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A Socio-Psychological Analysis of Gender Identity: Dynamics of Human Relationships through Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract:

In the present research paper the socio-psychological analysis of gender identity has been done through two plays of Mahesh Dattani namely Tara and Dance like a Man. Dattani explores that unexplored aspect of human life which was kept under the carpet for a long time. The play Tara is basically related with the issue of gender bias. It is a pathetic dramatic representation of the suffering of two Siamese twins. Same gender issues have been highlighted by Dattani in Dance Like a Man through the lense of socio-psychological ones, but the focus is more on the family relationships.

Keywords: Socio-psychological analysis, Mahesh Dattani , Tara , Dance Like a Man, family relationships.

Introduction:

India is basically a land of rich cultural heritage having a glorious tradition of art, culture, drama, dance and performance. It was only when Britishers established themselves in India that the genre Indian drama written in English started gaining popularity. Dattani is radical and dynamic dramatist in the large framework of drama. He locates himself as the change but without regressing into his past, it was a venture to carve a new hope and new tradition. His effort was to promote theatre to meet challenges of multilingual community of India. Dattani confesses, "you've got to be true to your expression also. English is for me a sort of given one. Most of the issues taken up by Dattani in his plays, are radical, unconventional, contemporary and free from taboos. Homosexuality, lesbianism, child sexual abuse, communalism and gender discrimination are some of the favorite subjects with him. He prepared the stage for a specific realism on the lines of Isben and Shaw. For him man is an integral part of society and consciously or unconsciously the creeping influences of societal set up, determine the fabric of relationship around him. In the play Tara, in the background of the conflict of familial relationship, he shares the anguish of gender discrimination in society.

Dance like a Man, Dattani expresses his resentment for close fisted gender roles in the conventional social framework where the passion of an artist is quashed against the restrictions imposed on an individual according to their gender roles.

The play *Tara* was first performed as *Twinkle Tara* at Chidian Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23rd October 1990 by Playpen Performing Art Group. The plot of the play revolves around the family of Mr. Patel. It is related with the life of congenial twins, one girl and one boy who are joined together at the hip. Chandan is the son and Tara is the daughter. They are to be separated through a surgical operation which will mean the danger to life of one of them and in this operation mother prefers that male child should be stronger. The operation was arranged in such a manner that Chandan got the lease of life and poor Tara was left crippled. She was too innocent to realize the horrors of tragedy. It was all arranged by Bharati, mother of Tara. After the operation, the idea of self guilt grips her conscience. Not only Bharati but Chandan also suffers from the conscious injustice done to Tara. To get rid of the shadows of horrible memories, Chandan decides to escape to London. His anguish was so intense that he failed to get rid of his personal guilt and only confessed, “forgive me Tara, forgive me, for making it my tragedy.”

The play is woven of the complex web of relationships. Dattani pleads for two issues: the gender discrimination and the corruption prevalent in medical profession along with concern for the deterioration of values in general.

Dance Like a Man is a play related with gender issues with an exceptional originality of conception. The social myth that male and female roles are predecided in social order and the efforts to cross the boundaries prove a prelude to the confrontation between individual's choices and the expectations of society is the central motif in the play. Like other plays of Dattani, ‘family’ and ‘home’ is the locale of action even in this play. He deals with the crisis of three generations in the family of Amritlal, an image of a dictatorial household. The text is focused on the life of Ratna and Jairaj classical dancers based in Bangalore. They reflect on their past how it moulds and modifies their identities in the present. Jairaj has an innate passion for the classical dance *Bharatanatyam*. Amritlal being disgusted with the effeminate nature of the art of dance, tries his best to dissuade his son from pursuing his career in dancing.

He contrives a conspiracy with Rana to empower the passionate relationship of Ratna and Jairaj. Their discontent subsequently casts its gloomy shadows on the life of Lata, their daughter. They thrust their ambitions on her. Lata decides to marry Vishwas, who had no objection in their art.

Dynamics of Human Relationships in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

The play *Tara* is basically related with the issue of gender bias. It is a pathetic dramatic representation of the suffering of two Siamese twins. Besides the issue of gender bias, the play *Tara* has a more significant message to convey. The social relevance of the play has been subordinated to psycho-philosophical issues integrated in gender bias. The plot of *Tara* is arranged around familial relationship where each individual in his own way has to bear the burden of social values and their lives. In *Tara*, Mr. Patel, the native of Gujarat, is married to Bharati, a Kannadiga. Cultural diversities and cultural prejudices make their relationship a failure. After this marriage, Mr. Patel was forced to leave his parental home because this relationship was not accepted by his parents. The shadow of insecurity looms large over him. He had a painful realization. “My father had to leave his parents because of the marriage.... my mother's father was a very influential person. But my dad didn't take any help from him. Today my dad is the general manager of ...” (Collected plays, 388). The

