



PORTRAYAL OF RATNA IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *DANCE LIKE A MAN*

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the well-known playwright in Indian English Literature. He has written plays in English which explore various issues of Indian society like modernity, traditions, gender, patriarchy, urbanization etc. He is such a writer who delves deeply into human psychology and the impact of human relations on society and vice-versa. The play *Dance Like a Man* deals with a typical Indian family where patriarchy dominates in the name of morality. The creativity of Indian women is neglected that has adverse effect on the societal growth. Ratna, an efficient dancer, tries to cross the barriers of society to accomplish her ambition. While doing this, she faces many challenges from her husband Jairaj and Amritlal Parekh, her father-in-law. She gets ill-success but tries to find her own success in her daughter's success. She represents domineering and modern woman who successfully continues her passion for dance even after marriage. Her married life is not happy one as there is a tussle with her husband over their career. She does not allow Jairaj to dominate. This becomes focal point in their journey of married life.

Key Words: Society, Patriarchy, Woman, Modernity, Dance

Mahesh Dattani is a well-known English playwright of India who has won the Sahitya Akademy award in 1998, first time for dramatic art, for his book of plays, *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. He was born on 7th August, 1958 in Bangalore and studied in Baldwin's High School and St. Joseph's college of Arts and Science Bangalore. He teaches theatre courses at the summer sessions programme of Portland State University, Oregon, USA, and conducts workshops regularly at his studio and elsewhere. He also writes radio plays for BBC Radio 4. His plays share two common things: the family unit and urban milieu. He is very familiar to urban environment which emerges as an inseparable part of his plays. His well-known plays are *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions*.

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*¹ was staged on 22 September 1989 in Bangalore as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. The play deals with issues like problem of marriage and career, conflict between the tradition and modernity, patriarchal domination, plight of devdasis, gender roles etc. However, the basic concern of my paper is limited to exploring the 'forced harmony'² of familial life in the play and the dominance of Ratna over Jairaj.

The action of the play takes place in the big house of Amritlal which is located in centre of the Chennai city. The play has two acts which encapsulates the plight of major characters: Bharatnatyam dancers – Jairaj, 62 year old and Ratna, his wife ageing 60; Lata, their daughter, Viswas, her would-be-husband and Amritlal, Jairaj's father. Each of them have their own dreams. The couple dreams to see their daughter, Ratna, winner of dance competition and to get selected for the festival in Canada. Amritlal wants to see his son, Jairaj, grown up and Viswas, a mithaiwala's son, wants to marry Lata. The stage is shown as a dimly-lit old-fashioned house with up-centred entrance. Behind it, there is a modern-looking rear panel with a telephone and a modern painting on it. Since the play oscillates between time past and time present, the present living room often changes into a rose garden that denotes past events. The living room is associated with present showing Jairaj and Ratna in

their sixties and rose garden indicates past showing Jairaj and Ratna as a young couple. With the change of spotlight, the scene keeps on changing. Dattani is very economical regarding the actors in the play. In all, there are four performers out of which the three perform double roles. Young boy performer plays the role of young Jairaj and Viswas and young lady performer plays the role of Ratna as well as Lata. Only the old woman performer is assigned a single role of older Ratna.

The play tells the story that revolves mainly around Ratna, her aspirations as a good dancer and a good mother who expects perfect dancer in Lata. Her dominance over her husband is exposed by the playwright. Lata wants to marry Viswas and to gain favour of her parents, she invites Viswas to her house. When Jairaj and Ratna arrive, though late, they discuss about the forthcoming dance competition of Lata and her preparation. There is no harmony in their married life, both of them want to see Lata a winner and get selected for the Canadian festival. They are talking about mridanist (musician) whose arm is broken not paying attention to Viswas. Later, they apologize for their behaviour and accept his proposal on one condition that he will allow Lata to dance after marriage. Lata wins the competition and both the parents are overjoyed. They read reviews of appreciation by critics in the newspapers about Lata's performance and speculate over her selection for the Indian Festival in Canada.

