

(Un)-Doing Gender: Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like A Man in Perspective

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Abstract: Contemporary theories of gender aim at foregrounding the issues of anti-essentialism in gender roles. The traditional division between sex and gender are brought to question, so as to identify social education as the initiator of the both. Fixity of gender roles as determined by the society has proved to be oppressing for individuals irrespective of their sex. Mahesh Dattani, one of the pioneers of modern Indian theatre, has critically engaged with these discourses in the Indian cultural context. The present paper reads the nuances of the complex Indian society shown in a microcosmic way in *Dancelike a Man*, where the relation between a father and son suffers due to one's adherence to conventional gender roles and the other's attempts to frustrate it.

Keywords: Sex, Gender, Essentialism, Performance, Performatives, Gender Roles

I. Introduction

That theatre is an effective medium of expression is universally acknowledged. It can at times be propagandist and negotiating and even subversive too. Mahesh Dattani, seen as one of the pioneers of Modern Indian Theatre, effectively uses it to uncover issues which have traditionally been kept hidden so as to maintain the status quo and keep away any speck of rupture which can put to question their 'normative' existence. Among many such issues is the question of gender representation which is brought into relief by situating it into the complex structure of Indian family system, which upholds the father as master of the house. A study of Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* therefore must be truly rewarding when read through the prism of gender and its nuanced presence in the Indian context.

II. Feminist Discourse And Contemporary Gender Studies

Feminism's key aim is to foreground that the roles performed by women as daughters or mothers are not natural but social constructions in which a woman is 'trained to fit in' (Nayar 83). Existential feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir suggest that no one is born a woman, but grows up to be so, owing to the social educations they are exposed to. But the dimensions of this assumption have increased a great deal over the years. Theorists like Judith Butler argue that it is not only women who are made to fit into the constructed roles but members of other sexes as well. Here it should be noted that, traditionally, sex has been differentiated from gender on the grounds of being biological as opposed to the social. Contemporary theories on gender, however, consider sex as a social category too, for the biological body itself is studied as the site where the socio-political understandings of the onlooker are mapped on. Hence society constructs roles for each gender and one is made to conform to those roles, failing which they are liable to be stigmatized. However, these roles are internalized in such ways as not to make the individual feel objectified, but to acknowledge that one emerges as a subject only in conformity to them.

Feminist theory, therefore, argues that gender is an ideology because it naturalizes what are social 'performatives' and it proposes and reinforces the differences in social performances as natural, pre-ordained and unalterable. But remaining in proximity to deconstructive thoughts, the postmodern thinkers argue that gender is not a fixed or stable category across the world. Gender, like a text, is a performance, the playing out of roles, that has to be repeated ('cited') and validated within specific social and cultural contexts, but which is also open to contest and negotiations. The postmodern views of gender are also anti-essentialist. Critics like Butler do not believe that there is (or can be) an 'essential' woman or man because these are meanings that emerge in performances relative to each other. The postmodern theories of gender even reject the notions of authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity. Hence, texts such as Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* question the desperately strict adherence to gender roles in the conventional social framework which gives birth to a caustic relation between a father and a son and ruins an artist of his innocent passion for his art.

III. Gender Issues In Dance Like A Man

Family is the epicenter in Dattani's plays. This is mainly because of two things—firstly, the family, being a nuclear part, integrates with other parts so as to constitute a whole, i.e. the society, but the part or the family is a whole in itself too which somehow finds a window to the larger whole; secondly, though not against the joint family ideal in so far as it encourages stronger bonds of kinship through mutual support and sharing, Dattani calls attention to its bleaker sides by exposing the patriarchal underpinnings of the institution that has often denied freedom to its individual members.

Amritlal Parekh is the autocratic father in *Dance Like A Man* who tries to check the movements and manners of his son Jairaj and his daughter-in-law Ratna, although he is socially considered to be a man of progressive ideals and liberal views. Jairaj and Ratna are Bharatanatyam dancers. The play opens with Jairaj and Ratna in their sixties, looking back to their days of struggle in retrospect, and in the 1950s when there was a social stigma attached to the Bharatanatyam; that it is a dance form of the *devadasis*. It is a prostitutes' dance and members of 'respectable' families don't perform or practice this form. Hence it is doubly difficult for a man to pursue a career in such a bodily dance as this which has categorically been restricted to women. Jairaj therefore puts into question the notion of dance being a feminine art, rather than about sheer artistry and a female preserve.

Amritlal appears in the play as a custodian of rigid gender roles. He emerges as the father whose authority finds expression only in conditioning the son's desire with his own at the pretext of caring for him.

'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?' (Dattani 415)

Amritlal boasts of his mission to 'eradicate' the ugly practice of divine prostitution which he believes to be a 'shame' to the society. But the reality concealed underneath his rhetoric is that he is more antagonistic to those hapless women than interested in exposing the root cause of the flesh trade. Dattani, therefore, exposes the hypocrisy of the so-called reformists and conceives Amritlal as a representative of the same.

