



FROM REVOLT TO RECIPROCATION: A STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI'S DANCE LIKE A MAN

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The growth of drama in English has been glacial in comparison with the experimental growth and variety of novel in English, yet it has its own votaries and contributors which kept its spirit alive even today. Most of the plays are social oriented, aimed at bringing change in the thinking and practices of the audience, which is the true spirit of drama that is holding up a mirror to society. Some of the plays are written in the vernacular languages of the writers and later translated into English. Dramatists like Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore added a metaphysical dimension by infusing Indian philosophy into drama and enriched the oeuvre of dramatic art.

Coming to contemporary times the two bright stars in the constellation of Indian drama are Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani. While the plays of Karnad continue Indian literary tradition with the western architecture of art, the plays of Mahesh Dattani raise and highlight several social problems plaguing Indian society like communalism, ill treatment of women, gender prejudices and the rigid mindset of common people. Behind his plays one can perceive his unwavering dedication to Indian society and his spirited attempt to bring change by interrogating the present practices and the need to revisit and revise them based on the rapid changes coming over the world. His claim is that life can be an enjoyable and enriching experience if only one can change and readapt oneself over value system and behaviour pattern towards a liberal and accommodative one and cultivate a democratic outlook on life.

Dattani's dramatic output is both quantitative and qualitative vindicating his commitment as an artist to bring change in society. His plays reflect his seriousness and social commitment as all his plays are focused on discussing and debating values and practices of people and the need to change them to herald a new social order based on liberty and equality. The present play *Dance Like a Man* (1989) by Mahesh Dattani questions the stereotypes prevalent in Indian society which often go unchallenged. The play is to interrogate and deconstruct the fixed notions of man/woman activity in society. Dattani, true to his nature of being an iconoclast, questions and shatters the mould of gender stereotypes to prove their hollowness and irrationality.

The play was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 22nd September 1989 as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. Later on, it was staged at the NCPA experimental theatre, Mumbai on 14th February, 1990 under the directorship of Mahesh Dattani. It was also enacted by prime time in 1995 under the directorship of Lillete Dubey.

In the play *Dance Like a Man* revolves around three important characters Amritlal, the father, Jairaj, the son and Ratna, the daughter-in-law. In the play there is a conflict of interest between father and son as usual in a rapidly changing society. The father Amritlal Parekh is not only the richest man in the town he lives but is also known as philanthropist and a man of liberal views, supported and supplemented by his participation and contribution towards freedom struggle of India. He belongs to the older generation of Indians who strictly follow the guide lines and principles laid down by the earlier generations and who is proud of his achievements and public image whereas his son Jayraj Parekh does not care much for the family prestige and image, but wishes to follow his own choice of life. It is a conflict of wills between two generations.

The points of difference climaxe when Jairaj's declares that he wants to become a dancer due to his inclination towards dancing, whereas the elder is of the opinion, that it is not only a frivolous and focusless activity but also very poor in providing livelihood to the artistes who practise it. In other words, it takes the votaries of this vocation nowhere and rather strands them in society. His main objection to his son dancing is that it is not only an unmanly activity but that it will bring shame and dishonor to the family. While the son is obstinate in following his own choice of life, the father is equally adamant in refusing his permission to his son to practise the art in his house. After a showdown between the two, the son Jairaj leaves the house along with his wife, Ratna, vowing never to step into the house again. It was no doubt a brave gesture.

Both come back to the house after a couple of days after being frustrated and depressed in their attempts to lead independent lives. The older Parekh takes them back into the house with strict conditions as to how they should behave in future. As Ratna says at a later stage, when their daughter wants to make her debut as a dancer, the last-minute lapse of the drummer breaking his arm before the performance day puts Ratna in a state desperation as she declares:

RATNA.Finished! Just like me. Yes, your father was right. Dance has brought us nowhere. It's his curse on us. Nothing seems worth it anymore. Oh, it is also so ... worthless. You should have listened to your father. He was right. We were never anything great, never will be, and nor our daughter be anything but an average human being. (Dattani 402)



In the dialogue between the older Parekh and Ratna, his daughter-in-law, the father strikes a bargain with her to prevent and slowly defuse and divert Jairaj from his obsession with dancing, in return for his allowing her to dance as per her predilection. He understands too well that he cannot prevent his daughter-in-law from dancing, even though it is an affront to his public image and social prestige, but he can manipulate her to make his son to shun dancing as a vocation. His chief objection as he puts very well. Amritlal, "A woman is a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic". (Dattani 427)

As the elder Parekh admits, Ratna is a very clever woman who married Jairaj not for his talent to dance, but to be allowed to dance and choose a life of her own. She knows that Jairaj is a mediocre artiste who will never shine as a dancer but can be bullied into submission by gradual degrees. She has grudge against Jairaj for not being able to look after her without the help of the father and treats him with contempt. Both of them have grudges against each other and often trade insults retrieving their past. They get along but do not live-in harmony.