By the use of flashback technique, the playwright reveals the past of Jairaj and Ratna and their confrontation with Amritlal, Jairaj's father. Amritlal does not like Jairaj's passion for the dance, especially for Bharatnatyam. He does not like Jairaj's idea of growing hair long. He expects his son an adult and grown up and in this matter he expects Ratna's help. But both Jairaj and Ratna never respect Amritlal's selfish opinions. They leave the house impulsively but come back after two days humiliated, accepting Amritlal's shelter. But during these two days, all the three are changed and some sort of transformation is sought in them. Amritlal is ready to pay Jairaj and permits and advises him to perform dance as a profession. He asks Ratna to help him making Jairaj an adult and grown up and that he will permit her to dance. The play ends on a happy note that both Jairaj and Ratna despite earlier differences get mutually united and they perform the dance in the heaven without missing a step or a beat. They realize, "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God." (74)

Mahesh Dattani has explored deep into the gender roles in Indian family and society at large. He writes, "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 in a world that believes dance is for women."³ Mahesh Dattani concentrates on feminine psyche and patriarchal order in this play through the couple who is very passionate about the dance. *Dance Like a Man* concerns with various issues but the most touching issue is the family – relationship between Jairaj, Ratna and Amritlal. Through them, Dattani focuses on humanity and want of mutual understanding between husband and wife. He also eminently brings into light the role of a father in Indian families. He is also of the opinion that there should be enough freedom to the women. Answering one of the questions by Laxmi Subramanyam, Dattani reveals his views about women, "They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All eyes focus on in the powerlessness of sensibility for political correctness either. My only defense is to say that I am not biased against woman."⁴

Dance Like a Man encapsulates the tension between Jairaj and Ratna mainly because of Amritlal, father of Jairaj. Both of them have married on their own but unfortunately they breathe no peace in married life. Ratna has her own dream of gaining perfection and prizes in the dance. Moreover, she is hungry for appreciation of her dance by others that she does not get. Instead she gets frustration and it is reflected in her married life. She is portrayed as a possessive woman who neglects her duty towards the husband. Her role as a wife is important for Jairaj who expects from her respect, introspection, motivation and care. They quarrel on meaningless things right from the beginning of the play and it is observed by their would-be son-in-law, Viswas. They seek solace in speculating Lata's best performance at the competition. Both of them take great efforts for her success. But it is Ratna who thinks that she has taken whole efforts for the success of her daughter, "My hard work has paid off." (p.65) She thinks that she has managed the things regarding the best reviews in the newspapers. But Jairaj never gives her full credit of it, "Those critics gave her good reviews because she deserved them. They weren't doing you any favours." (p.65) But it is panic on the part of Jairaj when Lata acknowledges Ratna's contribution in her success, "Mostly mummy's efforts. Pushing me forward." (p.57) Amritlal urges Ratna to help him making Jairaj a right person or grown up. But she is helpless and Jairaj becomes a drunkard feeling humiliated by Ratna's treatment. The following conversation between the two reveals how Ratna is self-centred neglecting her duty towards Jairaj:

Jairaj: For one full year. For one full year I refused to dance – turning down offers because I didn't want to dance alone.

Ratna: I didn't ask for such a sacrifice. Tell me what you want in return. I'll do anything except sacrifice a year of my life in return.

Jairaj: I want you to give me back my self-esteem!

Ratna: When did I ever take it?

Jairaj: Bit by bit. 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.

Ratna: You just don't want to face it. It is me they want to see dancing.

(pp. 69-70)

But Ratna thinks that she is not responsible for his state and that he himself is responsible for it. She accuses him that he never accepted invitation to dance alone because his weakness would be exposed. Thus, Ratna never accepts her over-ambitiousness and accuses her husband for his condition. Ratna also accepts the opinion of Amritlal who once tells her that she has married Jairaj not because he is dancer but he has allowed her to dance after marriage. She has her own ambition for which she neglects all others.

