

Politics and Aesthetics of Bharatanatyam in Dance like a man

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Abstract

The plays of Mahesh Dattani relentlessly destabilize the long established conventions about gender roles. In 'Dance like a Man,' he depicts a man's quest for his individual identity in the women's world of Bharatanatyam. Even a passing glance at Mahesh Dattani's plays reveals that his dramatic works provide a voice of dissent against the inexcusable imposition of restraints by the authoritarian patriarchy. The playwright dauntlessly antagonizes the maladies of the society. The play teases the patriarchal authority and power controlling system. His theatrical conviction suggests that he is a playwright who comes heavily upon societal injustice and hypocrisy. His virtually algebraic brevity of dialogues captures the attention of the audience. Being a "playwright of world stature" the dramatist engineers burning social issues in his plays to the fullest extent. In the scheme of stiff and unrelenting patriarchal configuration, the traditional dance becomes the source for the formation of gender identity. Any crisscross over these factors is not usually tolerated by people like Amritlal. This is how the play becomes a powerful medium that gives a glimpse of contemporary society that is still phallogocentric and shrouded with age old stereotypes. This paper attempts to decode the politics and aesthetics of Bharatanatyam in the play, Dance like a Man.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Bharatanatyam, Dance, Gender(ed) Roles, Politics.

The screen play 'Dance like a man' is the troubled tale of Jairaj and his passion for a gendered dance. It is about a South Indian dance form Bharatanatyam and the stereotypical treatment of such art form. The crux of the movie is the distressed tale of protagonist Jairaj and his obsession for Bharatanatyam, which has been gendered. The play deals with Bharatanatyam

as a gendered dance where a male dancer faces discrimination in patriarchal society. The concepts of gender and sexuality have always been a part of the theory of classical dance. Gender refers to the physical and biological body makeup, and 'sexuality' is about the psycho-emotional makeup of a person. However, any categorization of heterosexual binary often betrays the cultural constructs. Many dance forms with the history of erotically-charged poetic imagery suited women rather than men. The historical and cultural factors amply prove this notion. The central characters are two Bharatanatyam dancers, who are bothered about launching their only daughter as a Bharatanatyam dancer. Some colonial indologists trace the origin of Bharatanatyam to devadasi practice, while the revivalist nationalist movements in India rediscovered this form of dance to the aesthetics of the classical dance form of India based on exquisite geometry and codified dance. This paper focuses on the discriminatory issues faced by the protagonist of the play.

The protagonist, Jairaj, is unfortunately cornered by the societal pressures and stereotypes. Unpretentious Jairaj is honestly passionate about Bharatanatyam, which forms the central theme of the play itself. His uncompromising engagement with the art is never appreciated by his father, Amritlal. Amritlal acts as a foil to Jairaj, who fails to develop authentically as a strong character. Amritlal largely succeeds in hijacking his son's unconventional passion for Bharatanatyam. But this play is more than an ego clash between son and father. The play draws attention towards an ancient art like Bharatanatyam dance that is gendered over centuries. The playwright depicts the identity crisis of Jairaj Parekh, as a dancer. He has to shape and redesign his persona in accordance with the norms and expectations of society. Amritlal Parekh is a very conformist and rigid person. He has his own notions and ideology, which he imposes upon Jairaj. But Jairaj protests, miserably fails and yields to the desires and dreams of his father and also of his wife. In fact, he knows what he wants to be, but his father wants him to shape his personality in a conventional manner that conforms to the ways of society. He is under the impression that Jairaj is not behaving like a man. For Ratna, whose

sense of self-esteem and pride is hurt, he ceases to be a man the moment when they are forced to come back and live with Amritlal.

In depicting the character of Jairaj as a Bharatanatyam dancer, the playwright has not suggested any simple inversion of patriarchal values. It can be seen as a re-working of the old established patriarchal ethos, which has to be internalized without questioning. Jairaj's economic dependence on his father and Amritlal's obsession with familial reputation (khandan ka maryada!) coalesce into one, makes the matter worse. The playwright's raw Confrontations with this gendered dance becomes more pertinent when Jairaj grows more fascination towards Bharatanatyam. There is a danger of losing aesthetic value of any art which is gendered and kept in a water tight compartment. Bharatanatyam dance is categorized as a pursuit of women. It's the prerogative of women's world. A man's pursuit of this art is seen as a potential betrayal of patriarchy; hence he is mocked at for effeminizing himself. Jairaj's overwhelming desire to master this art receives only opposition from his father. The playwright here does not preach or philosophize any issue.