The ambition of Ratna is to achieve through her daughter what she could not do in her own life due to several objections and obstacles and would not spare any efforts to make her daughter a celebrity and a legend in the world of dancing. She harnesses all her resources and contacts and when Lata gets rave reviews out of favoured and critics; she becomes jealous of her daughter, who got recognition and fame easily.

In the second act, the setting is placed in 1940 where the older Amritlal Parekh dominates the situation and attempts to control his son and daughter. He is opposed to the obsession of Jairaj not only because it is an unmanly activity but also that he will never be more than a mediocre artist in spite of his attachment to it and that the real spirit and propelling force behind his son is his daughter-in-law whom he concedes is a clever woman who knows her way out of the medley of customs and conventions, to achieve what she wants to achieve. It is a play across three generations from the stage of objection and obstruction to promotion and celebration. While Ratna feels fulfilled that her daughter has become a celebrity. Jairaj realizes that his life is a failure; because of his mediocrity and that his wife has manipulated and often bullied him into carrying out her wishes.

The writer evidently succeeds in shaking up not only the logic and legitimacy of social and cultural stereotypes but also makes the audience revise their monolithic thinking as to how people live by received opinions that certain activities of life are only means for women and men have neither place nor role in them. Dance as an art form was associated with devadasis, the servants of God, right from ancient times but has degraded into prostitution due to lack of patronage that was available earlier. It has become a source of shame and embarrassment and the new breed of social reformers want to eradicate the evil by providing alternate means of livelihood to devadasis. The writer points out the irony that while ancient dance forms are exhibited and showcased abroad as an artistic contribution of India to the enrichment of the world, the practitioner who kept it alive from ages past are treated as the most undesirable members of society. In the dialogue between the older and younger Parekh, the father poses a direct question to his son "why must you dance? It doesn't give you any income". (Dattani 415) While the older Parekh is realistic and balanced due to age and experience, the younger one is impulsive and temperamental due to his strong belief in the value of his art and holds a grudge against father for imposing his will on him.

In the second act of the play when Jairaj and Ratna come back, after being unable to find any accommodation, the father censures them for their obstinacy and their refusal to see reasons in his exhortations. In a country where dancing is only treated as a female avocation and not as a mode of livelihood, dancing doesn't yield any income for its practitioners due to its precarious social status. Amritlal expresses his definite opinion by saying "I will allow you to dance. And I shall be very happy if you can earn your livelihood from it. If you ask me for money, I shall not refuse but I will be disappointed". (Dattani 425).

Throughout the play, Ratna comes out not only as a clever woman but also as a strong willed one, who knows how to get what she wants from others and tenacious to hold on to her goal, in spite of much opposition to it. She was able to extract concessions from her father-in-law in return for allowing him to shape his son as per his idea of manhood and manipulating Jairaj to play second fiddle to her own career as a dancer. Her unfulfilled ambitions to become legendary dancer are channelised through her daughter as she trains her to become an outstanding dancer by managing everyone to highlight her talents and performance. Her single-minded pursuit of dance does not allow her to deviate even to look after her son, who dies of over dosage of opium in his milk.

Out of the whole play of three generations, Jairaj comes out as pathetic figure, because he was not able to rise above his mediocrity but becomes a victim, first by opposition of his father and second by his wife Ratna who gradually marginalizes him to a secondary role and a puppet, as she herself admits. The play graduates from the stage where it is a frivolous, time wasting, unmanly activity to a respectable and popular progression with acclaim and rewards.



The writer succeeds in breaking the stereotype that dance ought to be the exclusive domain of women by interrogating the rationale behind it and suggesting that men may have equal entry and participation in the celebration of the beauty and profundity of human life.

The play ends with Lata being a happily married woman and also a celebrated dancer thus fulfilling the dream and endeavour of Ratna whose life is riddled with failure due to lack of right opportunities and opposition to her ambition. The dramatist introduces character like Biswas who doesn't, in any way, contribute to the progress of the play, apart from providing humour, to a very serious drama. The dramatist also highlights the shady side of human nature, harbouring grudges and insults carried over by years of memory and which come out when there is an opportunity. He highlights the petty domestic politics which are like unhealed wounds smarting under the skin. The play does not revolve around any one single theme but meanders to several one's brushing up memories and reviving the past. Dattani successfully envelops the strategy of expressionism competently used by Arthur Miller in his plays by shuttling between the present and the past. He not only shows the continuity of action and the connection among events but also the change of attitudes and ambience of time and place. The dramatist demands opening of minds and freedom of action for everyone, irrespective of gender, to pursue his own goals ignoring the imposition of stereotypes by society. It is only where there is so much leeway and latitude in society that one expects real progress in terms of self-fulfillment unhindered by the obstacles of society. He traces the origin of dance forms to a disreputable source but underscores as to how it is white washed into glorious contribution to Indian culture and aesthetics.