insecurity of the separation from parents and subsequently the birth of Siamese twins, Mr. Patel finds himself isolated. The insecurity increases with the interference of Bharati's parents in his marital life. He was forced to decide for the surgery of kids for their separation. With the successful surgery, Chandan and Tara are separated but after separation they start reformulating themselves. However, in their separation, they lose their confidence, companionship and even their will to survive. Chandan has a realization that he is responsible for Tara's suffering. In order to escape the horror of situation, Chandan leaves for London to get a new identity 'Dan'. He adopts writing as his career and withdraws himself from the external world. He finds it difficult to compromise with injustices done to his sister. For him Tara was an inseparable part of his inner self. The separation and death of Tara becomes a prelude to his own doom.

The play *Tara* is exposed through the consciousness of Chandan who emotionally suffers after the forced separation. It is not only a matter of Tara's tragedy because it involves some significant issues related with 'self' and 'society'.

In the play *Tara*, all the major characters, Bharati, Mr. Patel and Chandan suffer with uncompromising sense of guilt and everyone seeks an outlet for guilt sharing the suffering of Tara. More than social dilemma, the psychological tension of each character is more prominent. Mr. Patel for his sense of guilt born out of the injustice done to his parents, fails to do justice with his wife. Bharati, in order to resist the anger of Mr. Patel, unknowingly did injustice with her own daughter. Chandan suffers for the wrong choices of his parents. With a view to compensate for his loss, he alienates Bharati in a desperate attempt to escape the pain of the deprivation of the parental authority. He does not allow insight into their internal insecurity. Dattani makes extensive use of flashbacks. Mr. Patel's past reflects in the discontent of his marital life. Bharati under the authority of rigid parents, unknowingly do injustice to her own daughter. The inner psyche and external action, extend the impression that man has ultimately to bear the pain of guilt for his own wrong doings.

Dattani with the self-reflective method in *Tara*, has created the possibility of objective assessment of each character along with a reflection on their interpersonal relationship. Chandan recalls the moments when separation took place. He used to feel himself stronger, "I am strong, my mother made me strong". On this flash he reveals the nature of the relationship of his parents and its impact on the rearing of Chandan and Tara.

The play *Tara* without debate is a tragedy of the confrontation of individual choices against social conventions. However, the suffering of Dan, Bharati and Mr. Patel is an argument in defence of the fact that 'social self' of an individual is insignificant without its harmony with the psycho philosophical self. This elevated state of 'human self' is the ultimate reality and it is beyond the concept of gender discrimination.

Mahesh Dattani in his dramatic world exposes both the traditional and non-traditional approaches to familial relationship. In *Tara* the marital life of Mr. and Mrs. Patel expresses the arguments for and against the prejudices of male and female relationship. Mr. Patel, maintains his absolute authority in the decision making about the family. Contrarily, in the later part of the play, he turns out to be a caring husband in his looking after Bharati during her bouts of depression.

Gender Issues: Dance Like A Man

The play *Dance Like a Man*, was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 22nd September 1989, as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre festival. It was also performed by Lillette Dubey. It is a play where Dattani seems to seek intermediate ground between narrative and dramatic. The clash of motives of Jairaj with his wife and father involves the issue of identity crisis, the stigma of gender binary existing at the centre in socio-cultural thought and the perpetual conflict of man's desires and forces of destiny. Along with multiple layers of suggestions beyond the spectacle at the stage, the shift of the position of characters as younger Jairaj and his father Amritlal denotes the shift of action in past and present. Dattani forces us to "examine our own individual and collective consciousness." ("Note on Play", *Collected Plays*, 383) Individual is as much a part of his own inner conscience, as much as he is a part of defined social code. The perpetual clash of human motives with the traditions of family, prejudice of society and the code of culture constitute the dramatic structure of the play *Dance Like a Man*.

The social conventions of gender binary, spoiling the grace of life both for male and female, is the focal point of the play *Dance Like a Man*. The dramatic structure of the play evolves around the idea that individual will have to make struggle against social conventions. The issue of gender discrimination is not only a socio-cultural phenomenon but it is integrated in human consciousness and is closely associated with individual choices, self development and self identity. It is a strong determination of human personality and its suppression is bound to lead to terrible consequences.