In the scheme of stiff and unrelenting patriarchal configuration, the traditional dance becomes the source for the formation of gender identity. Any crisscross over these factors is not usually tolerated by people like Amritlal. This is how the play becomes a powerful medium that gives a glimpse of contemporary society that is still phallogocentric and shrouded with age old stereotypes. In fact, Jairaj, the male dancer has to bear the wrath of patriarchy for possessing an undying passion for Bharatanatyam dance. Mahesh Dattani explores two key aspects in this play; the social embarrassment of a man who takes dance as a profession and that too Bharatanatyam dance which is customarily performed by women and the relationship between a husband and wife who appear to be a happy couple. But the couple has done adequate psychological damage to each other as their respective ambitions were left unfulfilled. This frustration affects their only daughter who is in relationship with a person who has no knowledge about any art at all.

The roles of male and female are predetermined in social order is a social myth that is being circulated since times immemorial. Somehow it is conventionally thought that any effort to cross the gender boundaries is bound to create chaos and problems. Social cohesiveness will be a casualty in such eventuality. The Confrontations between individual's choices and the exceptions of society is the central motif in the play. He deals with the crisis of three generations in the family of Amritlal, an image of a dictatorial household. Ratna and Jairaj, classical dancers based in Bangalore are worried about their daughter's *ranga pravesham* when the play opens. They reflect on their past that moulds their societal identities and transforms their social status in the present. Jairaj has an intrinsic passion for the classical dance Bharatanatyam. Amritlal is disgusted with the effeminate nature of the art of dance, tries his best to discourage his son from pursuing his career in dancing. He tries to engineer a conspiracy with Ratna to derail the passion of Jairaj. However this plot adversely affects the personal relationship of Ratna and Jairaj. Their dissatisfaction subsequently casts its dark shadows on the life of Lata, their daughter. They imposed their ambitions on her. Parental pressure surely does its damage to the natural growth of Lata. She ultimately decides to marry Vishwas, who has no background of any art. He seems to be a misfit for Lata.

In fact, many types of dance and drama in Indian context are associated with religious rituals. The drama has its genesis in temples since time immemorial. Here Bharatanatyam has close connection with temples. Devadasis, whose social status was not that of a respectable one, usually performed the dance of Bharatanatyam in temples. They were rewarded for their services by the temple authorities. Slowly, the vice of sexual exploitation did enter here and spoiled the image of devadasis. Since they were economically weak, they were exploited to oblige the sexual needs of the priests and other wealthy people. In this way, an ineradicable disgrace has been connected to their lives and their professional dance, Bharatanatyam. Further, this form of dance was sardonically discouraged on the excuse that it was too erotic. On the other hand, it began to resurface in the pre-independence period with the efforts and undying interest of some genuine lovers of this form of art. However the kind of disgrace that is attached to this dance by certain

parochial minds remains intact. This view is strengthened by Jairaj's offensive words, "*The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares- what business did a man learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him?*"¹

How Jairaj turns to drinking and the need of parental obligation towards their toddler Shankar that results in his premature demise form the depressing moments of the movie. The flashback techniques are effectively employed used by the director and in one moment we are taken back and forth in time. Through such techniques, Lata's father plays the role of his own father and Lata's fiancé becomes the young man, haunted by his art, and Lata herself portrays her mother when she was much younger. We go into flashbacks at a much later stage of the play. The play begins with Ratna's daughter Lata who brings her fiancé, Vishwas to her parents' home. Their tête-à-têtes shed light on their family history, the temperament of Lata's parents and also about their lineage. Just when Vishwas is in the process of imitating her grandfather, Lata's parents enter. Some misunderstanding seems to cover the entire scene. Lata's mother makes a commotion about her debut dance performance before the large audience. It is attributed that, "*By choosing, in the 1960s, Bharatnatyam – a dance form degraded as woman's pursuit, more specifically, the harlot's pursuit- Jairaj disturbs the heteropatriarchal normality. In the specific cultural context, the dissociation and absolute incompatibility of these exclusive genres of "dance" and "man" becomes almost incumbent.*"²

The main focus is on Jairaj and Lata in the play. Their strong characters emerge to constitute the core of the play. Ratna does not apparently believe her husband is manly enough for two reasons. Firstly he is not capable enough to materialize his dreams, and so he is to blame for his self-annihilation. And secondly, he cannot financially sustain the family. Images of a dancing man, cladded in the costumes of a woman, and that of a weak man, are effectively juxtaposed. The thematic concern of the play is handled very dexterously. The way how the story is presented does matter a lot. Because a powerful story can either become a mere muddle or it can eventually strengthen the narrative itself. Every character contributes for the overall development of the play and brilliant performance invariably pleases the audience. The setting is

simple yet grand. Antique photos of family members are hung on the walls. The traditional furniture gives an impression that it is still the traditional society. Towards the culmination of the dramatic action, a sort of poetic justice is done. The husband and wife are likely to reunite in heaven and dance to please the gods. Who can after all command Jairaj not to dance or if he dances, he should “dance like a man” in the domain of patriarchal society? Apparently, the gendered dance invites criticism for Jairaj and not accolades from his near ones. Stereotypical approaches of the general public have hurt the serious practitioners of art. Mandakranta Bose in ‘*Gender and Performance: Classical Indian dancing*’ writes about the gendering of classical dance, “*The troubling paradox of the history of classical Indian dancing is that it has been traditionally an art-form practised by women but controlled by men. Yet this seemingly retrograde gendering of dancing has resulted in the emergence of a feminine initiative in claiming it as a fertile territory for women’s experiences and women’s imagination without relinquishing the aesthetic heritage of its tradition.*”³

