

Deconstructing Gendered Identities: Dattani's bravely fought the Queen and Dance like a Man

Snigdha Mondal,

Student, English literature, University of Calcutta
West Bengal, India

Abstract: *The deconstruction of gendered identities is a very unique and revolutionary issue / idea in Indian English Literature, influenced by Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction. Identity finds a new dimension by the intellectual light of thinking which shatters the conventionally prejudiced and stereotyped gendered role playing. Mahesh Dattani in his famous plays "Bravely Fought the Queen" and "Dance Like a Man" celebrates the gendered identity and gendered roles as performative and reiterative rather than a socio-cultural construct. He also conjured up the existence of peripheral gendered people like Nitin, a gay in our Indian context. Being born and brought up in Bangalore, Dattani wrote about plays which are urban centered dealing with urban issues. His plays such as 'Tara', 'Seven Steps Round the Fire' also dealt with the problems of gender identity crisis. His plays become the eye-openers for our moral and intellectual teachings to deconstruct gendered identities and gendered roles following Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler.*

Key words: *deconstruction, socio cultural, queer theory, feminism*

Deconstruction, the opposite of construction refers to the understanding of how something was created or constructed and to go against it. Deconstruction is the breaking of fixed order which predominates the previously created or constructed things or ideas.

The great French Philosopher Jacques Derrida presented his paper entitled- *Structure, Sign and Play in Discourse of Human Sciences* in a symposium at John Hopkins University in 1996. Derrida inaugurated the concept of "deconstruction" which upset the traditional idea of a "structure". He put into question such concepts of "centre", "presence" etc.

The term, "deconstruction" invites its various interpretations in numerous fields. The very unique and untrodden issue in Indian English Literature is the deconstruction of gendered identities which echoes the revolutionary idea in Indian context. As we all have the general misconception that one is born either as a male or as a female in our society. Thus one has to perform the role of either a male or a female in the form or structure that our society has dictated previously.

Gendered identities are formed through playing or performing the roles (male or female) which the society has predetermined and imposed. Thus deconstructing gendered identities is the revolutionary attempt to break all the socially and culturally selected or structured gendered constructions. Following Derrida and Simone de Beauvoir, Mahesh Dattani agreed with Beauvoir's comment on female gendered identity – "One is not born but rather becomes a woman". (p-12)

The seed of Indian English playwrighting has blossomed into an ever green tree with fragrant flowers and ripe fruits in the hands of Mahesh Dattani who received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1998 for drama *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. According to Michael Walling "To Mahesh, a play is never really finished. Plays only really happen in the theatre, as ephemeral events. The apparently permanent printed text is just one approximation to what might occur when the piece is performed". He talks about Dattani's realistic plays. Dattani explored the radical idea of deconstruction in gendered identities in our Indian context. His famous plays *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Dance Like a Man* not only conjured up the claustrophobia and groaning of the two mainstream genders (male and female) in their structured role playing identities but also the repressed, peripheral condition of the 'other' gendered people or LGBT'S. Dattani, once said in one of his interviews- "you can talk about feminism because in a way that is accepted. /But you can't talk about gay issues because that's not Indian, that doesn't happen here". (chaudhury,2005)

Dattani gives a special thrust toward the understanding of socially determined gendered roles and gendered stereotypes in his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991). The title of the play itself is deconstructed as Dattani shows his 'queen' Alka who, being a housewife cannot be brave, as the society orders her to mould herself into a submissive and weak woman. But Dattani uses the adverb 'bravely' which is generally a societal association with male patriachs. Thus Alka's gendered identity becomes shattered by her fighting 'bravely'.

ALKA:- "Oh good. You make a tinsplate armour for me. And a sword. A cardboard sword, of course. And I will remove it and swish it about, like this(Demonstrates)" P-(296)

Through certain characters Dattani shows how the societal imposition in playing a gendered role can be deconstructed by one's natural instinct. Alka and Dolly, the two Trivedi housewives break the fixed notion of a perfect, beautiful, submissive, weak and obedient societal woman. Alka is a profound alcoholic and her dancing in the rain outside the house was forbidden for her as she is a female, a woman in the eye of the society. But she does these by breaking her fixed identical performances. The society also forbids women to raise voice against the in laws

which both Dolly and Alka does by their own angry protests. Both expressed their unhappy marital life to public and thus deconstructed gendered role playing. Moreover, breaking the prohibition Dolly fantasies her extramarital physical relationship with Kanhaiya, : ALKA: Kanhaiyalal. The toothless cook's friend's grandson.