The role models, professional achievements, habits, dresses, and morality, are expressed in terms of gender bias. Dattani admits, "I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatnatyam in my mid twenties ... a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up on a world that believes dance is for woman." ("*India's Gay Cinema Comes of Age*", *Gay Today*, 32). It signifies that dramatist was inspired by two irresistible passion, to be a 'dancer' (individual) and the panic of social stigma that 'dance' is a feminine art and man's attempt at being a dancer would be a prelude to the tragedy of a man (society). The psycho-cultural conflict prepares an intense tragic tension mounting to the disastrous collapse of two gentle persons and consummate artists. The action in the play moves between the past, present and future dissolving the different time shifts and anticipating the fate of three generations. Jairaj, the protagonist having a passion for dance, is ready to challenge all the restrictions imposed on him by his father Amritlal, an embodiment of patriarchal authority. He fails to tolerate that Ratna, his daughter-in-law should learn dance from a Devdasi, the temple dancer who is traditionally looked down upon as prostitutes in society.

For Amritlal, the decision of Jairaj to be a dancer and the idea of giving honour of an artist to a Devdasi was a challenge. The social consciousness of Amritlal was rooted in cultural dynamics and to go beyond them was treated only as a blasphemy. For him the individual identity of Jairaj was not of much significance. To detain Jairaj from being a dancer becomes a passion with him and to realize his mission, he manages a conspiracy with Ratna, his own daughter-in-law. He convinces Ratna that her success as a dancer can be brightened if she helps Jairaj in bringing him out of his obsession and help in making him a 'manly man'.

The socio-psychological conflict related with three generations is successfully exposed within the dramatic structure. Lata emerges as a shining star of the art of Bharatnatyam. In the success of Lata,

Ratna identifies her own images and brings the consolation, “my hard work has been paid off” (Collected Plays, 439). Outwardly, Ratna seeks consolation in the success of Lata but her inner self remains unfulfilled. The isolation of Jairaj creates a greater vacuum in her life. “Jairaj do something useful before it is too late”. (Collected Plays, 422)

The irony in the life of Jairaj is that his life is shaped and reshaped according to the desires and dreams of others. Ratna carves out her own method to give a shape to the manhood of Jairaj and Amritlal shapes him into whatever shape he thinks, man should be. This anguished rendering makes his tragedy, a tragedy of soul. The following outburst of Jairaj provides a specific forcefulness to the expression corresponding with the consciousness of Jairaj. Dattani captures the internal turmoil of the characters at a crucial stage where it is difficult to bridle the pace of emotions. Though like Marlow, Dattani makes no use of Blank-verse, the simple, short and suggestive dialogues which create a highly suggestive poetry of its own kind to record the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. He is helpless but not weak.

It is the discovery of his own identity hidden in his inner self which the ‘artist’ and ‘man’ are not two distinctive entities but one. Play ends in a calm stoicism. Instead of being influenced by the images of their grown up ages, Ratna and Jairaj turn back to past. Spot light picks up the younger Jairaj and Ratna in dance hall. They decide to leave the flat that belong to Lata and Viswas. The younger Jairaj and Ratna smile and embrace with the realization, “we dance perfectly in union. Not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes, we made in our previous dances.” The final conclusion comes in the form of realization, “we were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God” (Collected Plays, 447).

The idea of Dance Like God imparts a rare consolation to the storm of passion raised in the play. It is a state of the elevation of human consciousness that wraps the distinction a 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.

The play Dance Like a Man begins with a socio—cultural spectrum, passes through psycho-cultural dynamics and culminates in psycho—philosophical suggestiveness and here lies the strength and distinction of Dattani’s art. Time shifts, character shifts, conscience shifts but the purpose of the play is well settled in the imagination of dramatist. In the process, the half concealed and half revealed message emerges only out of skilled direction and accurate performance. Theorists like Julian Hilton would leave out both audience and text in the consideration of performance. Performance provides a specific meaning to the text.

Mahesh Dattani frequently takes his subject from within the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural construction of gender and repressed desire. His dramas are often played out on multi-level layers where interior and exterior identities of human subjects, sometimes blend to defy and challenge specific cultural locations of India, typically seen through the collapse of families.

Dattani’s writing should be seen as a “literary process”, which places his plays amidst power relations of tradition within cultural frameworks. His plays thus can demonstrate through the text and the plot, a hybridized state that emerges by both domination or subversion of tradition. Thus, Dance Like a

Man should be seen as having hybridity and having elements of subversive energies within the text and plot structure.

By pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug, and placing them on stage for public discussion. Dattani challenges the construction of “India” and “Indian”, as they have traditionally been defined in the modern theatre of India. He thus introduces a system of differentiation which enables the “cultural to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, historical reality” (Bhabha, 119). Dattani realizes the paradoxes that the Indian society faces, and through the system of differentiation, as reflected in *Dance Like a Man*, he produces a postcolonial construct about the historical reality of India. Dattani creates a range of layers in this play, in a language close to everyday speech, and humour that is easily accessible to any viewer, as the human predicament.

