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Rebellion against the Patriarchal Tradition in *Dance Like a Man*

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ABSTRACT

Dance Like A Man, a play by Mahesh Dattani, deals with the dogma of being a man in the 1940s, of the Indian society. Although the story revolves around a dancer couple and their family, but the emotions of the play lies in the emotional and social dance. Jairaj did dance to the tune of his father, his dancer and intelligent wife and to the tune of this society. This play deals with the recent, and ancient, history of India in personal terms, probing three generations of conflict against a background that evokes the highest achievements of ancient Sanskrit theatre and classical religious dance. Some of the turns in this story are harrowing, and the bitterness of the characters can be deeply unsettling.

Key words: patriarchal, rebellion, ambition, family, autocrat

Dance Like A Man is a tale of failure and frustrations. of the present generation against the old order in Indian patriarchal society. Herein lies the central problem of *Dance Like A Man*, which is a brilliant study of human relationships and weaknesses between tradition and youthful rebellion represented by Amritlal Parekh and his son Jairaj respectively. Jairaj's ambition to make a mark as a Bharatnatyam dancer is curbed because of the dominance exercised by his father Amritlal Parekh who expects all the members of his family to prostrate themselves before him. In the context of patriarchal domination in Indian society, the note by Mithran Devanesan, who first directed this Chennai-based play is relevant:

I have a chair that belonged to my father and, since his death has now passed onto me. Through some unwritten rule, it is understood that this is my chair and nobody else will sit in it. I used this chair on stage for the play's Amritlal Parekh, the

autocratic father; to use and nobody else sat on it — a metaphor the unwritten rules of authority that so many of us come to accept as part of the Indian joint family. The younger Jairaj tries to go against this in the play that examines authority and prejudice socially and culturally and as we sit in the dark watching the story unfold between time past and time present Mahesh Dattani forces us to examine our individual and collective consciousness. (17)

Are we the liberal-minded persons we would like to believe we are or do we blindly know to unwritten laws of family conduct that is the easier path to take? (DLAM 22)

Amritlal Parekh, as head of the family, lays down its unwritten rules. Jairaj follows his heart's desire and becomes a dancer but has enraged his father in the process. Amritlal Parekh is

disappointed because his son's ideas of happiness do not fit in with his. He says:

"I have always allowed you to do what you wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you. Why must you dance?" (29)

Amritlal Parkeh is a freedom fighter and social reformer who professes "progressive ideas". That explains why he has allowed his only son Jairaj to marry a Bharatnatyam dancer. Ratna, in turn, has married Jairaj because he will allow her to continue her passion for dance after marriage. But Amritlal Parekh does not want his son to take up a career as a Bharatnatyam dancer. And therein lies the root cause of conflict between the father and the son. *Dance Like A Man* questions the propriety of a man overstepping his jurisdiction by taking to dancing. He is ostracized for he chooses to dance like a woman though his dancing is a way of expressing his identity. Jairaj, the protagonist, is shown the door because he goes against the expressed wishes of his father in choosing to dance his way through life. This lands him in great trouble. One of Jairaj's deepest regrets till the end is that he has not been able to dance like a man. Naturally, after his father's death he destroys all things that are dear to his father. He does not spare even the rose garden.

Amritlal Parekh is introduced to us as a wealthy autocrat who has left this sprawling bungalow to Jairaj and Ratna, who carry out their dance practice in what once used to be his favourite rose garden. A freedom fighter and social reformer, Amritlal Parekh, Viswas is told by Jairaj, made his money through his dealings in real estate:

"Houses, bungalows. Bought them real cheap. When the British left, there was a real demand for these bungalows. He made a lot of money. One of the richest men in town. Amritlal Parekh. The sethji of the city. Do you know what he did with all that? He spent it all in reconstructing India. Sounds very patriotic, doesn't it?" (37)

Jairaj is so attached to the bungalow that he doesn't want to sell it to a builder who wants to

construct a shopping complex there. He is also very possessive of his father's splendid brocade shawl that was gifted to him by the Maharajah of Mysore. So when he wraps the shawl around his shoulders, he starts talking and behaving like Amritlal Parekh. But when Viswas takes a fancy to the shawl, Jairaj promises to gift it to him after he marries Lata. Then he mutters to himself -