Only twenty.

DOLLY: Nineteen.

ALKA: Oh that's even better. A teenager still.(Looks at Dolly).

Just a few years older than Daksha.

DOLLY: Don't be disgusting.

ALKA: Sorry, I couldn't resist. (P-260)

Alka accuses her brother Praful and her mother-in-law, Baa for being tricked in her marriage with the homosexual Nitin. She says to Baa – “you know why I can't have children, you wan't let me”.(P-260) She says to Dolly about Praful – “our brother is a cheat! He lied about our father to them. And he lied to me!”(P-256). She further tells Dolly – “The saint gives his sister to the sinner and disappears.”(P-266)

The Social gender construction has established every male as a strong and egoistic patriarch who can easily inflict torture on their wives and can freely keep extramarital affairs with other women. Dattani here also deconstructed the male role playing by Jiten when he at last fails to argue with Dolly's accusations for his being responsible for the birth of their spastic daughter Daksha. His constructed role falls down when he bursts into crying and repenting for his crime, he says to Dolly –

DOLLY:- And you hit me! Jitu, you beat me up! I was carrying Daksha and you beat me up!

JITEN:- I didn't mean to – you know I didn't. It was Baa! Blame her but not me! She is my daughter!(crying) Get her back! Get her from wherever she is. I want her home.”(311-12)

Nitin, being an 'Other' gendered, a gay or homosexual cannot properly play the role of a constructed male patriarch. As he repents for Alka's damaged life for their loveless marriage by Praful, instead of torturing or accusing Alka, he says to her: “ He told me to get married...How could I? And to whom?...He told me that you knew. That he had told you...about me...but you didn't know! He tricked you! I-I am sorry. It wasn't my fault.”(P-312)

Nitin also deconstructed his own male identity as he cannot have the courage to express his own desires and wishes for another male body in front of the society. It proves his lack of masculinity. On the other hand Dattani presents Nitin's deconstructed in his role playing when he keeps his gay relationship with Praful and Autorickshawala secretary by avoiding the scornful forbiddance of the society : He says to slept Alka:“ But now, you will have to sleep. You mustn't wake up, while I.....while I..... I must not keep him waitingyes. Don't wake up. Stay drunk. You mustn't watch..... these powerful arms.....”. (315)

Baa, the mother- in- law of the two sisters Dolly and Alka , is portrayed as moulded by the societal female role as she is portrayed in her flashbacks as performing her gendered roles by tolerating her husband's tortures and also provoking her son Jiten and Nitin to inflict tortures upon their wives – “Jitu throw her out of the house.” “Nitin! Don't marry her!.....she is like her mother.” (311)

But the role of the Baa is also deconstructed by Dattani towards the end when she realized her crime for provoking Jiten to hit pregnant Dolly and thus she wants her expiation even in her bedridden condition in her old age. She asserts -:” Mine! Every paisa is mine!” And she wants to give all her properties to her spastic grand daughter Daksha “I love her. She is my blood. “ “it is Daksha's house.” She exclaimed in her expiation.(310)

Dattani celebrates the emancipation of gendered role playing in his two minor characters Lalitha and Sridhar. The couple shows how the predominated notion of a husband – wife relationship can be deconstructed. Lalitha is shown enjoying much freedom than the Trivedi housewives. She is not affected by spousal violence and her husband Sridhar gives her a personal space and he accepted and maintains his wife's obsession for bonsai : “Careful! Don't knock the bonsai!” Sridhar says to Nitin and Jiten. (269)

Sridhar breaks the constructed identity of a subordinate stuff who must always to be submissive and obedient to his boss as the society has structured. But Sridhar, presented by Dattani, protesting honestly against his boss Jiten's insult on his wife Lalitha : “ Be more polite! It's my wife you are talking to!” (306)