A man is ensnared by his circumstances in this play and a woman is trapped in the conflict between professional ambition and familial commitment. When the choice is between dreams and reality, the latter is socially recommended. Mahesh Dattani’s ‘*Dance like a Man*’ is about an individual's dilemma, where an ancient form of art, that is gendered by the patriarchal society serves as the background for the plot. The direction of this movie makes the story more realistic and down to earth. A man subdued by his aged father's philosophy of life, has to discover a way to break away from the system, in order to build a different world that will enable him to practice Bharatanatyam that he adores the most. The son ridicules his father's deep seated acts of patriarchal prejudices. He also makes mockery of the reforms that freedom fighters struggled to achieve. Nevertheless, his father has different strategy for his son. Taking note of his son's financial dependency on him, the father completely stops his son’s dance classes. He expects his son to become practical and practice the mundane ways of the world, not the dance of women. In resentment, the son leaves residence, only to come back, as he cannot financially maintain his family. This works in favor of his father to accept his values of life. He thinks of a

new idea. He diplomatically suggests his daughter-in-law to discourage her husband from his obsession of dance and to condemn, his weakness. But Ratna is excessively ambitious, and she will think of sacrificing her husband's career for the sake of her career. Her act of seizing this chance shows how opportunistic she can be. She is determined to achieve excellence in Bharatanatyam. Chenni Amma's words to Ratna are worth quoting here, "*To master the art of abhinaya, you will have to find the woman and God inside you-and to dance, you must fight the demons outside you. To keep our tradition alive you have to be a rebel. Such is the irony of our times...*"⁴

Mahesh Dattani has not presented these issues in a simplistic fashion. He has created various layers in this play. The play opens with a young dancer, Lata, bringing her fiancé, Vishwas, home to meet her parents. Their expectations, and the family histories that emerge from their conversation, are humorous, and the misunderstandings that trip up everyone when Lata's parents return to the house are quite interesting. It somehow shows that few families can be internally disturbed and occasionally dysfunctional. When Jairaj is about to withdraw from dancing, he has masked that diffidence with refined ennui and a sense of sarcasm. Amritlal lets the audience know why his son, Jairaj is behaving that way.

This play also deals with different temporal stages in private terms. It explores three generations which is set against a backdrop that suggests the main accomplishments of very old Sanskrit theater and classical spiritual dance. Some of the turns in this story are disturbing, and the hostility of the characters can be deeply disquieting. Jairaj and Ratna have been Bharatanatyam dancers since their young age, but not outstandingly successful ones. They confess regretfully at the end. It's worth noting here that the stage play has a different ending compared to the screenplay that was co-written with Pamela Rooks. The screenplay ends with a positive note. They put all their hopes on the forthcoming dance debut of Lata, their only daughter and whose professional career promises to be marvelous. As the narrative continues,

Ratna discloses a deep envy towards her daughter and an almost overbearing disapproval for her husband. His life, in turn, is unfortunately disrupted by his revolt against his father.

Amritlal is acutely opposed to his son's cultivation of ancient religious and artistic disciplines represented by the dance to which Jairaj and Ratna were dedicated. His words to Ratna that reflect on the societal stereotype is worth quoting here, "*A woman in a man's world may be considered being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic*"⁵. Their dedication to art has remotely become the cause of the death of their first child which had infuriated Amritlal. Lata, the young dancer and bride, is the artistic hope for her parents. Ratna exemplifies a self-centered ambition for success in the dance that noticeably weakens her aesthetic receptivity. This intensity of Ratna leaves one pitying and fearing her at the same time. Vishwas, the suitor is a fine comic and a childlike character. He is ignorant of his own passion and he hardly knows other people's passions. This man is quite clever and without a doubt, lets the spectators feel that his deep-seated independence is a mark of volatility of character.