Ratna seems to be a selfish woman altogether, a woman of self-esteem and over-ambition. This is also displayed in her relationship with her daughter and an infant son. When she is young, she practices hard to gain perfection in dance. She all the time thinks to win appreciation of the audiences. She forgets her motherly duty towards her infant son, Shankar. She along with Jairaj goes for night performances keeping Shankar in the custody of *ayas* who offers him opium to make him sleep for more time and the *ayah* gets long peaceful sleep. Jairaj also accuses Ratna, "you can't convince me that you are playing the part of devoted mother very well." (p.72) She finds Shankar died of overdose of opium. She accuses Jairaj for that also and expected him at home near Shankar when she performed in the public. In her youth, Ratna cares only for the dance and her appreciation by the others. She neglects even her motherly duties. In contrast, when she is old, to be precise 60, she cares for her daughter and her performance. As a good mother, she dreams her daughter successful. She takes hard efforts for that also. She proudly tells Jairaj about Lata's success and decides to take very serious efforts for her daughter's success:

She is on her way to fame which is what I wanted for her. She had my blessings and guidance and now that her performance has been noticed by the right people, it shouldn't be very difficult for her to . . . Naturally, she will have to practice very hard and take her career very seriously. And then there's the foreign festival. I shall try my level best to see that she is included. I will use all my contacts and see that she is in. Yes, I have every reason to feel happy. (p.64)

Further, Ratna's efforts also seem selfish because when the reviews appear in the newspapers, she insists that she will paste those reviews on her own album though Jairaj opposes it. This indicates her possessiveness and that she wants to use Lata's success for her own reputation. That's why Jairaj's doubt seems real when he asks her, "Are you happy for her?" (64) Hence, it seems that Ratna is portrayed as a woman who is more concerned with her own career than her duty to the family. In an Indian family system, it is important on the part of a woman to perform dual or plural duties. She has to maintain her self-interest as well as perform roles of sister, daughter, mother, mother-in-law, sister-in-law etc.

Dance Like a Man explores the clash between tradition and modernity too. This is well seen in the relationship between Amritlal and Jairaj who represent tradition and modernity respectively. Amritlal once tensely advises Jairaj about the profession and asks to earn in financial terms that dance doesn't give to him. He speculates that it is because of Ratna he is following the dance. He also asks about her visits to Chennai amma every Monday which he regards shame on the family. But Jairaj opposes and tells him that Amritlal fought only for the power in his hands and that he is conservative and prudish like the British who thought badly about the Bharatnatyam dancers as prostitutes. Instead, Jairaj tells him, Amritlal should allow to practice the dance and should send them (*devdasis*) to temples and thank them for the preservation of the art. This shows the humanitarian outlook of Jairaj towards the poor *devdasis* and also indicates his concern over their future. Traditional approach is also observed in Amritlal towards the 'Guruji' of Jairaj and Ratna. He advises both of them that they should not invite their 'Guruji' at home who has 'long hairs' and 'a different walk'. He is not in a position to accept the 'Guruji' who does not show the symptoms of 'being a man'. Amritlal thinks that the dance is a profession of a woman, not of a man. That's why he is against of Jairaj's idea to practice dance. For him, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (50) But Dattani tends to convey opposite of it that the dance is not only the domain of women and that it can be well practiced by men.

Further, the theme of tradition versus modernity is also seen in the clash between Ratna and Amritlal. Amritlal asks Ratna not to visit Chennai amma, the oldest living exponent of the Mysore school of dance on

every Monday. But Ratna opposes Amritlal saying that she has to learn and preserve the knowledge of classical dance. Amritlal's idea is that her visit can bring blot on his family but Ratna opposes him and insists that she will keep on visiting Chenni amma. This brave modern outlook of Ratna makes her something special and praiseworthy. In this regard she gets the help and support of her husband, Jairaj, who holds also similar modern view about the devadasis.