He also protested against the murder of the beggar woman by Jiten's car. He says to Lalitha – Tomorrow I'm going to the police. I want to see that animal locked up.” (314)

Dattani's use of the allusion of the Hindi poem Jhansi Ki Rani by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan as Lalitha mentioned in the first act, adds to the deconstruction of gendered role playing. The poem describes the valour of the Queen Lakshmi Bai “khub ladi mardania who toh Janshiwali Rani thi.” Who fought courageously against the British. By the motif of 'brave queen', through the role of a female warrior, Dattani sketches the possibilities of an alternative model or identity in opposition to the hegemonic conceptions of gendered performance and role playing, as Lalitha mentioned :-

LALITHA: Your story. It just reminded me of a poem we learnt in school. It was in hindi, but we all had to translate it into English as an exercise.

Thunder.

ALKA: It's going to pour!

LALITHA: The poem was...let me see.

ALKA(interested).’Jhansi ki Rani’.

LALITHA: Yes, but how did it go?(Remembers and recites).

We'd heard her praises sung so often

“ So bravely fought the Rani of Jansi

So bravely fought the manly queen.....”

DOLLY: Bravely fought the manly queen?

LALITHA: Silly, isn't it? I guess it sounds better in Hindi.

DOLLY: Why manly?

ALKA: Because she was brave.

LALITHA: I always laugh when I remember that poem. I guess it just means that she was brave.

ALKA: Bravely enough to qualify as a man.” (295-96)

Here the 'queen' becomes 'manly' thus the gender – discrimination and difference gets blurred.

Another gendered role of female performance gets hurt by the mention of Naina Devi's thumri. Dattani celebrates the opposition of role playing by avoiding 'societal gendered constructions. Naina Devi, the 'queen of thumri', raised her voice against the societal forbiddance in her singing thumri, kind of a love song which is prejudiced as associated with prostitution. Baa's singing and that of Dolly and Alka's mother was forced to stop. And Baa mentioned her as a whore

-BAA: "Read this letter, you liar! Your father is not dead!

DOLLY: How were we to know he hadn't?

BAA: He is alive! Living with his wife and four children!

DOLLY: My mother didn't know about his wife till later.

She was deceived too.

BAA: Your mother is a keep... a mistress! My sons have married the daughters of a whore!

DOLLY: Your mother never understood that. She blamed it on us!

BAA: Jitu, throw her out of the house!

DOLLY: She turned her anger on us.

BAA: Jitu, throw her out as well. Whore!" (311)

Though Naina Devi belonged to a high class royal family, her husband supported her for her career, breaking male dominating patriarchal role playing. Thus a womanly submissive role playing of a societal housewife is deconstructed. Dolly felt unanticipated by the sound of thumri –

DOLLY: "The thumri plays. And it ends. Another one plays. I forget when that ends and a new one begins! All I'm aware of are two powerful black arms around me and the beautiful sound of the heartbeat of a warm gentle soul. The voice of Naina Devi comes back. It is the most beautiful song I've ever heard in my life!" (P- 262)

Dattani also portrays the deconstruction of the role playing of the upper class people like Trivedi family who formally belongs and enjoys the status of elite class but actually proves to be the most mean-minded and unhappy life styled mainstream people who always wear a mask to hide their original identity from society. On the contrary Dattani presents the Lalitha – Sridhar middle class honest, happy and emancipated life style.

Dattani's use of the bonsai is an interesting symbol of deconstructing the gendered role playing of women. It gives a new emancipated identity to woman. The grotesque looking tree is deliberately acclimatized in its environment and adopts to its growth. Accordingly even bearing fruit but stunted in every way and yet surviving. Lalitha explains : "... You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the roots and bind their branches with wire and Stunt them". (244)

And again :

" I guess you can't call them fully grown – but when they have reached their dwarfed maturity, they really look bizarre Anyway you plant a sapling in a shallow tray – you have got to make sure the roots don't have enough space to spread . You still have to keep trimming them as they grow." (P-246)

Alka ,Dolly, Lalitha are all bonsais, of a certain kind as the society has moulded them as women and imposed a restricted identity on them but just like the bonsai, they all grow and deconstruct their gendered roles though the society keeps its 'trimming'.