"Your last memory. Soon I'll be rid of you too. Then I won see you wearing this shawl, walking about this room." (51)

This shows how "deeply" he loves and respects his autocratic father. Our first encounter with Amritlal Parekh is when he is seen shouting at his son Jairaj who is busy rehearsing his dance steps with Ratna under the guidance of Guruji and the musicians. When he shows up, Amritlal shouts at him: "When I call for you, please show your face." Jairaj has been practising "the whole day" and will pack up only when Guruji decides it. But Amritlal wants "this din" to stop at once as he is expecting visitors. But Jairaj replies that he just can't ask them to leave.

It is coffee break for the musicians but Amritlal Parekh is still fuming that he can't have some peace and quiet in his own house. Turning to Jairaj, he comments on his son's unusual hobby:

"I thought it (dance) 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 realise this interest of yours would turn into an ... obsession." (63)

Amritlal's own obsession, he tells his son, was his involvement in fighting for the country's freedom. Jairaj retaliates: "You had yours. Now allow me to have mine." (47)

Amritlal is stunned. How can his son compare fighting for India's freedom with something like Bharatnatyam which, according to him, is the "craft of a prostitute" since it has its origins in the Devadasi system. In its earlier days Bharatnatyam was associated with temples and rituals. The art was preserved by "devadasis", who were

professional dancers in temples. They were, however, exploited by the priests and rulers, and eventually, out of economic necessity, turned to prostitution. Hence a stigma came to be attached to the dance form itself. Till the 1930s and 1940s — the time of action — the dance form was ignored and neglected. Added to this was the British prudish attitude, which dubbed Bharatnatyam as "erotic". The English-educated elite, the "brown sahibs", endorsed this views and considered the art form as "a debased and licentious remnant" of our barbaric past, says Dattani in his note to the play. But in spite of this, in the same decade, a few young dancers from well-to-do and respectable families like Ratna in the play, came forward to learn the art form from the "devadasis" like Chenni aroma.

The play focusses on the conflict in the character like Amritlal Parekh who represents the attitudes of the older generation of society in the 1930s and 1940s. The younger generation, represented by Jairaj and Ratna, oppose such an attitude. They challenge the old man who has no good opinion about the art form. Amritlal even suspects Ratna's attempts to learn "the Mysore school of dance" from Chenni aroma, the impecunious and "withered" seventy-five-year old living exponent of the art form. But it goes to his credit that he arranges for Chenniamma's medical treatment and compensates her handsomely for "depriving her of her only student". As a result of this tussle, Jairaj and Ratna leave the house in defiance. But out of sheer helplessness and desperation they return, "within forty-eight hours" because Ratna's uncle wanted to sleep with her in exchange of providing them shelter in his house.

Amritlal Parekh exploits their helplessness and desperation by imposing certain restrictions on them. He tells Jairaj "not to grow his hair any longer" and asks Ratna "not to learn (the Mysore school of dance) from anyone else. He tells Ratna that man's happiness lies "in being a man". He assures her that she would be allowed to dance if she helps him in making Jairaj "an adult", who could be worthy of a woman. After striking this deal with her, Amritlal Parekh disappears from the scene. It appears as if he has handed over this responsibility

to Ratna who thus buys her freedom to dance at the expense of Jairaj's ambition to become a male Bharatnatyam dancer.

Ambition overtakes Ratna. In order to prove herself as a dancer, she "destroys" Jairaj by undermining his "self-esteem". Jairaj feels that he is used as a tool, as a stage prop, or as a choreographer to Ratna's dance items, but seldom as a co-dancer. He takes 'to drinking, holding Ratna responsible for his drunkenness because she has, under a deal with his autocratic father, deprived him of dancing. On her part, Ratna blames his addiction to alcohol for his "mediocrity" and calls him "a spineless boy". She holds Amritlal Parekh for his downfall, which is true. Jairaj's fault is that he has tried to march to the defeat of a different drummer in the patriarchal society. Thus, 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 tradition of family, prejudice of society and the code of culture constitute the dramatic structure of the play *Dance Like a Man*.

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