



# Scrutiny of Mahesh Dattani's 'Dance' in "Dance Like a Man" from Judith Butler's Perspective

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**Abstract**— Dattani's plays deal with gender identity and gender discrimination. Society has imposed gender stereotypes on both men and women and when one does not accept or follow the roles decided for them there are 'outcasts' in the patriarchal world. In the play 'Dance like a Man', Jairaj and Ratna both with a common passion for dance are victims of Amritlal the patriarch of the family. Even after Amritlal's demise Jairaj, his son cannot get rid of the expectations of his father which eventually leads him into depression and alcoholism. In contrast, Ratna at every stage cooperates with Amritlal for her benefit and pursues her passions till the end. Hegemonic masculinity norms can be traced to society's pressure on women to be groomed and look desirable. This is the opposite of what's seen in most animals where male species work on their looks to attract females. Ideas of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity have directly resulted in the oppression of every gender for several centuries. Dattani's Jairaj and Ratna have both suffered from patriarchy, subjugation, the quest for identity and the male gaze. The journey of both characters through all this has one the winner and the other the loser. One character fulfils its desires and wishes while the other merely participates under societal norms. This research paper attempts to analyze Mahesh Dattani's 'Dance like a Man' from Judith Butler's perspective of identity politics and gender performativity.

**Keywords**— Feminism, Gender Studies, Hegemony, Indian English Drama, Masculinity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The play 'Dance Like a Man' is one of the best plays written by an Indian playwright in English. Mahesh Dattani has done thorough justice to a sensitive issue like gender inequality among the other themes of the play. Dattani's feat as the first playwright to have won the Sahitya Akademi Award has sealed his place as one of the finest and most prominent playwrights of India. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri writes, "Dance Like a Man is a play that deals with one of Dattani's pet concerns – gender – through one of his principal passions, dance." (Chaudhuri, Asha Kumari, 2005). He has showcased the nuances, nuisances and complexities of an Indian household through a common thread of very unusual but peculiar to Indian culture 'classical dance'. Choice of classical dance as the central theme is an outcome of his learning Bharatanatyam

in his early 20s. The play Dance Like a Man first staged in 1989, dramatizes 'dance' with its many implicit implications – dance as a profession, dance as a passion, dance as a quest for identity, dance as ambition, dance as revolt, dance as manipulation, dance as an object of the male gaze and finally, dance as a strong maker of gender identity;... (Konar, Ankur, 2018). Social roles of men and women concerning each other are based on the cultural norms of that society, which lead to the creation of gender systems. (Warnecke, T., 2013). In the play, 'Dance' is the cultural performative norm that affects the lives of Jairaj, Ratna and even Amritlal. Judith Butler's Gender Trouble (1990) argued that "Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expression" that are said to be its results." Thus, sex is biological and gender is social (Butler, Judith, 1990 p.24,25).

The play plots around an affluent modern Parikh family, Jairaj and Ratna, the middle-aged couple wanting their daughter Lata to become an accomplished dancer and achieve the fame and glory that a proficient classical dancer is entitled to Amritlal the patriarch of the family. Amongst the other themes of the play, the theme of human relationships and human weaknesses is also dealt with as the characters throughout the play struggle to come to terms with the complexity of intersection relations. The title is suggestive of the central challenge faced by the male protagonist, Jairaj, "[if] he [can] dance like a man", as the very notion of dance as opposed to that of maleness and considered only as a female (Jacob, Jerin, 2018) activity and more so by women of disgrace. The title itself suggests that a man is supposed to do the work which suits the man and not pursue his career in anything else which makes him less of a man ( *Dance Like a Man* — Mahesh Dattani, 2016). Amritlal Parikh a reformist, a freedom fighter and an influential personality in society in new India cannot imagine that the choice of his son's profession would not just rob Jairaj of any status but even he may lose what he had earned over the years. The basic unwritten laws of gender identities that are prevalent in our hegemonic society prevent Jairaj to choose dance as his profession (Konar, Ankur, 2018). Amritlal's unacceptance of his son becoming a dancer, Ratna fulfilling her passion misguiding him throughout his career, Jairaj's self-doubt in his abilities to take care of his family, earn enough to maintain an expected lifestyle and eventually his lack of being the caregiver for his family show how gender stereotypes work in a patriarchal society.

