

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue-5 (October 2016)

*The Criterion* 

7th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## The Issue of Alternative Gender Roles in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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### Introduction

Mahesh Dattani explores the issue of alternative gender roles in the play *Dance like a Man*. Sex identity is biological phenomenon but gender identity is a socially constructed aspect of human personality. It often imparts no freedom to individual to frame the images of life beyond the set patterns of ideologies. The burden of gender identity is so integrated in human self and social conventions that the idea of going beyond them only brings chaos and fragmentation in human self. In his plays, Dattani not only projects social reality but also present 'grotesque' image of life born out of those images. Regarding this function of his dramatic art, he states:

The function of drama in my opinion is not merely to reflect malfunctions of society but to act like "freak mirrors" in a carnival and to project grotesque images at all passes for normal in our world, it is ugly but funny. (Roy : 2002)

These grotesque images of life emerge out of man's desire to search out alternative solutions of personal desires that are essential for self preservation and self-survival.

In *Dance like a Man*, Dattani dramatizes the distortion of human self of a sensitive artist who conceives the images of life beyond rigid conventions that are gender specific. In the critical evaluation of the issue of alternative gender identity in the play, it is said:

The grotesque images are not only 'ugly' and 'funny' but they are also the images existing in the inner psyche of all human behaviour. In dramatic structure, the shift from time to timeless appears only when dramatist synthesize the grotesque images with the subtlety of life, seen with unseen, society with self, past with present and stage with page. (Agarwal : 96)

Dattani precedes in the play with the vision that binary of male and female that is an absolutely social construct adversely affects the equilibrium of human psyche. For the dilemma born out of this binary relationship, an individual fails to seek wholeness as it appears with the protagonist of the play *Dance like a Man*. Though Dattani's vision is not depressing because in the texture of the play. Dattani traces a growth of the consciousness of Jairaj who defines his human self beyond existing binaries. It is observed:

It is a state of the elevation of human consciousness that wraps the distinction of male and female into a state of "wholeness", corresponding with the rhythm of life. In his self discovery Jairaj discovers the divine essence of human self that is neither male nor female. (Agarwal : 104)

### Discussion

The play *Dance like a Man* was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall Bangalore on 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1989 as a part of Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. The central

plot of the play moves around the mental crisis of Jairaj who comes in conflict with his wife Ratna and his father Amritlal because he thinks differently. The conflict of Jairaj involves the issue of compulsions of gender ideologies, identity crisis and perpetual conflict of man's desires against the forces of fate. Dattani tries to emphasize that individual psyche essentially shares the shadows of defined social codes. He dramatizes "to examine our own individual and collective consciousness." (Devanesen : 383)

The cardinal core of the play *Dance like a Man* is about "gender construct." (Srivatava : 170) Jairaj, the protagonist has a passion for Bharatnatyam dance and he wants to be a consummate dancer. His wife Ratna is also dancer. Both are married but after marriage Ratna wants Jairaj to be the provider and also to be a perfect man. Jairaj wants to adopt dance as his career but social conditions do not permit him to do so. In Indian society, dance is supposed to be a feminine art. Nobody cares for the aesthetic craving of Jairaj. It adversely affects his relationship with his father and even his relationship with his wife Ratna. The frustration in the life of Jairaj and Ratna subsequently adversely affects their own daughter Lata who is also a dancer. The dramatic irony is evident when Ratna and Jairaj have a passion for the same art but their desires and responses too essentially share the burden of social images. It is said:

*Dance like a Man* is the play in which the politics of aesthetics are shown to seep into the lives. Ratna and Jaisingh with unsettling brutality rendering their mutual and uncommon love for a common art into a fight for self assertion rather than reason for collaborative creativity. (Srivastava : 170)

The action shifts in terms of time and space – past and present – social and personal. Ratna for herself identity, is not ready to sacrifice her career as a dancer. The gender determined roles in *Dance like a Man* affects the nature of personal relationship. Ratna neglects her married life and her responsibility as a wife to sustain her position as the best dancer. In contrast to the enthusiasm of Ratna, Jaisingh's ambition to be a dancer was a burden to his consciousness. Social constraints do not permit him to be a dancer. Jairaj's father Amritlal does not like his son's idea of rehearsal in his house. Amritlal discourages Jairaj, "You can't have a decent rehearsal in this house? I can't have some peace and quiet in my house! It's bad enough having had to convert the library into a practice hall for you." (178)

Amritlal is also a slave of social image. He wants to make his son happy but has no courage to practice the art that is not recommended by the conventions of society. Amritlal with deep distress replies:

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. (414-415)

Gender prejudices also affects the physical postures and dresses of Jairaj. Amritlal does not favour the long hair of Jairaj's Guru because man does not keep long hair like their women. Jairaj leaves his parental home and shifts in Ratna's home.