'Amritlal: We are building Ashrams for these unfortunate women! Educating them, reforming them.' (416)

Calling the practitioners 'unfortunate' makes them constructs who are to be reformed and hence conceived in terms of the 'reformists', whose attempts to educate or reform results in imposing the objective ideals upon them, thereby, denying expression to their own desires. The truth of such a reform is therefore brought to light by Jairaj -

'Jairaj: Reform! Don't talk about reform. If you really wanted any kind of reform in our society, you would let them practice their art.' (416)

But Amritlal, caught in the complex structures of fixed gender roles, is unable to 'eradicate' the prejudices that actually reside within him and hence fails to appreciate the freedom that an artist craves for and finds in her/his art. What it entails is that Amritlal stigmatizes dance as a prostitutes' art, which to Jairaj is an art of the temple having divine dimensions.

'Amritlal: Encourage open prostitution?

Jairaj: Send them back to their temples! Give them awards for preserving their art.

Amritlal: My son, you are the ignorant one. Most of them have given up their 'art' as you call it and have taken to selling their bodies.' (416)

Though Amritlal is opposed to Jairaj's choice of dancing, he is in the favour of making a cricket pitch in his lawn for him. This is because "most boys are interested in cricket"- a pronouncement of his belief in fixed gender roles and that playing cricket rather than dancing would be an expression of masculinity.

The boundaries of gender and body are thinly placed. They often spill over each other in social discourses. The performances of the body do go on to identify the gender of the individual. Body may complement the performance of an art, but when it is internalized in such ways as to repeat it in terms of performatives, socio-cultural normative is put to question. Hence patriarchal heads like Amritlal find enough space to question the 'normalcy' of the individual. The Guru in *Dance Like a Man* keeps long hair for it enhances the 'abhinay', but to Amritlal he becomes a butt of ridicule, for he fails to appreciate the art inherent in such a performance, and rather questions his 'sanity'. The reality therefore resides in a twofold structure, one is that which is outside the world of art, and the other is in the art itself where it is being constructed and reconstructed in terms of their requirements, but in every reconstruction there remains a referent in the world outside, so that there remains a communication between the two. However there is always a disjunction between the two for a self-obsessed man like Amritlal, who dissolves the two so as to arrive at an easy conclusion - "All I'm saying is that normal men don't keep their hair so long... I've also noticed the way he walks" (417).

The father here emerges not just as a single individual, but a symbolic father figure possessing the 'phallus', representing authority and the sole progenitor of meaning. Jairaj is the symbolic son who lives in the fear of castration, not for the desire of his mother but his art. He appears as a site on which the meaning is imposed upon, so as to continue bearing the already constructed. On one occasion, Jairaj do draw courage to leave the house on his own, but facing tribulations at Ratna's uncle's, for the uncle made progresses towards Ratna, he returned to his father's house, only after surrendering his self-esteem to him.

To make his son conform to his own 'gender', Amritlal tries to manipulate Ratna in doubting Jairaj's 'manliness'.

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

Ratna: No.

Amritlal: In being a man'(425-26).

Amritlal conspires with her for making Jairaj a 'manly man' in response to his supporting Ratna continue becoming a dancer, for to him a 'man in a woman's world is pathetic'(427).

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'(427).

But pathetically both emerge as virtual destroyers of Jairaj. Ratna destroys Jairaj the man and Amritlal destroys Jairaj the dancer, though they project themselves as something else. Hence, far from growing into a 'man', Jairaj loses all his self-esteem and wastes himself - "I want you to give me back my self-esteem!"(443)

However, Dattani draws the character of Ratna as a foil to Jairaj. She has succeeded well in the manly world, deftly managing both the appreciators and the critics. She has also succeeded in creating a favorable atmosphere for Lata, their daughter, to 'shine' as a 'star' and hence takes the full credit in doing so. Having been both unmanned and unsuccessful in his life and career, Jairaj now looks for opportunities to highlight Ratna's failures. Hence, he recedes back to the essentialism of fixed gender roles so as to point out Ratna's failure in emerging as a caring mother, for to him it is due to her negligence that their son Shankar died. This is in conformity to social construction of gender roles that its the mother's role to look after the child, though Ratna's performance as a mother surely differs from Lata to Shankar.

Angelie Multani reads Ratna and Lata as transgressive women- Ratna has married outside her community and Lata is preparing to do so. Neither of them has necessary female virtues of demureness, quietness, and obedience, both are ambitious and outspoken. The play therefore also seems to reflect on the reversal of gender roles. Dattani here has conceived the two as more masculine than the men, for both of them emerge as characters who successfully manipulate the public space. Hence the play is a brilliant questioning of the social boundaries for the activities of men and women, the gender stereotypes, the gender roles and the ensuing gender trouble under the garb of a fine domestic conflict.

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