The stage has multi-level sets. The furniture in the room is at least forty years old, belonging to the generation of Amritlal, the father, which reminds Viswas, the fiancée of Lata of an antique shop. The Time in the play shuffles between 1940's and contemporary society to convey the odyssey of Jairaj and Lata from youth to on-set of old age, the time of reckoning and retrospection. They realise that the period of 40's is rather a period of conservative social outlook and that the society, through the conduit of family, exerts pressure and often predetermines the choice of individuals. There is a conflict of outlooks and perception and question of what is respectable and what is not. The change of time is indicated by turning the present drawing room into a rose garden of the past. Like several plays of Dattani there is a dialectical tension and conflict of interests among individuals supposed to be living in harmony and understanding. An interesting innovation is the actors taking on multiple roles, often changing their roles for the economy of actors and also space being parceled out into several levels to indicate past and present time zones.

As a dramatist Dattani does not hesitate to reveal the flaws and warts of the characters and often their shady side. He does not either idealise or iconise the characters as he knows too well that people are not ideal in real life, but suffer from character defects, biased perceptions, personality rigidities and a host of other undeniable problems. In spite of living together for quite a long period, to the extent of their daughter arriving at marriageable age, there is little understanding and harmony between Ratna and Jairaj. Each harbour some kind of grudge against the other and blame each other for their failures and frustrations. In the course of the play, it becomes apparent that Ratna is the smarter of the two and unhesitatingly bargains with her father-in-law to shape and condition Jairaj according to the wishes and expectations of the father in exchange for the freedom of having her own career pursuit. She is temperamental, dominant and often aggressive, not realizing the agonies undergone by Jairaj and berates him as a spineless boy when they come back to the house of the father, after leaving him in a spirit of defiance. In a stretch of dialogue between Amritlal and Jairaj, father and son, marked by acrimony and recrimination, the crux of the issue comes out. The objection of the father to his son pursuing dance is twofold. Dance as a performing art is traditionally associated with devadasis, the temple dancers dedicated to god, but who also indulge in prostitution due to poverty and lack of patronage to their art. The moral stigma associated with them and their art goes to the extent that Amritlal declares that they should be reformed and weaned away from their art which Jairaj demands to know as to what is wrong with their art. The dialogue is symptomatic of the conflict between the perceptions of two generations,

AMRITLAL. I will not have our temples turned into brothels!

JAIRAJ. And I will not have any art run down by handful stubborn narrow-minded individuals with fancy pretentious ideals. (Dattani 416)

Amritlal also believes that while the presence and participation of woman in what is usually or traditionally regarded as the world of activities proper to men, progressive the participation or partaking of man in a woman's world or woman activities is pathetic. Patriarchic bias is clearly evident in the way that he liberally admits women into a man's world, but objects to men participating in women activities like dancing as being retrogressive. He does not ignore or erase the difference between men and women activities, but has derogatory and contemptuous views about woman activities, especially dancing. He also castigates the guru of Jairaj as being womanish, gay and emasculated and objects his son associating with him. He has clear, strong and firm views of gender differentiation and respective roles they have to play in society and any kind of transgression or violation is unpardonable. This core of the conflict is summed up by Dattani in an interview with Ranu Uniyal:



Well, the other play which I think I could talk about is Dance Like a Man which is because we talked about my Bharatnatyam background. It is about Bharatnatyam dancers. Again, in their old age, when they are in their 60's and they are looking back on their struggling days, when they had their ideals and in the 50's where there was a stigma attached to the dance forms; that it is a dance form of the devadasi. It's a prostitute's dance and people from respectable families did not perform or practise that dance form. It is doubly difficult for the man you know; what business does a man have learning a prostitute's dance. So, it brings about gender roles, what is expected of gender as well. And also, the tensions between the couple and how they solve, how they felt that they used their relationship to develop their careers, dances and how they reconcile to the fact that the time wasn't right for them (Uniyal 182- 183).