Mahesh Dattani's language is far from the artificial embellishment literary language. The spoken words are down to earth and they do suit the Indian milieu quite naturally. There are instances of irony and humor, which can be understood by any viewer. But, beyond all those, there is tragedy, the pity of human predicament, which he explores in a restrained manner. Most of the directors stage Mahesh Dattani's plays in a direct manner. They do not seem to go beyond the boundaries and bring in the central emotion, the hidden pathos and irony that the playwright explores in his venture. Lillette Dubey, in her production has also directed the play. Taking the easy way out to direct the play without fully exploring other dimensions of the play would be like scratching the surface. Mahesh Dattani abundantly makes use of real life situations in his plays. That's why the script is practical and stage directions are realistic. If the directors seek to stage it in a realistic method, with no serious reflection and thorough introspection, the play is likely to lose its depth and subtlety. Commenting on the Lillette Dubey production, Vasanti Sankaranarayanan, writes in a review dated 8th April, 2007, that the sets and props on stage were

too realistic and cluttered. She notes that the sets detracted the audience's attention without contributing anything to the actual play and the sets were dead as far as the play was concerned that did not give any energy to the players. It's relevant to quote her words: *“In fact, the stage only limited their movements and made them artificial... The music by itself was not bad. But, what it did to the play was again distracting the attention of the audience from the main plot and emotion. The usage of Bharatanatyam notations and aalaps did not have any element of surprise in them... To say the least, it was stereotypical, parodying the gestures of a Bharatanatyam dancer and throwing tantrums like a shrew. If the aging dancers of the South like Padma Subrahmanyam, Chitra Visweswaran, Sudharani Raghupathy or Kalanidhi had witnessed this show, they would have protested vociferously against this caricaturing of one of their kind. The net result was that the actors managed to get a few laughs out of the audience; but, they failed to bring out the pathos or irony built into the play.”*⁶

The review obviously shows that the superficial representation of insightful drama actually does more damage than good to the author. The fact that the reception of audience was good, wherever it was staged, need not be a heartening feature. It tries to show that the audience perception can easily be influenced by media publicity and the promotion. Justice should be done to the script writer who has actually created the play. Mahesh Dattani directed this movie and proved his versatility at film direction. Except for a few indicative movements, the actors do not dance in the play. But the dance that Lata and her parents try to perform rightly rises from Bharatamuni's 'Natyasastra', an ancient book often called the fifth Veda. The name of the dance refers to the book, and to its author Bharata. To place a drama in such a context is to elevate it out of time and situate it somewhere between legend and philosophy. That is not to say that one should know the *Natyasastra* to appreciate the classical dance. Even some scholars of ancient scriptures find it hard to master this text.

Mahesh Dattani's plays deal with the real predicaments that are hard to run away from. They are couched in Indian urban idiom. They are not taken from Indian mines of mythology or folklore. They are from the contemporary burning issues to take reality head-on, no matter what

the impact of the collision. They have worked onstage when directed sensitively, or read over BBC, or somewhat less powerfully when rendered as cinema. They prove irrefutably that Mahesh Dattani is in tune with millions of urbanites, to whom English is an Indian language. We are his audience, his characters, and his source of sustained feedback. Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he leads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and contradictions of our values and world views. Watching this quality of movie is transforming in itself and no matter how disquieting the play, at times it becomes aesthetically joyful.

The lofty ideals expressed in the *Natyasastra* may be the peak of human art realization. However, this production can also be seen as a significant tribute to the immortal work of Bharata. Urmimala Sarkar Munsri in her essay, '*A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of the Woman Dancer in India*' argues that the "patriarchal vision" of dance is crucial in creating the normative ethics. She argues that the discourse and narratives of classical dance is associated with the idea of nationalism, which is essentially a patriarchal construction. This following quote is particularly significant in relation to the main question of gendered dance in the play, "*The public discourse around dance developed from within the folds of, and as a part of the discourse of nationalism, formatting all value systems, normative understandings and requirements of Indian society and culture in the process. Hence dance ethics and dancers, and most importantly the grammar of dance had to fit into the mould that the nationalistic Vision prepared. This vision shaped the 'ideal' dance, the 'ideal' dancing body, the 'ideal' dance narrative, the 'ideal' dancer, all of which was reiterated time and again by funding bodies, Governmental patronage, the writings on dance and many such other external factors such that, in time, this vision became everyone's idea of the 'truth'. This was predominantly a Hindu, upper class, patriarchal vision, projected as the national image of culture, tradition and heritage, which the dance community made its logo, and struggled tirelessly to reaffirm the dance pedagogy.....*"⁷ Jairaj and Ratna dance together with a significant change of attitude towards the end of the play. They also establish a good understanding between them. There is a great zeal and hope for the performance

of dance in Jairaj and Ratna all through the play. However, they do not achieve the much success as dancers. The final words lend a matchless dramatic stroke to the play, “*Then we had all the grace, all the brilliance, all the magic to dance like the gods.*”⁸ It brings about a fresh outlook of life and a logical resolution to the conflict that they underwent throughout their lives.

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