Jairaj and Ratna live within the domain of the 'patriarch' Amritlal, the father of Jairaj. Such are the deep roots of the patriarchy that even after his demise, Jairaj and Ratna cannot seem to break out of it. In fact, Jairaj adorns his late father's shawl on his shoulder representing the burden of the patriarchal code of conduct that he himself struggled with all his life. Dance for Amritlal is a profession where men like him visit as patrons, women of their household should not learn it even for the sake of revival of dying art and it is unimaginable for his heir to learn it and make it into his source of earning. Amritlal uses every emotion he is capable of to make Jairaj into a 'man'. As he cannot accept his son pursuing his career as a dancer, he tries all the possible means to stop him from seeking his ambition. Disgust, anguish, hatred, manipulation, surrender, Amritlal attempts in every way to achieve his desire of a son. He stays adamant that either the effeminate teacher stops visiting their home or he and Ratna cannot call it their home anymore. Jairaj leaves and takes Ratna along with him. But the home they choose to stay in is even worse than Amritlal's, at Ratna's uncle's house. It is even less

than twenty-four hours that the Uncle thinks his own niece under his care is an object of satiation. The male gaze is a manifestation of unequal social power, between the gazing man and the gazed-upon woman; and also is a conscious and subconscious social effort to develop gender inequality in service to a patriarchal sexual order. The male gaze is a social construct derived from the ideologies and discourses of patriarchy (Male Gaze, 2022).

Dattani's portrayals of Jairaj & Ratna as a subjugated class in mainstream society are strongly visible. Agrawal quotes Gayatri Spivak's view on patriarchy. She quotes that "all subjugated classes of society are not permitted to speak of their rights and duties. They are left to survive in the confined spaces of domesticity, kept in the dark to bear the burden of patriarchy in silence and sobbing" (Agrawal, Beena, 2008, p.69). Jairaj and Ratna, both with their common passion for dance, are bound to each other through marriage, in a lifelong companionship though love has ceased to exist between them due to the hatred for how they manipulated each other's careers of dance. They both desire to make dance their profession and fulfil their ambition. However, throughout the play, Jairaj appears as one who suffers on account of choosing his own path, which was untrodden by others.

Amritlal as a father wishes his son to have the best, he also worries that his son's choices would not make him anything if he pursued them any longer. He gave his son the freedom to practice dance instead of cricket as a young boy but he was worried when the hobby for dance as a boy grew into a passion for Jairaj as an adult. Jairaj desired to take his passion for dance as his profession and that would lead his son nowhere and he would not be able to support his family in future. Amritlal feared that his son, unable to take the role of man by the social norms, would fail to win the love and respect a wife has for her husband. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri says, "The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him 'womanly' – an effeminate man – the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned." (Chaudhuri, Asha Kumari, 2005, p.68). Jairaj's character can be best understood in the light of what Sheila Ruth observes, in her essay on "The Dynamics of Patriarchy", the traits of an ideal patriarchal male. According to her he "... must be not only brave but never-timid; not only independent but never-needful; not only strong but never-weak. Committed to victory in battle, which is his first priority, he is a man of constraint and restraint, for violent emotions of any kind might deter him from his rationally designed course or strategy" (Ruth, Sheila, 1990, p.48). Jairaj faithfully follows his hobby though he is aware that he is Ratna's puppet who pulls the strings of his life, passion and profession with the directions of Amritlal.

For Ratna Dance was her ambition, and purpose in life and for that, she married Jairaj who would never stop her from dancing. Ratna's ambition and need to shine in the limelight were so powerful that she played with his emotions by misguiding him constantly, keeping him out of the limelight with a stone heart. However, she is aware of his support for the pursuit of her ambitions hence she never tells him his real worth to dance as a profession. To gain personal aims, she sacrifices Jairaj's abilities.

Jairaj was manly enough for Amritlal, Ratna, Lata and even Vishwas, it was his mentality that wasn't male than his physical self. For Amritlal maleness was a profession that was acceptable by the social norms. "A woman in a man's world is considered progressive, but a man in a woman's world is considered pathetic." (Dattani, Mahesh, 2006, p.166)

For Ratna maleness meant one's independent decision making power and once that decision was made seeing it through, living on one's own conditions, standing on one's own feet without any support and some others that Jairaj lacked.

"You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours ( Dattani, Mahesh, 2006, p.147).

Jairaj himself wants to prove his maleness to his father, wife and daughter and is willing to do things that would please them to consider him a man. His self-esteem is destroyed scrupulously by Ratna. Jairaj wants to win the approval of Ratna as a Man. For Lata's performance due to an unfortunate accident with the mridangam player, Ratna is frantically looking for a replacement. Jairaj says "Will finding a musician make me a man?" ( Dattani, Mahesh, 2006, p.123).

## II. CONCLUSION

As the characters move forward in the play through their own struggles and trials and triumphs it seems that there are reversals of gendered roles in the family. The struggles that women have to endure to materialize their dreams in the so-called patriarchal world like compromise, manipulation, discreteness, jealousy and bitter guilt are Jairaj's destiny in the play. Jairaj is the other, the second sex in the Parikh household. Jairaj seems to lack masculinity because in a man's world he is oppressed, forced and tortured. Jairaj appears to have been gazed upon as an LGBTQ in the play by his father and his love of life Ratna than the patriarchal representative.

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