

An Amendment of Masculinity in Dance Like A Man of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a thought-provoking playwright, has won the reputation of a man of letters, who is always ready to deal with the 'burning issues' of contemporary life and within the skeleton of society. Present age is the age of show off market economy in which caption holds the cap. But the plays of Mahesh Dattani open the door to enter, peep, study and provide the opportunity to amend your concepts about the issue. All the plays of Mahesh Dattani handle social issues not in general but the deep-rooted prejudices that should be amended. Same happens in the play, *Dance Like A Man* (1989) where he has represented an amendment of the image of masculinity and raised a definition of gender equality. He has unveiled the issues which society has been represented with decoration and tried to hide the wounds. The term 'Masculinity' refers to the social expectations of being a man. It is a socio-cultural concept. It attributes some roles, behaviour, characteristics which are assigned by cultural and political policies of a society to a body. It is not a biological concept. Mahesh Dattani, through the character of Jairaj, has amended the masculine image of man and the selection of profession by a man in the play.

Keywords: Gender equality, masculinity, amendment, society, culture.

In her essay Performative Acts and Gender Constitution Butler notes:

“Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler).

The transition of ancient art forms into commodities is an ordinary thing in modern times in which a certain type of cultural form developed as an integral part and parcel of the social system in which we are living. In most of the plays of Mahesh Dattani, the flash light is on the family as the representative unit of society and its corrupt morality and ideas.

This research paper examines the portrayal of masculinity and its evolution in the play "*Dance Like A Man*" by Mahesh Dattani. The paper analyzes how Dattani challenges traditional notions of masculinity through the characters and themes presented in the play. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of masculinity and its representation in the context of dance, this research paper aims to shed light on the societal constructs and stereotypes that hinder the expression of masculinity in non-conforming ways. The paper argues that Dattani's play serves as a catalyst for redefining masculinity and promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender identity and self-expression. The title of the play itself generates the idea that a man is supposed to perform the duties which is assigned to him not to pursue the other activities which make him less than a man.

By analyzing the play "*Dance Like A Man*" by Mahesh Dattani, it is found that it highlights the transformative potential of the arts in challenging and redefining conventional notions of masculinity.

Through the characters and themes presented in the play, Dattani encourages a more inclusive understanding of gender identity and self-expression, thereby breaking free from societal expectations and stereotypes. The findings of this research contribute to ongoing conversations about masculinity, gender identity, and the power of the arts in fostering social change.

In the play, *Dance Like A Man*, Amritlal is a 'freedom fighter' but after the departure of the British, he is as rich as a 'Sethji' by the profits on real estate. Amritlal is a freedom fighter but he wants to keep the liberty of his own son in his own hands because he thinks if his son, Jairaj goes with his choice in profession selection as dance. He will rebel against him by taking up the dance. Amritlal always focuses on the idea of a 'normal' man because it's above everything as he says:

"Do you know where a man's happiness lies?... In being a man."

Jairaj started to practice dance as a medium of self-expression of his feelings by his performances but after restrictions as a rebel that's why despite the opposition of his father he was eager to learn Kuchipudi. It is Ratna, his wife, who supported him in his dance and his revolutionary attitude in the starting but she also moves ahead.

“Amritlal: I have never seen a man with long hair.

Jairaj: All sadhus have long hair.

Amritlal: I don't mean them. I meant normal men. [...]

Jairaj: Are you saying that he is not...

Amritlal: I have also noticed the way he walks.”

Amritlal thinks that a male should perform the duties and activities of a male, assigned by the societal structure which shows the macho strength and power of a man. That is the reason, he is also against his son's growing hair like his Guruji whose sight and body posture shakes the ground beneath him because it suggests the homosexuality which is not suitable in the social structure of Amritlal. That's why Amritlal tries to convince him to play cricket rather than to practice dancing. Dattani states, "No other dance form has such a fascinating history of oppression and Renaissance as Bharatnatyam."

In ancient times, dancing and singing were not considered as respectful professions for the high class male as well as female. It was the profession of prostitutes and other lower class people. In this scenario, to think about the dance as the profession of a man is just like a sin or an impure action. In the words of Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri: “Through the seamless movement in time and space, Dattani weaves in the intricate web of gender relationships and the givens of societal norm spanning three generations”

Dattani has investigated very carefully the gender roles, prejudices and psychological thoughts related to gender roles and identities that's why he puts the man in the world of woman and woman in the world of man, to see what is the reaction of this action. It is Amritlal's response which clarifies everything: "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's the world is pathetic...sick."

