

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## GENDER ROLES, PATRIARCHY AND MARGINALIZATION IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *DANCE LIKE A MAN*

VINITA MARIGOLD<sup>1</sup>, Dr. HELEN UNIUS BACKIAVATHY<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar, Karunya University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Science and Humanities  
Karunya University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu



VINITA MARIGOLD

### ABSTRACT

In early rigid societies 'gender role' was labeled as masculine and feminine. However today the traditional notions about gender roles are undergoing transformation; changing roles in the social and economical spheres had led to the change in the gender roles as well.

Mahesh Dattani in the play "Dance Like a Man" portrays the patriarchal society of the 1970's. It focuses on three generations –Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj, his son, his wife Ratna, their daughter Lata and future son in law Viswas. Throughout the play the past, the present and the future are seamlessly connected in one story spanning three generations and the struggles of each generation against the expected gender roles of society till the future generation experiences the freedom of choosing the roles they prefer regardless of their gender. Thus Mahesh Dattani holds a mirror to society, portraying reality as it was but at the same time moving through the cause and reason for a gradual positive change.

Key words: Gender roles, Gender stereotypes, breaking norms.

### Introduction

Patriarchy can be defined as a social system in which the male holds primary power and predominance in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. In the domain of the family the father or father figure holds authority over women and children. This issue of patriarchy cannot be separated from the structure of Indian society.

Until the 1970's the roles of men and women were fairly well defined. However recent years have witnessed the line between male and female roles becoming blurred and the domain of femininity has expanded to include social and professional fields. The changing trends are reflected in men and women taking up unconventional work as pilots and astronauts while men are honing their skills as chefs, fashion designers and dancers.

Madhavi Verma in her book *Mahesh Dattani's Play : A psychoanalytical study* considers Mahesh Dattani's plays to be about modern India and the contemporary social situations. She says:

"Family is the center of his plays... He lays emphasis on family. He relates modern Indian families to contemporary realities and re-creates the characters in their situations." (35)

Dattani's knowledge of human relationship and the problems of the people involved in the play are profound. He attempts to draw many of his characters from real life situations and they are remarkably realistic. Deepthi Agarwal speaks of the troubled relationships in Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance like a Man*. In her book *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani*, she says:

"A powerful drama directly hits out at torn relationships in a pseudo-sophisticated world.....the play tells the tale of human hearts, trapped in conflicting situations" (137)

The play "Dance like a Man" focuses on three generations –Amritlal Parekh ,Jairaj, his son, his wife Ratna , their daughter Lata and future son in law Viswas. It centers on an individual plight where a dying form of art serves as a backdrop. Amritlal is the autocratic father, a freedom fighter and reformist. He stands as a metaphor of the unwritten rules of authority that many come to accept as part of the Indian joint family. He is a representative of the society in the 1930's and 1940's. Though liberal in thoughts he curtails the freedom of his son who wants to become a Bharatanatayam dancer. Jairaj seems to be have a passion for dance which is accepted by the society of his times.

"Jairaj: You promised you would allow me to continue with my hobbies.

Amritlal: That was when you were a boy and dance was just a hobby. Grow up Jairaj

Jairaj : I don't want to grow up! You can't stop me from doing what I want.

Amritlal: As long as you are under my care ....." (422)

Hoping that Jairaj's passion for dance is only temporary ,Amritlal gave into his son's whims and fancies in the beginning. He had converted the library into a practice hall for Jairaj, but he did not realize that his interest would turn into an obsession. He fails to find a suitable reason for Jairaj's choice of career. He blames himself and his upbringing. Taking advantage of his financial dependency on him, the father altogether stops his son's dancing classes. He tries to win his daughter- in- law Ratna over to his side and in the bargain wants her to discourage her husband from his passion.

Another aspect that Mahesh Dattani highlights in the play is the rigid notion regarding marriage of the Indian society in the 1930's. Though Amritlal is considered to be a revolutionary reformer he feels Ratna is not a suitable wife for Jairaj . He blames Ratna for influencing his son.

"Amritlal : Is it because of your wife? Is she forcing you to dance? She may be

influencing you. May be it's not you. That's one thing I regret, consenting to your marriage." (422)

Typical of the times, we see Amritlal fixed in the notions of gender roles acceptable in society. He feels that dance was the art of the devdasi's and no one else should practice it. He is against his daughter in law pursuing dance and he tries to put an end to the practice session with the guruji . He does not want to be associated with the people related to dance- the musician as well as the guruji. He tells his son,

" I am expecting some people and I want those musicians out before they arrive...My request is that you finish your lesson as quickly as you can and see that your guruji leaves before my guests arrive. God forbid that we should bump into one another. .. You can pay them four rupees and tell them not to set their foot in this house again." (414)

Moreover speaking of 'dance' he believes that it is his priority to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to the society – such as the practice and performance of the traditional devdasi's dance-the Bharatanatyam. He believed in the concept of ashrams for the unfortunate women- the Devdasis , ignoring aspects such as educating and reforming them and he feels they have given up their 'art' and have taken to selling their bodies.

