic fulfillment within the claustrophobic constraints of the world that he inhabits. (36-37)

### Works Cited

Aggarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Book Enclave, 2011.

Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. Foundation, 2005.

Das, Bijay Kumar. *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*. Atlantic Publishers, 2008.

Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. Penguin, 2000.