It should be clearly observed that every individual is the part of society and its streams but we must be aware of the point that it is not the reality, it is a forced harmonious picture which is represented with colours in front of us.

Mahesh Dattani's play "*Dance Like A Man*" represents the family and its members as a product of the value system of the society which propagates the ideology of patriarchy and other power structures. Amritlal is the most perfect model of "man" who is enjoying the status of "man" because he is the patriarch, bread and butter earner and head of the family who has the authority over his son, Jairaj and

daughter-in-law, Ratna while Jairaj doesn't fit in the form of "manhood" because he has the idea about his son (Shankar) –

" When he grows up, I will teach him how to dance - the dance of Shiva - the dance of man " Tradition of a ' normal man' is a unique reality which is established as natural. This so called Natural reality is a product of repetition. As Butler wrote:

“Gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed”.

"Dance" is a prominent base by which Dattani is trying to amend the concept of ' masculinity '.

This 'dance' is just like a catalyst, it over- excites the internal confusion, conflicts and compromises and questions a man's identity and equality. It flips the gender and opens the opposition side of point of view and displays that not only women but men also can be an injured party by such ideologies of society and patriarchy. Both Jairaj and Ratna are surviving under the domain of Amritlal to whom dance is a profession of prostitutes. That's why he cannot approve it for his daughter- in - law and mind- boggling for his only son to choose career in this field at the cost of his prestige. One can understand how unbearable it is to hear the sounds of dancing bells during the practice sessions and he cannot tolerate their Guru with his effeminate behaviour and long hairs which are suggesting the homosexuality. He has the fear that the practice of dance under the shadow of such an effeminate teacher will change his son into an effeminate man or we can say he will go on the path of homosexuality which is not acceptable at any cost to Amritlal. So, he tries everything to stop his journey by not providing a single penny and disowning him from the house and property. As Ratna commits:

"He realised he couldn't stop me, but he could you - through me."

He also deals with Ratna to keep his son 'a man' and grant the permission to make her career in dance instead of his son and desirous Ratna deceives her husband. Her decision turned Jairaj into an alcoholic. To omit the obsession of dance of Jairaj, he declares:

"Bharatnatyam is the craft of the prostitute to show off her wares."

Amritlal has the traditional performative structure of gender identity in which a woman fits in the role of dancer but he doesn't allow it easily and tries to control her actions. He forbids her practices in the courtyard of devadasi Chenni Amma, it is damaging the prestige of his family

"Amritlal: And practice in her courtyard for all passers-by to see.

Ratna: Only those who are curious enough to peep over her wall to see where the sound of dancing bells are coming from.

Amritlal: Your bells.The sound of your bells.

Ratna: Yes.

Amritlal: The sound of your bells coming from the courtyard of a prostitute.

Ratna: She is seventy-five years old.

Amritlal: And people peer over her walls to see my daughter-in-law dancing in her courtyard.”

A man has nothing to do with this type of art. By chance, anyone who has learnt it, is not the real man in the true sense. But Jairaj is determined to teach his son, Shankar - the embodiment of 'man'ly dance' - the dance of Shiva - the dance of man. Unfortunately his son doesn't survive due to over doses of drugs while his father, Amritlal believes that nowadays the temples are rotating in brothels due to the practice of dance.

Ratna, herself a dancer and wife of a dancer, can not protect herself of being caught in the trap to look out the 'real man' in his husband as a money-earner of the family and addresses him:

"You! You are nothing but 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." Later, Jairaj also contradicts and questions the idea of "man"hood when he reveals the masculinity of Ratna's uncle who has supported them the basic needs. It is a bitter sarcastic interrogative conversation:

"While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter?"

In a nutshell, Dattani has tried to amend the idea of masculinity with the help of the ideas of Jairaj and the allusion of Shiva - the God of dance and a classical symbol of androgyny. Dance is an important instrument to deconstruct the idea of 'masculinity' in the play. It throws out every character from the stage and occupies the whole area to amend the concept. It represents the bitter truth of how power and selfishness play the major role in the formation of ideologies which govern the lives of people generation after generation. By giving voice to speechless people, Dattani has raised many suppressed questions from the graveyard of masculinity, gender identity and other overtones because it is a 'man' who is suffering under the authority of patriarchy not a 'woman'. Dattani has exposed the inner reality of these gender roles and identities which are made of prejudices, stereotypes, ideologies and authorities in the disguised forms of tradition and culture. It reveals how the meaning of independence, freedom and progress has different meanings for different people and gender. How can artificial boundaries stop a man or woman from expressing himself or herself in his / her natural existence? It states strictly the amendment of the concepts of masculinity as well as femininity.

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