

The Representation of Patriarchal Hegemony in Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man

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Abstract: ‘The Representation of Patriarchal Hegemony in Mahesh Dattani’s Dance Like a Man’ exhibits the rigid tyranny of patriarchy in the middle class and upper middle class Indian society that lays down separate rules of conduct for both men and women respectively, thereby formulating gender stereotypes. Dance is considered to be a profession dominated by the females and hence completely unthinkable and ridiculous, if taken up with considerable sincerity by any male counterpart. Mahesh Dattani gives a twist to the stereotypes associated with “gender” issues that regard solely women as at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of a patriarchal society. The play reveals the struggle of a man wanting to be an accomplished dancer in a world that believes dance is solely reserved for women.

Keywords: Patriarchy; gender; gender stereotypes; Indian society; gender inequality; gender roles; gender bias; dance.

Mahesh Dattani is an authentic and realistic voice in the arena of contemporary Indian plays written in English. One of his significant plays which deals with the complex yet pervasive issues of patriarchy in the Indian society is Dance Like a Man. Dattani himself said about the play:

I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid-twenties.

[...] a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women ... (Ayyar n.p.).

Jairaj wishes to become a dancer but his ambition is thwarted by his father, a stern patriarch, who cannot accept the idea of his son – a “man” – becoming a professional dancer. The underlying fear is that dance would make Jairaj “womanly”, an effeminate man. Jairaj, however, with his passion for dance is all set to strike his blow against these stereotypes. This is the twist that Dattani gives to the stereotypes associated with “gender” issues that regard solely women as at the receiving end of the oppressive power structures of patriarchal society. Dattani accomplishes this by making Jairaj in this play the primary victim of patriarchal pressures exerted on him. In fact, as significant studies have shown, in any patriarchal society, boys are prone to be more influenced by gender distinctions than girls, and it is boys who form a greater number of gender stereotypes at an earlier age than girls (Bardwell et al. 281). There is, in reality, more pressure on little boys than on little girls to conform to gender stereotypic demands in a patriarchal society. Being told their behaviour is like that of a girl, constitutes a powerful negative message for boys.

And in keeping with these attitudes, Amritlal the patriarchal father in Dattani’s Dance Like a Man says to Ratna:

A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic (Dattani, Vol 1, 427).

Further, for Amritlal, Bharatanatyam is:

The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares – what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man (Dattani, Vol 1, 406).

Thus it is our society, which is essentially patriarchal, that lays down separate rules of conduct for both men and women respectively, thereby formulating gender stereotypes. Even a slight deviation from such prescribed modes of behaviour and conduct is regarded as a potential threat to the continuity of this system. In keeping with this, Jairaj in wishing to take up dance as his profession, goes against the conventional social stereotype as well as the patriarchal dictate, which Amritlal embodies. How the patriarchal society formulates these gender stereotypes and compels its members to abide by them, is made apparent by Dattani in the following exchange between Amritlal, the upholder of the system, and Jairaj the subject who falls a victim to it:

AMRITLAL: 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 (Dattani, Vol 1, 414-415) ...

AMRITLAL: I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do.

But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you (Dattani, Vol 1, 415).

According to Amritlal Parekh, dance is fit for women and girls. Boys, on the other hand, are expected to play games like cricket and though they may be allowed to take up dance as a hobby to satisfy their childhood fancy, it should never be considered as a career option of a grown up “man”. But Dattani

indicates yet another prejudice of Amritlal here, and this is his instinctive revulsion towards the dance form of Bharatnatyam. Like many men of the 1940's, Amritlal too thought that Bharatnatyam which had originally been a temple dance performed by 'devadasis', or women 'married' to the God of the temple, was a cover for prostitution, or at least a performance activity in which the practitioners were no better than harlots. Hence in a show of sophistry, he refers to these highly talented dancers as "unfortunate women", and claims that 'enlightened' men like him are committed to educating them, and even building sanctuaries ('ashrams') to accommodate and rehabilitate them. Dattani makes Jairaj in his play raise a voice of protest against such unjust and differential treatment meted out to the devadasis. Jairaj attempts to argue before Amritlal that the devadasis are not social deviants in need of reformation but rather artistes with unique talents in search of acknowledgement, acceptance and appreciation of their art form. By denying them the right to practise their art, by depriving them of their profession and by building separate ashrams for them, patriarchal society is actually marginalizing them by pushing them away from the mainstream.

In the play, Dattani strikes the greatest blow at patriarchy through the character portrayal of Amritlal Parekh, whose much vaunted image as a great patriot and a social reformer is undercut by Jairaj's penetrating comments on him:

JAIRAJ: 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? All he did was give out a lot of personal loans to friends and relatives. Gullible – that's what he was – my father (Dattani, Vol 1, 405).

Dattani makes sure that his audiences do not miss the strain of similarity existing between Viswas's father, a professional businessman who "runs a mithai shop on Commercial Street" and "owns half the buildings on that road" (Dattani, Vol 1, 388) and Amritlal, a freedom fighter and a social reformer. Jairaj is right when he says about him: "You didn't fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands" (Dattani, Vol 1, 416). Amritlal had, in fact, agreed to the match between Jairaj and Ratna because "It suited ... [his] image – that of a liberal-minded person – to have a daughter-in-law from outside ... [his] community" (Dattani, Vol 1, 415), but as Jairaj rightly says, he is "... just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us!" (Dattani, Vol 1, 416). What Amritlal fails to realize is that the true spirit of freedom for which he claims to have fought, does not entail one to curb others' freedom, but that it should rather be geared towards creating a society in which each of its members possess the liberty to pursue what one really wants. Freedom, in its true sense, can be realized by not merely freeing our nation from the oppressive British rule, rather it can be brought about by freeing oneself from such obscurantisms that deny others the freedom of action.

