



“Dance like a Man beyond the Discourse of Gender”: Relocating the tragedy of Jairaj in the circumscribed world of politics and power

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Abstract—Mahesh Dattani’s play *Dance like a Man* (1989) speculate the tragedy of an ageing Bharatanatyam Dancer, Jairaj and his shattering dancing dream owing to an authoritarian patriarch’s resistance and manipulation. Amritalal who is authoritarian, martinet; led by material values is agitated by his son’s liberal and modernist sensibility and initiated to curtail his dream. In the play Jairaj is personified as the epitome of the victim of gender rigidity, who attempts to subvert the subversion of hegemonic patriarchy but end up as an emblem of gender tragedy. The play is not solely about gender as it seems on the bare eye - it is a brutal reprehension of the existing power dynamics that encompass wealth, social status and reputation. In Amritalal’s rise as a prominent businessman, and as an influential social worker, in Jai and Ratna’s marriage of convenience, in their abandonment and return in their parental house, in the tragic death of infant child Shankar, in Lata’s rise as a “shinning star” in Bharatanatyam, the play showcases how the politics of power, wealth and social status deeply engraved in the structural dimension of the society and influence the normal day to day life of the masses. My paper tries to reanalyze Dattani’s seminal work *Dance like a Man* going beyond gender oriented approach and aimed at a detailed critical study of Jairaj, leading to his tragedy, as a subject and victim of a plethora of different social apparatus along with his own incompetency in a world of fundamentalism.

Keywords— Gender, Wealth, Power, Politics, Human Relationship, Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

“Is it possible for the currents of human life to flow in its own accord like a river? It moves through man made ditches, dictated by some unknown force which is changeless and universal like gravity”

Manik Bandyopadhyay in *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (The Puppets Tale)

The flow of ‘human life’ is surely not swift and mellifluent like a swollen ‘river’ that can pierce through undeterred or can transcend all barriers and hindrances; and Bandyopadhyay is perhaps right in claiming human existence rather trapped in the labyrinth of its circumstances. Human being as individual may have the impression of a free being – however, its position in the chaotically structured world is overtly ambiguous. Bandyopadhyay’s particular concern with all the ambiguities of modern existence, projecting man cradling

in the midst of a shoreless sea, is very much symptomatic to Jairaj’s own post-tragic existence inside the familial sphere of his personal abode. Modernist age with all its possible anxieties questions the essential nature of existence itself – retraces or relocates man’s position, objectives and telos of living in the universe full of ambiguity. While the purpose or *telos* of human life is to achieve *eudemonia* or happiness, the pursuance of simple happiness is in most cases jolted by clusters of ideologically framed machinery, sabotaging general will and desire, exposing the possible meaninglessness of existence. Here, in *Dance like a Man*, “*eudemonia*” for Jairaj is dance, something which gives his life essence, meaning, where he finds his “*arête*” or pleasure. Again, then dance is a form of art that in Indian social system meant mostly for women, and Jairaj’s pursuit of prohibited Kuchipudi dance form in which the man attires

like a woman brings himself into direct conflict with his father Amritalal who is a proud believer of antiquity. The conflict is then the inexorability of unending pathos for Jairaj standing in the midst of a world that prohibits him from attaining his “*arête*”.

Modern urban life encompasses duplicity of feeling and as Michel Foucault opined has turned into “biopolitical” regime that operates on its subject not by coercive force but by surveillance. A fixed identity is demanded from its subjects - fixed name, fixed address, fixed occupation and fixed hobbies which will be surely heterogeneous in nature. The people thus are in the midst of a panoptic prison. The need for a heterogeneous male identity is thrust into Jairaj, not by his overbearing father but by the law of the biopolitical regime. Before he turned into an epitome of tragic figure due to his incongruous choice of Kuchipudi dance that violates social norm, Jairaj led a life of utmost complacency under his father’s harborage, in the Parekh family mansion – his hobby, his aim, and a partner of choice and camaraderie. Normativity in the Foucauldian sense is not just a set of regulations but the consequences of centuries old beliefs and practices that exerted its predominance in the social and regulatory framework – continually othering the unusual. The norm while must not always be the norm of the powerful ones, contains the footstep of dominant voice. Jairaj then with his non-normal choice of Kuchipudi dance directly engages in conflict with the normative ideology.

Dattani’s *Dance like a Man* is the prototype of subliminal gender critique and obviously to the fact that it has established or rather re-shifted gender criticism in India to a new dimension – critiquing the functioning of hetero-patriarchal normative in the subversion of identity and self-propensity - creating what Judith Butler called “performative” gendered identity. Jairaj is the epitome of gender stereotype, who attempts to subvert the subversion of hegemonic patriarchy - the preconceived gender role imposed onto him. Dattani was particularly critical about the patriarchal code that defines much of the activities of modern urban domestic life, snatches away in-di-vi-duality of self. *Dance like a Man* though is much more than a play of gender itself. A brutal reprehension of the existing power mechanism; a relentless projection of a societal structure that mortifies individual freedom and identity of self, making them slave to money, power and social ideology. The creation of identity then is not monolithic but multidimensional - from sovereign individual self transforms into multifarious subject - creating identity complexity into which the individual finds imprisoned. Jairaj is found entrapped in this perplexed identity complexity.