Dattani's another play *Dance like a Man*_(1989) also refutes the conventional tradition of maintaining gendered roles and gendered identities Dattani here shows that the gendered roles are not 'intrinsic' or natural; they are cultural. Thus Dattani highlights on the path breaking idea of deconstruction through presenting the sharp arrow to thrust out the main points.

The title of the play is a symbol of deconstruction in gendered identities. It suggests one to dance like a 'man'. Here in this play Dattani shows how society forbids a man to be a dancer but he, as its title has suggested one to dance to praise the feminine art; (dancing) like a man. This contradictory title shows Dattani's courage to break the predetermined role playing of genders.

Through presenting his characters, Dattani decorates his arguments to deconstruct the gendered roles and gendered identities as every character uniquely have the duality of gendered performance.

Amritlal Parekh, as he pretends to be an open minded, kind hearted, unprejudiced social reformer, in the societal eyes; is actually a stereotyped, prejudiced, repressive patriarch as Dattani deconstructed his formal identity. As Man # 2 praises him – “ you are a forward thinking man. You don't believe in blind tradition and superstition. Together we can build a modern Mysore state with industries, dams and mechanized farming!" (111)

In this play the social stigma of dancing as an art of prostitution is highlighted by the hands of Amritlal Parekh, when he says to Ratna about his own son Jairaj's dancing - "A woman in a man's world may be considered being progressive, but a man in a woman's world is pathetic (P-140)

He mentioned. Chennai Amma, an Bharatnatyam artist as a prostitute-

RATNA:"Chennai Amma is the oldest living exponent of the Thanjavur school. I consider myself lucky to learn from her. So yes, instead of going to the temple every Monday, I go to her house.

AMRITLAL: And practice in the courtyard of a prostitute for all passerby to see.

RATNA: She's a devdasi. People would naturally be curious to see where the sound of dancing bells are coming from. She is seventy-five years old".(P132)

Dattani refutes this stereotyped and prejudiced concept about man - woman relationship and gender discrimination while boldly presents Ratna, a highly ambitious great dancer. The society has structured women role playing to be submissive and obedient as they are considered as weak and helpless, but Dattani's presentation of Ratna breaks all the gendered role barriers when she does not hesitate to argue with Amritlal :

AMRITLAL- "How do you feel dancing with your husband? What do you think of him when you see him all dressed and ...made-up?

RATNA - You seem to forget. I married him because he is a dancer." (139)

Ratna's trick on Amritlal proves that patriarchy have to be dominated by femininity for the sake of its own profit. Amritlal to maintain his own social status and prestige had to stop Jairaj from being a dancer, an effeminate. His helplessness thus brings profit to Ratna to play her 'manly' role in Amritlal's domination over her :

AMRITLAL - "Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.

RATNA: How?

AMRITLAL- "That I'll leave to you. Help me and I'll never present you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done.

RATNA :I'll think about it.

AMRITLAL: You have to do better than that."

Ratna again refutes the fixed notion on a societal loving and caring mother's role in every woman. Instead of her Jairaj plays the role of the 'perfect' mother to their son Shankar while Ratna become obsessed with her bright career in dancing. Jairaj accuses her motherhood: "Oh, you're a clever actress but the role of a devoted mother is beyond even your capabilities. You wouldn't know where to start" (162)

Dattani, in this play time and again deconstructed the most sensitive motherly role of a woman in her gendered role. He presents the Ayah, Shantama, the nanny of Shankar who also proves to be a heartless and monstrous 'motherly' figure by giving Shankar, the child, opium for her own peaceful sleep at nights As Jairaj told Ratna: "you wouldn't knew. It's an old trick handed from one generation of ayahs like her to the next. I know I was raised by one.

RATNA : Opium?

JAIRAJ : Yes, It's very effective. He hasn't cried at all. Don't worry, they always give just the right amount.

RATNA: She too...she too has given Shankar?

JAIRAJ: What do you mean?

