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Abstract

Dance Like a Man is one of the most popular and widely appreciated dramatic creation of Dattani which throws light on the lives of people who feel exhausted and frustrated due to not getting proper support from their own surroundings. The present study is a modest attempt to expose the tensions built in the drama *Dance Like a Man* between the old set up mind and the modern liberal outlook, to say, the age and the youth. The main theme of the play is about gender construct and the resultant tension is because of not performing the expected gender role in the framework of society.

Key-Words

Tradition, Modernity, Patriarch, Conservative, Autocrat.

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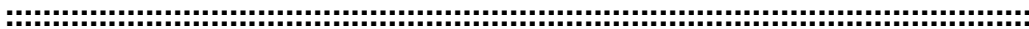
A STUDY OF DRAMATIC TENSION IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *DANCE LIKE A MAN*

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Dramatic world of Mahesh Dattani presents real life situation dealing with the serious problems prevailing in urban India. *Dance Like a Man* is one of the most popular and widely appreciated dramatic creation of Dattani which throws light on the lives of people who feel exhausted and frustrated due to not getting proper support from their own surroundings. The present study is a modest attempt to expose the tensions built in the drama *Dance Like a Man* between the old set up mind and the modern liberal outlook, to say, the age and the youth covering over all the serious discussions about managing a mrindagam between parents of Lata, setting marriage, building future plan for career in dance, and above all establishing identity in the world of art. Art has its own world & the artists in it seek for promotion and appreciation. The study here focuses on the protagonists who are artists and who want to pursue their career in dancing. They want to dance not for earning bread alone but for the sake of name and fame also.

Mahesh Dattani, winner of the esteemed Sahitya Academy Award for his *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998, is not only one of the most promising and potential dramatists in present Indian English dramatic scenario but a voice of voiceless people of our Indian society. He wrote his first play *Where There is a Will* in 1986 and after that he never looked back and now he has to his credit with more than a dozen plays. Dattani himself said, "The love of my life is drama"(Dhawan 7). The influence of G. B. Shaw and Ibsen exercised on the dramatist to a great extent. Like Shaw he has turned theatre into a real practice room to discuss the crisis in everyday life and like Ibsen he shows the issues of the individual in connection to his social environment and presents men and women facing the problems living in an unhealthy atmosphere and society. Shaw also finds that unjust law, unhealthy conditions and institutions of society often distort image of human beings and repress their inherent qualities full of emotions and feelings. Dattani also realizes the same. He gives more importance to emotions than thought while Shaw only to that of intellect. "Within the

periphery of theatre, he dramatizes human will, desires and determinations that mould and modify the dynamics of human relationship inside and outside the family” (Agarwal 181).

Dattani shows his great concerns to the common men and depicts the society and surrounding in which he lives and experiences. “He bares life to the bone and acts as a spokesman for all the marginalized people” (Jain 161). He dramatizes the pathetic picture of the miserable people and their sufferings and plights in his plays. His plays deal with the issues of hijra community, gay persons, homosexuality, communal hatred, social prejudice, gender issues, child sexual abuse, marriage and career, conflict between tradition and modernity, patriarchal social system, interpersonal relationship, identity crisis and so on. “All the issues in fact which Dattani has made his own in his stage work” (*Collected Plays* viii). The title of the play *Dance Like a Man* deals with the theme of the play. Dattani himself, in one of the interviews, says:

Thematically, I talk about the areas where the individual feels exhausted. My plays are about such people who are striving to expand this space. They live on the fringes of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringe space for themselves as they can. (As quoted by Karthika)

Dattani here gives a clear cut view about his themes and concerns of the play. Though the play was written in 1989, it moves back and forth in time, from the 1980s to the 1940s to the 1980s. There is a young Ratna and Jairaj, as well as an old Ratna and Jairaj. Oscillating between time past and time present, the play revolves round the story of two *Bharatanatayam* dancers, Jairaj Parekh and his wife Ratna, the decisions they take and the repercussions of the decisions. “Both well past their prime, juxtaposed with that of their daughter, Lata, who is on the brink of establishing herself as a brilliant dancer. Her imminent success creates tension and jealousy, and the readers are drawn into the dark secrets of family relationships and conflicts between generations” (Shrivastava 169). They live with their only daughter, Lata in the old fashioned but a big house, which is situated in the heart of the city. They want to make Lata a famous dancer, a dream they cherished in their life. It should be noticed that in this drama, one actor plays two roles – Amritlal and Old Jairaj, Young Jairaj and Viswas, and Young Ratna and Lata. A single actor only plays a role of old Ratna.