Ratna thinks about Lata's performance all the time. While speaking with Jairaj, she senses that unavailability of mridangam at the performance of Lata can fail her in dance. She is discouraged and expresses her dilemma over dance as a profession:

Your father was right. Dance has brought us nowhere. It's his curse on us. Nothing seems worth it anymore. Oh, it is all so . . . worthless. You should have listened to your father. He was right. We were never anything great, never will be, and nor will our daughter be anything but an average human being. (21)

But Jairaj thinks that he is fine and has achieved something in life after long struggle. Ratna thinks contrary and teases him, "You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours. . . . You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house." (21) Ratna is a woman torn between faith and doubt, tradition and modernity, between success and failure, between her career and her duties towards husband and children and seeking compromise in her daughter's success and future.

Jairaj also thinks, sometimes, that what Ratna once said is right. He confesses it to Viswas. Jairaj is also not happy with the ideals of his father who is hypocrite and selfish social reformer who hurls evil thoughts about *devdasis*. While speaking with Viswas, Jairaj explores his father's nonsense regarding what his father did in the name of reforms and expresses his father's negligence towards him. He thinks that his father has not done anything for him:

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 friend and relatives. . . . He gave to everyone except me. (25)

Jairaj wants to see his son grown up and excel in dance. He wants see his son dancing on Amritlal's head – the tandava nritya. He compares his father with a demon. Such intense hatred is the result of what Amritlal has done to Jairaj. As a son he expects motivation, love and comfort from Amritlal that he does not get. Amritlal is busy in searching clues to divert his son from the dance. But he fails and brings frustration in all the members of the family. Jairaj and Ratna always plunge deep into the past and tries to escape the present which is not satisfied and tolerable.

It can be viewed that the family discord is due to the Patriarchal set up of the society. Patriarchal expectations of Amritlal regarding his son's upbringing and development as a man and his refusal to Ratna's social approach are visible. It is also the patriarchal dominance of Jairaj that holds Ratna responsible for the death of Shankar. In this regard Jerin Jacob rightly comments, "At this point in the play, we see Jairaj symbolizing the patriarchal voice of society and stigmatizing Ratna for failing to live up to the expectations of the woman as a nurturer in the same way that Jairaj is condemned in for choosing an 'unmanly' profession and hobby."⁵

Dance Like a Man is a realistic and expressionistic play which deals with psychology of the characters who form the family. It follows the tradition of absurdist play to convey the sad plight of Jairaj and Ratna. All are living together with a forceful harmony, with some sense of compromise allowing everybody to live independently. They live together because they place society above all. Dattani's female characters are more dominant than the male characters and the play is not an exception to this. Through Jairaj-Ratna and Viswas-Lata relationship, Dattani tends to convey that there must be sense of compromise in one's married life. Though Jairaj and Ratna share same feelings for dance, they lack real harmony of married life due to lack of compromise. Though Viswas does not share feelings for dance like Lata, they live happily due to sense of respect and compromise. This is what Mahesh Dattani intends to convey to the audiences through shorter dialogues in common man's language.

References

1. Mahesh Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* (New Delhi: Penguin Books), 2006. (All subsequent original dialogues are taken from this edition only)
2. The phrase was used by Mahesh Dattani in one of the interviews.
3. Cited in Dr. T. Sasikant Reddy's "Realistic and Expressionistic Techniques in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*" in (eds.) S,B. Barure and M.A. Sami Siddiqui, *Reflections on Mahesh Dattani* (Jaipur: Vital Pub), 2012, p.34.

4. Internet sources

5. Jerin Jacob, "Review Of Dance Like A Man: Society's Desire For Wholistic Masculinity", <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/04/18/dance-like-a-man-review/>