What did you say? She too has given Shankar?

You?

RATNA :No!"(163)

The use of opium in a harmless child is also shown by Dattani in Ratna , being herself the mother she even did not hesitate to apply it on him for her own peaceful dancing programmes. Lata, their daughter also breaks out from the confinement of an ideal mother's role playing as it is associated with her societal identity. She tells her fiancé Vishwas - "And we won't have children..... There's plenty of time. We are still young. My parents had me when they were in their thirties". (96)

As Judith Butter said - "gender is not a radical choicenor it is imposed or inscribed upon the individual." (526) Dattani represents this concept through presenting Jairaj, a great male dancer who become womanly in the eyes of the society for choosing his career and dream in dancing as it is considered as a feminine art and moreover associated with prostitution. Ratna says to him - "you! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eighty hours." (P-138) Overriding all social prohibitions he kept his hair long for Kuchipudi dance and served his Guruji by his own self and confronted his father -

AMRITLAL:"I want this dance to stop .I want your guruji out. I have some important people coming and I want those musicians out before they arrive.

JAIRAJ: I'm not going to get into an argument with you on that. Why can't I even have a decent rehearsal in this house? Why did you do it if you didn't want to?

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.

JAIRAJ: Didn't you have your obsessions? "(P-116)

Jairaj played the role of a mother much better than Ratna and he cannot continue the societal imposition of his gendered role playing on his male patriarchy, cannot take any serious step to punish or inflict torture upon Ratna, a female crime for the death of their son Shankar, and Jairaj's own smashed dancing career.

JAIRAJ : “ Don’t pretend. I’m not blind.”

As Asha Kuthari Choudhury says – “ The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him ‘womanly’ – an effeminate man – the suggestion of homosexuality however near, although never explicitly mentioned. “ (P- 68)

Lata also did not kneel down to the predetermined gendered identity of a female as she becomes “A shining star in the sky of Bharatnatyam “(P-148) like her mother-

LATA:” I can’t believe it!

JAIRAJ: You’d better. You are famous now.

LATA: amma’s efforts-all of it.

JAIRAJ :hmm, I wouldn’t give her the credit entirely.

LATA: This one actually liked my tillana. Her sculptural poses and flourishes were truly delightful to view-that’s a laugh.” (p-149.)

Vishwas, Lata’s fiancé and his family though at first did not accept Lata’s dancing instead of being a housewife but Vishwas’s role playing in his male gender gets blurred when he showed his greed for attaining fame and popularity for his dancer wife. He and his family then overrides social stigma associated with dancing only for money and fame-

MOTHER:”Look! Over there! Isn’t that Mr Sathyu?

FATHER: Who?

MOTHER: Arre. That MLA. Damyantiben always brags about how well her husband knows him. We will ask Ratna Devi to introduce us.

SATHYU: A shining light! Ratna Deviji, you have outdone yourself.

RATNA: You are too kind, Sathyu Sahib. Being such a senior government official, you are also so knowledgeable about dance-and I know you can be so critical. If people like you praise her, she has every reason to be thrilled.” (141-142)

The societal formations of gendered role playing is thus hurt by Dattani’s reprimanding on it, as Asha Kuthari Choudhury has commented – “ Dance like a Man is a play that deals with one of Dattani’s pet concerns – gender – through one of his principal passions, dance.” (P-67)

To quote Butler, ”There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, ...identity is performatively constituted ...”- (P25) to prove this, Dattani’s plays become a site of the portrayals of how the gendered identities and gendered representations are deconstructed. Along with these, his other plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998) courageously and uniquely focus on the gay relationship in Hijra Community in India Context. Thus the democratic and investigating nature of his plays celebrates Derrida’s Concept of ‘Decentering the Centre’ by reprimanding the two mainstream gendered roles (male and female).

On the other hand Dattani’s deconstruction becomes successful when the two mainstreams gendered roles become merged as Beauvoir’s concept of Transcendence and Immanence – “ in truth all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time.” (P-57)

Thus the inauguration of deconstruction in gendered identities in Indian playwrighting blooms in the hands of valorous and unique Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani.

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