The Play *Dance Like a Man* begins with a healthy conversation between Viswas and Lata. Like Lata, Viswas is also the only child of his parents. Both have not seen the difficult times and their life are at the very ease. But the happy atmosphere changes into a tension as soon as Jairaj and Ratna appear on the stage. They are highly disturbed about Lata’s performance because of their mridanganist’s illness as they would like to make their dreams come true through their daughter. Their extreme worry and concerns about her performance at high profile dance party creates tension and the matrimonial conversation for which Viswas came to Jairaj’s house sets aside. Without seeing Viswas, they discuss their problem:

Our daughter is giving a performance that will make her career and she is not going to have a mridangam playing for her. How do you expect her to give her best? How do you expect her to dance? What will we announce to the President of India? There will be no dance tonight? Tell all those foreign diplomats to go home? In my life I've had problem... (43).

And further,

Jairaj: We've had problems before.

Ratna: But never one like this. Oh God! What will we do? (40)

The main theme of the play is about gender construct and the resultant tension is because of not performing the expected gender role in the framework of society. The trouble is that Jairaj wants to dance, not just as a hobby but pursue it as a career. It raises questions about traditional gender roles and forces us to see within ourselves. Do we follow the same old setup tradition in the way we think? Or are we modern and open to new ideas or pretend to be so with open heart what we are not? It's not too easy to answer these questions. Dattani, here, seems to be exploring two key issues: What makes a man a man? How strong is patriarchal authority?

Amritlal, the patriarch and father of Jairaj, is a freedom fighter and he cannot adjust himself with the idea that his son would adopt dance as a career. He asks him to "be a man" and not a dancer because dance is generally performed by women. Although he makes all the arrangements for dance rehearsal in his house but he tells Jairaj:

I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our 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. (55)

Ratna cherishes in her life a dream, the only dream to dance. For this reason she marries Jairaj that he will allow her to continue her dream. The playwright in the play has used time shift technique. Amritlal Parekh is presented as one of the richest persons in the town and a man of liberal ideology. But he does not like his son's obsession with dance nor want to allow him and his wife to "have a decent rehearsal in this house? I can't have some peace and quiet in my house! It is bad enough having had to convert the library into a practice hall for you (55)."

A conflict between father and son in the play is very well exposed. The father is a symbol of having traditional values whereas the son is a representative of modern outlook. That is why he strongly objects his son's obsession of dance and also checks the movements of Ratna. The playwright here gives a bitter commentary upon a patriarchal family system portraying the autocratic father. The family ties and marriage difference are shown through a series of discords among the members of a single family. Amritlal parekh supports the tradition values and asks his son not to get influenced by his wife Ratna and behaves like a man.

He feels sorry for "consenting to your marriage (56)." At this Jairaj retorts: "Don't pretend. It suited your

image - that of a liberal-minded person - to have daughter-in-law from outside your community.” (56) Angry tone of Amritlal is heard when he objects Ratna of having association with a ‘*devdasi*’ and learning art of dance at her house with the fear of spoiling his family reputation. Hence Jairaj puts a question to his father:

Where are your progressive ideas now? ... Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn’t fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us! (56)

But Amritlal has a different outlook and says:

Our priority is to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to our society (56)... We are building ashrams for these unfortunate women! Educating them, reforming them... (57)

The above conversation increases a tension in the play. It gets its height when Amritlal narrates his past experience and bitter truth of his life to Ratna:

Times haven’t changed when we were newly married, Jai’s mother and I were not allowed to go anywhere on our own, especially not to see the moving pictures. But we were allowed to go to the temple. So whenever we wanted to see the moving pictures, we would tell everyone at home that we were going to the temple. Nobody stopped us. (59)

Dattani in the play narrates a long description of how Ratna and Jairaj are adamant to learn the art of *abhinaya* and nothing can stop them from learning this art. Amritlal forbids Ratna to dance in old lady’s courtyard, saying “I don’t want you seeing that woman again. That’s final. And that is all I have to say” (61) but she says that dance is a “divine activity.” Amritlal objects not only for Chennai Amma to whom he considers a prostitute but also for inviting his *Guruji* at their house. This clash forces Jairaj and Ratna to leave the house. In this way Jairaj shows his protest against traditional notions and restrictions imposed upon him and his wife by Amritlal and decide never to set a foot here. In a defiant tone Jairaj says: “As from now we are no longer under your care. And will never be again. Never.” (64)

Hence they leave the house setting aside old restrictions to the wind. Jairaj realizes that now he can take breathe in open-air and is free from the clutches of autocratic father. In this climax we see that the clash between the father and the son is not a simple one but it is a conflict between the traditional and conservative father and the son with a liberal modern outlook.

But the drama exposes their retreat after two days to the traditional and conservative father’s house. Modern Jairaj tastes the fruit of hostile surroundings and becomes a very submissive yielding to his father’s whims and fancy. Ratna also transforms herself and becomes gentle and polite. They agree to follow the unwritten laws of family conduct.

Tension in the drama is not shortened here. But the best thing to be noticed in it that Amritlal being a loving father does not make them feel shame with their defeat. He asks Ratna to help him Jairaj grow up: “Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up...Help me and I’ll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done.” (67) Ratna agrees and does accordingly. She is an ambitious lady who will not stop at anything to make her dream come true. In doing so, she neglects even her own son Shankar who dies because of the overdose of opium given to him by his *ayah*. Ratna calls Jairaj a mediocre dancer and blames him for destroying his career by not accepting invitation to dance alone.

If you dance alone, your mediocrity would be exposed? Yes ask yourself your true worth and you will get your answer. Yes, I did cut you off but then you deserved it! So don’t come to me saying I destroyed you. I didn’t have to. You did it all by yourself. And don’t expect me to feel sorry for you, because I’m too busy feeling sorry for myself and Shankar. When he is a little older, he will feel the need for a father. Oh, you will be around all right. Where will you go? But all he will see is your exterior. It won’t take him long to realize that (*points to his head*) there’s nobody home! (82-83)

Mental tension is exposed in the above speech. Every woman like Ratna wants her husband to look like a man, to work and behave like a man. That’s why she calls Jairaj “a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house for more than forty eight hours...You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house... (44)

Ratna gets frustrated facing many problems during the path of her dancing career. Her only son Shankar dies. She has to pay a great price to make her dreams come true. Nevertheless here only hope is her daughter, Lata. She wants her to make a national figure. Ratna is ready to marry Lata with Viswas only for one reason that he will let her dance As is clear in the following discussion between Lata and Viswas:

Viswas: Why? Aren’t they anxious to know who their lovely Lata is marrying?

Lata: Actually, they couldn’t care less who or what you are. As long as you let me dance.

Viswas: Hmm. And what if I whisk you away to Dubai and sell you to a sheikh?

Lata: Well, at least I’ll still be dancing in his harem! No seriously, they are not worried. (31)

Dattani’s plays depict the theme of frustrations due to the conservative and conventional as well as unfriendly and unhealthy surroundings. The play *Dance Like a Man* displays mental conflict resulting from a strong desire for being national celebrities. The dramatist very adroitly shows his familiarity with contemporary urban Indian society and raises the problems and issues of its time. From the above discussion it may safely be said that Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man* constitutes the theme of clash between the tradition and the modernity which build tensions throughout the play along with issues of gender, marriage and career and presents them very vividly and artistically.

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