Even though, on a superficial level, the conflict of interest between Amritlal and Jairaj appears to be between tradition and modernity, the father holding the traditional views that dance is the domain of woman and it is unmanly to show interest or participate in such activities, the modern view is that gender differentiation and roles directed by society are not of overriding or paramount importance as one has to pursue one's interest irrespective of what society thinks of them. At a deeper level, the persistence of social stereotypes and people blindly believing them is at the bottom of the issue. The fact that Amritlal is willing to allow Ratna to pursue dance, even though he disapproves it as being improper to his status and image in society, he is willing to concede, to prevent Jairaj in pursuing dance, as he believes that it emasculates men and also a reflection of a weak and unstable mind, one can perceive the tenacity of stereotypes and how they influence and condition one's outlook on social values and practices. The hidden tragedy of the play is that with all defiance and persistence Jairaj only remained as a mediocre dancer, in the shadow of his wife. Ratna being both dominant and ambitious she cleverly sides with Jairaj taking advantage of the promise she made to her father-in-law that she will wean away Jairaj from dancing but only succeeded in marginalizing him as Jairaj realises too late. In the dialogue with her father-in-law, she concedes that Jairaj with all his commitment and dedication remained an average dancer and did not scintillate in his pursuit. In a way, Ratna uses him as a ladder to climb up in her career and which she extends to her daughter. Towards the end of the play, both Jairaj and Ratna concede that with all their efforts they remained as mediocre dancers and not able to reach the state of unrivalled excellence that they aspired for. Ironically, that is the only thing they were able to come to an agreement to. "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God." (Dattani 447)

One of the smartest characters that Dattani produced in his plays is the character Ratna in his drama Dance Like a Man. She opposes and fights against the domination of the father-in-law who imposes his will on his pusillanimous son and manipulative daughter in law. In an unempowered society without any individuality or freedom of choice, Dattani shows that women can survive using their wits and presence of mind and capitalising on every opportunity women fight against their victimisation. It is this spirit of fiery resistance dissent and protest with their will and strength that evokes the support and admiration. As a dramatist and humanist Dattani supports the weak and marginalized to delineate their suffering in a skewed and wrapped social order.

While suffering under the imposition and oppression of male dominated social order, the women of Dattani, are inventive resourceful and often smart enough to outwit men and achieve what they want. They know their way around and know how to tie men to their apron strings and are good at managing and often manipulating things to their advantage. They do not gain much by their scheming but manage to survive in a man dominated world where their wishes are either brushed aside or ridden over. The first example of smartness is Kiran Jhaveri in the first play of Dattani Where There's a Will in which she attracts and maintains the respect of Hasmukh Mehta to maintain her household. Hasmukh has so much respect for her abilities that he appoints her as the main trustee to all his properties as he does not believe either in the ability of his son or his wife and afraid of the cunningness of his daughter in law. Kiran proves to be worthy of the trust and operates everything smoothly and efficiently evoking the admiration of the audience.

True to his nature of being an iconoclast, raising uncomfortable queries about ones settled beliefs and practices, Dattani succeeds in shaking the conscience of the audience and forces one to re-examine the beliefs on which our behaviour is modulated as one critic Mithran Devanesen opines, " Play that examines authority and prejudice socially and culturally and as we sit in the dark watching the story unfold between time past and time present, Mahesh Dattani forces us to examine our own individual and collective consciousness" (Devanesen 383).

The transmutation of the play from a routine theme of gender stereotypes to the elevated philosophical perception of life is gradually brought out by the dramatist in a subtle and suggestive way reflecting not only the understanding of the artist but also the seamless way he negotiates through the play to give the audience an unbroken, wholesome aesthetic experience. This ability to create a world of imagination mediated through illusion is observed by Lillete Dubey, "It is beautifully crafted the way it moves back and forth in time, its use of one actor to play more than one role which really tests the actor's talent, makes it as unique as does the strong characterization and the 'seamless' movement in time" (Chaudhuri 35).



As a dramatist Dattani was able to take not only the actors but also the audience through a spectrum pain, frustration and eventual reconciliation to the dictates of life. This kind of philosophical acceptance of one's fate in life leaves the audience in a state of meditation as to what the final end of human life is. This elevation of spirit through experience is observed by Beena Agarwal, "The play Dance Like a Man begins with a socio-cultural spectrum, passes through psycho-cultural dynamics and culminates in psycho-philosophical suggestiveness and here lies the strength and distinction of Dattani's art (Agarwal 104).

To conclude, in a traditional and conservative society like India, the roles and responsibilities of both men and women are strictly categorized, with little common in between. When either a man or a woman wants to overstep the lines laid down by society, ridiculed they are immediately for breaking the tradition even though tradition has no other sanction other than traditional acceptance. The personalities and attitudes of people are shaped by social stereotypes and continue to do so even today. Dattani, being an iconoclast and rebel against the age-old attitudes and practices, presents and projects his ideas in a dramatic form. Hence, behind his plays one can perceive his unwavering dedication to Indian society and his spirited attempt to bring change by interrogating the present practices and the need to revisit and revise them based on the rapid changes coming over the world.

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