Socialist philosopher Karl Marx almost a century ago came up with the idea of “economic determinism” – to steer a view of the world subsidiary to the economical force. In *The German Ideology* (1845), he wrote,

“The production of ideas, concepts, and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man.”(195)

The “cultural world” of ideas, art, religion, law etc. thus is largely determined by the nature of the economic base – creates dominant ideology. Economy influences or more generally determines the liaison between man and the world – from in-di-vi-dual *self* it changes into economical *subject*, overpowering human sensibility of passion, desire, relationships. A businessman of extreme professionalism, Amritalal’s life focuses this economical ideals in sharp contrary to his son’s imaginative world of passion. In every human action he sees profit, “Why must you dance? It does not give you any income?” Dance for him is nothing but childhood “fancy” or hobby of an immature lad, “I thought it was just a fancy of yours”, he proclaims. He is undoubtedly having a much simplified concept of the world - formed, shaped and reshaped by a herculean force - the force of economy that subsides all other forces and play vital role in the power politics. Born and brought up in the wealthy and fruity environment, Jairaj, however, is careless about all the professional ethics that his father inherits and felt himself as free being. He has the angst of exploring his passion, his love dance. However, in a society that is largely regulated by constrained ideological bodies, the concept of “free” being is nothing but false consciousness. He took dance as the vitality of his life neglecting the material aspect of society that brings himself into direct conflict with his father.

Amritalal’s entire life was centered on agglomeration of private prosperity and the road to prosperity was symptomatic of his simulated identity as a social reformer. The decoration of social self with “fancy pretentious ideals” as a sanctimonious freedom fighter, social worker, liberal and a secular with which he re-designated himself is nothing but an attempt to catch the flow of wealth and power in the shifting power dynamics of the nation that was expecting its independence from the tyrannical British rule. Independence brought him the greatest opportunity - by buying old English mansions at cheaper price and reselling at a higher rate to the natives - he not only swelled as a rich businessman but also hold considerable amount of power. His social self was modelled on Gramscian ideology of “*hegemony*”, exercising political leadership over “subaltern classes” like Devdashi by uprooting them from temples; rearranging their settlements and prohibiting their art, calling them

social “shame”. The condign and compensatory power combined to make Amritalal a complete ruler. This autocratic attitude very well reflects in his familial sphere also. As Aristotelian dictum of family demarcates a family into two separate group; the patriarch leading on the one; and wives, children, slaves serving on the other as subjects – Amritalal, the proud patriarch nicely exerts his authority in exercising leadership over subalterns like Ratna and Jairaj as the head of the family. As difference among members of later group is very limited, individuality is restricted, Jai and Ratna as individuals reduced to the state of mere spectators in the general drama of family.

Jairaj’s existence may at one point give the impression of a Kafkaesque worldview – a collapsed controlling pattern of life; life turned into a muddle; and struggle against an all devouring force (autocracy) that has altogether wrapped his way up to the world. While inside the domestic sphere the patriarchal code that undermines his will and desire, chokes his freedom; the outside world is much open, with wider possibilities but with possible insecurities. Inside the panoptic prison of the family where he is being surveilled all the time – his identity as a naïve son who will acquiesce with his father’s vision of fixed role, is necessitated – escaping is only means. Jairaj then needs freedom, more profoundly freedom from his father’s authority, freedom to explore art that is inhibited by society. But with freedom comes great responsibility and the moment he denounced the shelter of his father he is exposed to the austerity of the outside world. It is the home, the harbor that he unknowingly deserts for a world of his own, a *home* of his own in the strange unhomely *home* (world). Despite of the fact that his home is symptomatic of the Bourdieuan “*habitus*,” the home outside home awaits the most destructive future for Jairaj. In the gulf between his father’s home and his own imaginary home exists a home that he is oblivious to; the world which believes in survival of the fittest, a blue born Jairaj seems fairly unfit for survival. The ill-proposal made by Ratna’s uncle to share bed with him in exchange of necessary food and shelter hurts the manly ego in Jairaj and an immediate return to father’s harbor, without trying to make living on his own, without striving for his passion, his dream proves his unworthiness. He is true to what Ratna says, “a spineless boy who could not leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours.” (21)