Dattani hence distorts, breaches, repeats actions, disturbs and divides his audience and empowers them to question their society and identity. His play *Dance Like a Man* is representative of a postcolonial condition, of ambivalent cultural moods, forms, transitions and translations in Indian society.

Dance Like a Man, in its finality, exercises a strong imprint on the minds of the audiences. The multiple layers of Indian society, the paradoxes of stereotypical gender roles, the strained relationship of Ratna and Jairaj, a presumably happily married couple, are dismantled through shock. The discovery of the death of son of Ratna and Jairaj, after confronting the truth about his son’s death, years after the event, wants to dismantle the icon of his past glory. He sells his mansion which he had held dearly and wants to welcome the god of death.

Dance Like a Man does not reflect a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is, on the other hand, a painful remembering, a putting tighter of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. The scenes lead to self-discoveries amongst the audiences, where the characters gain both pity and respect, not by simple negation of traditional Indian society but by representing a hybridized post- colonial condition. that questions identity.

Jairaj and Ratna, in *Dance Like a Man*, illustrates the truths about the Indian society and nation, by partial turning away from their past and by revealing “knowledge” that is established in the minds of their audiences. The play and the playwright create this postcolonial scenario based on new productions of culture through simultaneous assimilation and dismembering of tradition.

Discussion

In this research paper it was analysed that Dattani deals with wide range of themes in his writings. It is the visual quality and dramatic effect which are of the paramount importance. These two plays *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* deal with gender biasness and relationship between family members which lead to problems. Dattani takes issues that afflict societies the world over.

The play *Dance Like a Man* shows intricate family relationship in which dancing couple Ratna and Jairaj learn and practice dance in their house, where as, the play *Tara* deals with the gender discrimination. These plays have a great contemporary value. They are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time, these are the plays which embody many of the classic concerns of world drama. Dattani’s plays are revelatory in nature.

Dattani shows us the hollowness of middle class lives. His plays *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* explore what lies below the facades, characters and families, front up to fool the world. The prominent theme of Mahesh Dattani's plays is gender identity that he has described in the play *Tara*. Dattani raises these issues and a number of other questions regarding gender and social stratification, hierarchy and sexuality.

In these plays Dattani is unmasking the middle class. The action among different levels on stage not only makes his plays visually exciting landmark but more at a snappy pace.

Mahesh Dattani is a contemporary writer who writes specifically in English. Dattani's plays question some of the norms and conventions of society. In the process, interesting questions arise regarding gender discrimination and family relationships.

The family relationship (i.e. the relationship among the members of the family) as portrayed in Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* is an authentic and realistic in our situation. To read his plays and watch the characters enacting their roles, is to transport us to the everyday world in which we live. Such characters we encounter in our society—they are life-like that is typical of Indian situation in the contemporary society.

Dattani's plays have contemporary values and his plays can be said to have been inspired by Ibsen, the father of realism. Dattani handles every problem from gender issues to intricate family relationship very successfully. Dattani's achievement as a playwright depends on the fact that his plays are a slice of life. They present reality as it exists. Dattani has an array of themes to offer in his plays and the issues he chooses to project are not only the most topical but also the most controversial one. Dattani's plays have purely performance – oriented scripts that elicit from the audiences emotional as well as strongly intellectual response. His plays address the middle class and only the middle class. The reason is not far to seek; it is this class that constitutes his audience. Dattani has created a vibrant, new theatrical form which is a marked development on the hitherto stagnant Indian drama in English.

Dattani exposes the hypocritical nature of men who are either harsh to their wives in particular and female sex in general or who betray their wives of being 'gay' and 'bisexual' at the same time. Dattani has courage of conviction to expose inherent weakness of human nature with accuracy and objectivity.

Dattani's plays don't idealize the world. They seek to realize it and if possible improve it. That is why, they are neither tragedies nor comedies—they are on contemporary life situations of middle and lower middle class families. The very high (i.e. people at the top politically and economically and the very low (beggars etc.) find no place in his plays. The plays depict real life situations and hence, his characters are life-like, not larger than life. His plays can be best described as Kitchen sink dramas based on middle class life. Discrimination against women and female child are clearly portrayed in his plays. He has no gender or communal bias. In the play *Tara* discrimination is made against the girl child by her mother.

In these plays *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara* arguments are manifold but the solutions evade the audience. Dattani examines the problems, find them difficult but does not run away from them. Dattani's character is 'warm' and 'human' with both virtues and vices. They speak to us in our own situation and evoke a sense of empathy in us.

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