In Ratna and Jairaj relationship, Amritlal plays a significant role for the manipulation of their desires according to the expectations of society. Amritlal bargains with Ratna to make Jairaj to leave his passion of dance. For that purpose he is ready provide her mental and financial security. He challenges Ratna's silent womanhood to stir her consciousness in the direction of the reversal of the roles. He interrogates, "How do you feel? How do you feel dancing with your husband? Who do you think of him when you see him all dressed and...

made up.” (426) He further continues, “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.” (427) In this observation two facts are evident – (a) subservience to gender binaries is an essential phenomenon, (b) woman centric activities are supposed to be inferior and in a woman centric art, there is deterioration of male ego. Such an existing social system is dangerous to determine the psyche in a particular direction. He manipulates to make her release Jairaj by proving that he is an inferior dancer. Moreover his success would be a ruin to her career. These two suggestions make Ratna conscious only for her personal interest. Amritlal’s request “Help me make him an adult” and in return all her freedom to remake her career as a dancer. Ratna in her craze to preserve her identity and talent becomes hostile to the alternative role selected by Jairaj. As soon as Jairaj gets a realization of the whole conspiracy, he almost becomes frantic. Jairaj blames Ratna but it seems impossible for him to protect his shattered self both at mental and physical level. The resemblance expressed in the following statement is suggestive of the accumulated fury against the social prejudices in the formation, selection and implementation of gender determined roles. The pathetic cry of Jairaj is suggestive of his mental status:

You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names, in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting. (443)

In order to reduce the strain of hostile conditions, Jairaj turns into a drunkard. It is an irony of society that Ratna joins the battle against Jairaj but never takes the responsibility for Jairaj’s frustrations. Jairaj blames Ratna:

You destroy me first, then give the impression that there wasn’t much to destroy in the first place, then blame it all on my father, then suggest I make myself useful by being your stage prop, then use words like ‘regret’ and expect me to shrug my shoulders, resign myself and believe that my calling in life is to serve you. (444)

In *Dance like a Man*, Dattani takes a holistic view of human personality. Culture, society, family, personal desire collectively contribute in the constitution of human personality, Ratna humiliates Jairaj as a ‘Mediocre dancer’ and destroys his potential as a dancer. The decision of adopting an alternative role even destroys the masculine self of Jairaj. Ratna as woman demands and looks forward for masculine self of Jairaj. Ratna challenges his ‘self’ because her perceptions are rooted in the socially accepted conventions:

Why didn’t you accept those invitations when they came? Was it because of me or were you too afraid that if you danced alone, your mediocrity would be exposed? Yes, ask yourself your true worth and you will get answer... you did it by yourself. And don’t expect me to feel sorry for you, because I’m too busy feeling sorry for myself and Shanker. When he is 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. (445)

These interrogations of Ratna are the index of social responses that modify the psyche both of Ratna and Jairaj. Ratna also finds it difficult to cope up with the alternative role of Jairaj.

In case of Ratna two urges are prominent firstly her quest to frame her career as a dance and secondly her reaffirmation of her female identity. Her anger against Jairaj is a manifestation her depression of thwarted womanhood. However her impatient to make Lata a

successful dancer and attain fulfillment in marriage in the company of Viswas who makes her dance is a quest for the unification of binarism existing in man and woman relationship. Ratna's course of action suggests, "Sex is a prominent basic urge in woman's life and its pace can't be interpreted in terms of social conventions." (Agarwal : 102) In the construction of female psyche sexual desires play a significant role and its force is even above the specifications of gender determined roles. Ratna's crisis has come close to the observation of Bardwick who mentions:

The psychoanalytic idea that women are moved by strong sexual drives in the same way that men are, has led to the over estimation of sex as a significant variables in the life of woman. There has also been a lack of recognition of the cyclic nature of desire and of the strength of maternity nurturance as a powerful female need." (Bardwick : 59)

The dancing of Lata and Viswas in union turns back the consciousness of Jairaj and Ratna. The young Jairaj embraces Ratna with the realization, "We dance perfectly in union".

### Conclusion

The final conclusion of the crisis of Ratna and Jairaj comes in the form of realization, "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God." (447) With this realization, socio cultural and socio-psychological tension subsides with a universal conclusion that for the 'wholeness' the distinctions must be subsided. It is said:

The idea of 'Dance like a God' imparts a rare sublimity and consolation to the storm of passion raised in the play. It is a state of the elevation of human consciousness that wraps the distinction of male and female into a state of 'Wholeness' corresponding with the rhythm of life. In his self discovery Jairaj discovers the divine essence of human self that is neither male nor female. (Agarwal : 104)

In the Play *Dance like a Man* Dattani develops the idea that gender roles are the part of collective unconscious inherited from cultural practices. In absence of the conformity to them, there is a possibility of the image of a crippled and aborted self. Even the aesthetic of human potential is subordinated to gender ideologies.

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