If the house is place of conflict between two hierarchical groups – the head and the subjects – the political play begins from the house itself, from the family. In Foucauldian sense it is the highest form of disciplinary institution in which productive relations are made or established in comparison to the condign structure of the society as a whole. Home is not the place of utmost

complacency rather the crux of which creates Bourdieuan “*habitus*” and the pathway to enter the habitus is marriage (meeting between two souls). Marriage with its political motive and its simulated relation with the wonderful art form of dance ceaselessly weaves central discourse of the play. Dance is simply the apple of all discords here, and plays multifaceted roles to shape the fortune of individuals. The play sees the transformation of Parekh family from a typical Gujju baniya family to a family of Dance and the shift in family identity both profitable and objectionable. In Dattani’s attempt to place dance as a trope of life that is relative and ever-changing creates varieties of waves. The definition of dance changes as we move across generations, as womanly subject for Amritalal; passion for Jairaj; a gateway to the wonderful domain of fame for Ratna and finally it is the pinnacle of Parekh family bonding. In terms of dance Jairaj and Amritalal is already into two different hemisphere. To Ratna it is an ambition, a gate way to the splendid domain of fame, reputation and prosperity. Marrying wealthy, passionate Jairaj, could give her the necessary financial and professional support. She is more an opportunist than a lover- a “clever” woman according to Amritalal. Jairaj’s love for her too is politicized, he needs her more as a dance partner than a doted wife. And for a pseudo liberal and social reformer like Amritalal marrying off his own son below his community standard - socially inferior girl – “*a Devdashi*” is actually a shine of his political image. The marriage thus proved to be a market ground than a sacred institution where two heart melts. Relationships gets fluid and unreliable focusing on the materialistic gain as Lata proclaims, in reply of Viswas’s witty query what if, she is sold to some Sheikh in Dubai in the name of marriage, “No, seriously they(her Parents) are not worried” as long she is dancing. Lata is undoubtedly following her mother’s footsteps but in her case it is not for fame. She seems to be the melting ground between her parents - attempts to bring balance between her parents ambition sacrificing her own need. She is the crux which connects two soul even in this age of extreme materialism, she is the true material which needs to maintain relationships, a little sacrifice in addition with the ambition she aspires. The success as the “shining star” in the sky of Bharatanatyam is not as smooth as it feels though. Despite of the talent, passion she has for the art and hard work and dedication she gave, her success owes much to her mother’s effort in manipulating, arranging everything - managing the chief judge C.V Suri into favor with one of his most loved thing, being “garlanded on stage” and turning the critics into her side so that Lata doesn’t lose the competition. It is thus not Lata who deserve every bit of credit for her success, Ratna deserve due credit as she claims, “I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging

thing. Sweet-talking the critics. My hard work has paid off, hasn't it? Hasn't it?"(65).

Following Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, the play plays recurrence of archetypal fatherhood. While Jairaj's entire life is itself a challenge to the heteronormative authority, the role just reverses when he himself fathers a child. Sankar is borne out of the frustrated, un-satisfied soul of his father as a revenge agent who will dance the "tandava nritya" on his grandfather's head. The ghost of his un-achievement, failed soul that haunt him constantly found reappearing in the form of Sankar. Following his father's lineage, he fixed his son's role – vicious expectation like revenge is imposed on the innocence soul. In a specific social sphere the son of the family has certain roles to follow mostly adherence is demanded to the patriarch's wish. Jairaj, now being the *de facto* authoritative sets certain roles for his son here. Sankar symbolizes for him destruction, the manifestation of God Shiva who can annihilate predominant hegemonic norms (of which he is a victim) and bring gender mobility. Like Shelley's West Wind he will serve the role of "Wild Spirit," both a "Destroyer and preserver", destroying the predominant culture of heterogeneity and heralding a new era of gender mobility. Though it sounds the helpless musings of a father who is barred of his destiny – the objective of a child in the world is predetermined even before its consciousness. The synonym for life is death, finds Heidegger, life is but a journey towards death and this is where Dattani was perhaps concerned - telologically there is only death that is ultimate. So the death of Sankar, before the closure of play signifies the height of material quest; the futility of existence.

II. CONCLUSION

Obviously the claim made by Jean-Paul Sartre that "*existence precedes essence*", covers the central idea that our actions give life essence, however, it is not existence, rather the Deleuzian 'co-existence' - with other similar or dissimilar entities that characterize our being-in-the-world. Our being-in-the-world or *dasein*, in the same way depended on *mitsein* – the compulsory co-existence of the *self* and the *other* – other is indistinguishable part of the whole. Jairaj, on his discretion was able to nullify his father's opposition but failed to hold his esteem for long and yielded in front of inexorable material constraints. Since "co-existent precedes essence" and societal co-existence is not equal but hierarchal, Jairaj is entrapped in the politics of this hierarchy. It is a study in how the dominance of a powerful cultural structure forms a Bourdieuan *habitus* in which the protagonist lives and prevents him from becoming a successful dancer. Even though Jairaj is not free from all the blame - his

incompetency to strive; the lack of Nietzschean will to power – he became a victim to political constraints. The playwright's contempt for this cruel, labyrinth world well visualized when Jairaj exclaims, "He (Sankar) is in dreamland. Let him stay there. It's far better a place than this! ...If you ever there is a paradise, it isn't this, it isn't this...."(67) Dattani like Jairaj yearns for an alternative world, free of social constraints and false values; where freshness of thinking can bloom. Amritalal symbolizes the "rotten" world to him and he changes all the traces of him. "I removed his memories. The gardens... A rose garden. Creepers climbing the walls. When he died, I had everything removed. Pulled it all out from the roots."(26) He, however, failed to realize it is not his father, or anyone that can be completely blamed for entire thing, or can be weary of guilty, even he himself is part of the larger machinery.

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