Although Ratna tries to convince Amritlal that dancing is a divine art of Shiva and Parvathi . Amritlal is more concerned about his own status and position in society. As soon as he gets to know that Ratna was visiting a Devdasi, Chenniamma through one of his well wishers Patel , he tells Ratna to stop inviting Chenniamma. However Ratna defends herself, but Amritlal did not want passersby to see his daughter in law dancing in the courtyard of a devdasi . He tells her that people would assume the worst and it could tarnish the family reputation so he warns Ratna. In disagreement, Ratna tries to convince her father in law saying

"My husband knows where I go and I have his permission .....if you don't allow me to

visit her then I will have to ask her to come here." (420)

Firm, determined and patriarchal in nature he tries to put an end to the argument saying,

"Your husband happens to be my son. And you are both under my care. It is my permission that you should ask for." (420) Moreover there is an underlying fear in Amritlal that dance would make his son "womanly" an effeminate man." When Jairaj takes up traditional dance, for him it is something that gives him pure delight and happiness. He never thought that traditional dance or bharatanatayam was 'proper' or 'right' only for women. His decision was to follow his passion and enter the field of dance when everyone else looked down upon the dance form restricted to the devadasis and so one could call Jairaj rave and daring. Jairaj with his obsessions for this dance form is all set to break these stereotypes of the previous generation. He respects his teacher who is considered 'strange' by his father. People like Amritlal identify dancers as ones who have long hair, womanly gait and effeminate speaking style. There is also the implication of the guruji being homosexual. Although Jairaj is taken aback when Amritlal makes a mention of this he calls him insane.

Jairaj's approach towards traditional dance is sincere and honest and somewhere his character conveys that he believed in the concept of 'art for art sake'. The act of choosing dance as a career brings out Jairaj's strong urge to wage war against society's fixed notions regarding dance. He faithfully follows his passion only to realize later how he was used by Ratna who took sides with his father Amritlal. Here in the play the playwright Mahesh Dattani gives another twist to the stereotypes associated with 'gender issues' that view solely women at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society. The play dispels hidden notions and explores the nature of tyranny that even men might be subject to in such a structure of society.

Jairaj tells Rata

"I want you to give me back my self esteem! Bit by bit you took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programs. You took it when you made me perform my weakest items, you took it when you arranged the

lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow." (443)

Amarnath Prasad in his book "Four Indian Playwrights: A Critical Assessment" speaks of the technique used by Mahesh Dattani in many of his plays. He says

"Dattani knows the art of expressing the views through some powerful images, symbols, stage directions and other means of art." (53)

Speaking of the three generations and the three time frames of the past, the present and the future we see that Amritlal is carrying the baggage of his own times and tries to manipulate the next generation – Jairaj and Ratna – to carry it forward. Jairaj and Ratna ironically do the same with their own progeny and try to pass on their preferences to Lata. Jairaj is very happy when Lata Parekh is announced the "star of the festival" by the Herald and the Times. They are extremely proud when the review reads

"Her nritya and abhinaya were unparalleled and truly remarkable in a dancer so young in years. Under the expert guidance of her parents Smt. Ratna and Sri. Jairaj Parekh she has blossomed into a superlative dancer. This is one star which will shine bright in the sky of a bharatanatayam." (432)

Though Jairaj and Ratna try to transfer their own ambitions to Lata, she proves to be very different altogether. She is a talented dancer but is quiet happy to marry Viswas, the rich mitaiwala's son, who for his part is charming and comfortable with the complete ignorance of bharatanatayam – the passion of the preceding generation.

"Viswas: I like those poses they did; they remind me of sculptures like ..... You know, the one you see on a postcard where the dancer is talking to a parrot or something... it looked good..I liked the way she finished with a flourish. We knew then it was time to clap." (433)

Unlike her parents who believed in perfection and could not think of committing a mistake during the performance Lata is able to laugh at herself – for flaws in dance

"I forgot the last Jathi and simply posed till the music finished and I finished with a flourish" (434)

### Conclusion

The future generation represented by Viswas and Lata seem to have a better understanding between them unlike the elderly couple-Jairaj and Ratna who were from the same field of dance but had several moments of misunderstanding, unnecessary quarrels and tension that spread over the years creating harsh and bitter memories for each other. It is only after their death that they dance perfectly. In unison..not missing a step or a beat. Thus Mahesh Dattani holds a mirror to society, portraying reality as it was but at the same time moving through the causes and reason for a gradual positive change

### Works Cited

#### Primary Sources

- 1.Dattani,Mahesh, *Collected Plays : Dance Like a Man* New Delhi: Penguin books,2000.Print.

#### Secondary Sources

1. Agarwal, Deepthi , *The Plays of Mahesh Dattani*, New Delhi, Discovery Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 2013. Print.
2. Prasad Amarnath, *Four Indian Playwrights, A critical Assessment*, ,New Delhi, Sarup Book Publishers,2014.Print.
3. Verma, Madhavi, *The Quest*, New Dehi, Anubhuti Foundation Mission, 2013. Print.