Initially, unable to put up with Amritlal's controlling and authoritarian ways, Jairaj and Ratna leave his house. Their poverty forces them to take shelter in a relative's house, a man

who turns out to be a lecher. This uncle stoops low enough to suggest that the couple can stay with him in exchange of sexual favours from Ratna. Utterly shattered, but still incapable of financially supporting his wife, Jairaj finally decides to return home. Amritlal uses the defeat and humiliation of his son as an opportunity to impose even greater restrictions on the couple. Jairaj is forbidden to grow his hair long, and Ratna is ordered to refrain from taking any more dancing lessons. Jairaj is not allowed to sport long hair because that does not fit in with the Indian society's idea of how men should look like. Amritlal next enters into a pact with Ratna, whereby she may be allowed to dance if she helps him in making Jairaj "an adult" who can be worthy of a woman. (Dattani, Vol 1, 427) This has to be done by undermining Jairaj's self-confidence in himself as a dancer. Characteristically, Dattani here raises a pertinent question about what constitutes a 'man' in a patriarchal society. To even Ratna, Jairaj is a "mere spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours".

RATNA: You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house ... (Dattani, Vol 1, 402)

Ratna, eventually, buys her freedom to dance at the expense of Jairaj's desire to become a dancer. As a result, Jairaj begins to feel neglected and marginalized by her. He feels that he is being used by her as a mere tool, a stage prop, or at best a choreographer of Ratna's dance-items, but seldom given the status of being a co-dancer. The growing tussle between Jairaj and Ratna takes them away from each other. The gap is further widened by the death of Shankar, their son. This happens because the ayah who had been employed to look after the boy, in an attempt to keep the child from weeping for his mother, administers an overdose of opium and inadvertently kills the child. According to Jairaj, Ratna is solely responsible for the death of their son. Ratna's retort to Jairaj that it is not she who is solely responsible for the caring of their child, and her deeper insinuation that Jairaj as the less professionally engaged partner would have had been of more use at home, reflects on and engages with the issue of power in marriages being both structural and ideological.

As a matter of fact, in Ratna, Dattani wants us to look beyond the myths of motherhood that our patriarchal society has formulated. He wants his audience to see Ratna as a complex multifaceted individual, and to stop blaming her for being only human. It is because of this realization on his part that Dattani in an interview with Raj Ayyar, said,

[My] women protagonists fight, scheme and get a piece of the action albeit at great personal cost. These are seen as 'negative' qualities, sadly by some women too [...] but really we have yet to see feminism find expression in Indian society (Ayyar n.p.).

In the play itself, with the death of Shankar, the split between Jairaj and Ratna seems complete. With the passage of time, Jairaj eventually becomes an alcoholic, his self-confidence as a 'man' as well as a dancer being crushed by both his father and his wife. Ratna, on the other hand, comes across as an anxiety-prone neurotic who spends her life 'Bore [ing her] children [by] talking about the failure in [her] life' (Dattani, Vol 1, 404).

Dattani also shows that in the course of the play Amritlal's pervasive presence haunts Jairaj long after he is no more. The

decadence of patriarchy is suggested by Dattani by the use of certain images in the play. The 'large ornate cupboard' (Dattani, Vol 1, 393) used by Amritlal Parekh was made of solid rosewood, and is now kept in the dance hall. Though very beautiful to look at, it contains books, most of whose pages have turned yellow and which would crumble if one touches them. The splendid brocade shawl, one of the most 'prized possession[s]' (Dattani, Vol 1, 394) of Amritlal Parekh, served as a mere artificial device to exhibit his heightened social status:

LATA: Mummy did tell me once, but I've forgotten. She said this was his most prized possession. Every time he had visitors, he would quickly wrap this around, no matter how hot it was. (Dattani, Vol 1, 394)

The effect of patriarchy on all the generations is so pervasive that even Jairaj finds it difficult to part with the shawl. Ratna, too, is absolutely meticulous about the way the shawl is kept. Dattani also shows in the play that patriarchy reduces all the living members to mere puppets. He uses Viswas to provide an ironic as well as a humorous commentary on their pathetic living condition:

VISWAS: This room reminded me of something. Now I know what. An antique shop. (Dattani, Vol 1, 393)
The element of rigid control, the greatest weapon in the hands of patriarchy, is passed on from one generation to the next. Amritlal had utilised all his available means and resources to put an end to Jairaj's dancing career. Ironically, Jairaj and Ratna use the same dance form to control Lata's life:

VISWAS: Why? Aren't they anxious to know who their lovely Lata is marrying?

LATA: Actually they couldn't care less who or what you are. As long as you let me dance...

VISWAS: What kind of parents are they?

LATA (smiles). I told you, they are different. (Dattani, Vol 1, 388)

But while Ratna failed to strike a balance between her professional and personal life and ended up in ruining her personal relationship with her husband and remaining merely a mediocre performer in her professional life, Dattani shows a happy combination of a successful performer and a happily married and well-adjusted person in Lata. The play ends with Jairaj and Ratna's insightful words of realization:

We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God. (Dattani, Vol 1, 447)

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