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**UNDOING GENDER: DATTANI'S *DANCE LIKE A MAN***

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**Abstract:**

*Gender is a social construct. It is, as Butler says, performative. It is doing things as per the dictates of the society. In a traditional society, it is not in the hands of an individual to behave or act as per his desires. Society assigns male or female roles to perform to every individual based on its sex without taking into account the desire of the performer. One can learn to act or dance like a man or a woman. It means that what is done can be undone in the case of gender. Judith Butler in her book *Undoing Gender* says that gender roles can be dismantled. It is possible to undo gender. This paper explores Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* from the perspective of gender and posits that it is possible for a woman to behave like a man and vice versa. In the play *Dance Like a Man* Jairaj Parekh and Ratna Parekh, a couple, behave against the societal norms and prove that a man can dance like a woman and a woman can act like a man.*

**Keywords:** *Dismantling gender roles, Gender roles, undoing gender, etc.*

Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, a stage play in two acts, deals with gender roles. Gender roles are "socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behavior and emotions of men and women" and gender stereotypes are "overgeneralized beliefs about people based on their membership in one of many social categories" (Anselmi and Law, 195). According to Alice Eagly (1976) the sexual division of labour and societal expectations based on stereotypes produce gender roles. In patriarchal society both men and women are pressured to conform to a standard of masculinity and femininity and those who fail the standard often suffer. Mahesh Dattani *Dance like a Man* is a play "about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women..." (Ayyar, 2004). It raises a question "Can a man adopt the classical Bharatnatyam, a dance traditionally associated with *devdasis*, as a profession?" It shows how Jairaj Parekh, a son of Amritlal Parekh, tries to dismantle the stereotypes of gender roles by adopting Bharatnatyam as a profession and how the patriarchal society represented by Amritlal Parekh thwarts his efforts by using the power of authority and money. It presents different attitudes towards the classical and traditional Bharatnatyam dance. These attitudes are presented through the characters of the play— Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj Parekh, Ratna Parekh, Vishwas and Lata. The play shows that "the imagery of gender affects both men and women profoundly, if differently" (Michele Barrett, 106).

"*Dance like a Man* is a play that deals with one of Dattani's pet concerns—gender—through one of his principal passions, dance" (Chaudhuri 67). In the Indian society, every activity is gendered. It is believed that the traditional Bharatnatyam dance is a dance of women and, therefore, a man's passion for the dance is considered against the societal norms. In the play Jairaj Parekh, the son of Amritlal Parekh, chooses the traditional Bharatnatyam as his profession out of interest. Being a true lover of the dance, Jairaj marries a Bharatnatyam dancer, Ratna. Even before their marriage, they used to practice dance in Jairaj's house. Amritlal Parekh allows his son to practice the dance thinking it as his hobby. But he opposes his son when the same hobby becomes his obsession. He seems to agree with Plato that art effeminates the man if he plays the role of the woman. That's why he does not like his son

performing the woman's dance. Being the guardian of the patriarchal society, Amritlal expects Jairaj to play the role of a man, to dance like a man. To him to dance like a man means to act like a man; to act like a man means to behave like the man. In a patriarchal society a man is expected to earn his livelihood by adopting a career suited to men. He should earn enough money to cater all the needs of his wife and children. But to Amritlal, Jairaj ceases to be a man as he depends upon him for survival and for paying money to the musicians. While regretting his decision to allow Jairaj to dance he says, "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." (CP, 414-15).

Amritlal wants Jairaj to "grow up" by giving up his passion for Bharatnatyam. Like every Indian father he expects his son to be a money making machine. He says to Jairaj:

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. Why must you dance? It doesn't give you any income. Is it because of your wife? Is she forcing you to dance? (CP 415)

Amritlal Parekh has certain objections to the dance of Bharatnatyam. According to him it is "the craft of a prostitute to show off her wares" (CP 406). Therefore, a man who practices such a craft cannot be a 'real' man. He tells Jairaj that their priority as social reformers is "to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to our society" (CP 416). When Jairaj asks his father to allow devdasis to practice their art, Amritlal defiantly tells him that it would mean encouragement to open prostitution. According to him most of the devdasis are selling off their bodies in the name of the traditional dance. He does not like to "have our temples turned into brothels" (CP 416). Considering Chennamma, a devdasi, as a prostitute, Amritlal does not allow Ratna to associate with her to learn the art of *abhinaya*. He sends a doctor and five hundred rupees to Chennamma as a compensation for depriving her of her only student.

Amritlal Parekh has no objection in reviving the art but he does object Jairaj's association with certain people like his *guruji*. He does not like men with long hair. In his opinion only 'womanly' men grow their hair long. This shows how gender stereotypes are deep rooted in the Indian society. The following conversation throws light on gender stereotypes:

AMRITLAL. Your guru. What kind of a family he is from?

JAIRAJ. His mother was not a devdasi, if that's what you wanted to know.

AMRITLAL. Why does he wear his hair so long?

JAIRAJ. Why do you ask?

AMRITLAL. I have never seen a man with long hair.

JAIRAJ. All sadhus have long hair.

AMRITLAL. I don't mean them. I meant normal men.

JAIRAJ. What are you trying to say?

.....

AMRITLAL. I have also noticed the way he walks.

JAIRAJ (angrily). This is disgusting! You are insane!

Amritlal Parekh indirectly questions the gender of the dance teacher. If a man grows his hair long and walks like a woman, his gender is suspected because growing hair is associated with women. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri is right when she says, "The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him 'womanly'—an effeminate man—the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned" (68).

It is this fear that tortures Amritlal Parekh. When he learns from Ratna that *guruji* has asked Jairaj to grow his hair long to "enhance his *abhinaya*", he asks Ratna to tell Jairaj, "... if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and throw him on the roads" (CP, 418). That's why he gets angry with his son because of his association with his *guruji* and tells him, "I want this din to stop. I want *guruji* out, that's what I want" (CP 413).

Jairaj Parekh is a sincere and honest lover of Bharatnatyam. He may be an average dancer but he devotes his whole life in the service of it. Unlike his wife, he is credulous who can be easily swayed



away. Though he performs Bharatnatyam, a dance of a woman, he tries his best to prove his masculinity. Going against the will of his father, Jairaj pursues his hobby and makes it his career. He rebels against his father and gains “the independence to do what I want” (CP 415). When his father asks him where his wife Ratna goes every Monday, he doubts his progressiveness and defiantly remarks: “Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn’t fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us!” (CP, 416). His determination to pursue Bharatnatyam as his career despite his father’s opposition and his decision to leave his father’s house for his passion for dance prove his masculinity. To Jairaj, dance is not only his hobby but a life force without which he can not exist. He uses dance as a means “of defiance, revolt, negation of a particular way of life that was decided by his father, Amritlal” (S. Pandya, 2010:177).

Ratna’s calling Jairaj “a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours” and telling him that he ceased “being a man for me the day you came back to this house” (CP, 402) hurts him a lot. He takes it seriously and asks Ratna:

While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter? Would you have preferred that? Do you think your uncle made such interesting proposals to all his nieces? No! That would be a great sin ... So what was wrong with going back to my father? At least my father didn’t make... (CP 410)

Thus, Jairaj justifies his decision to return to his father’s house and proves his rationality which is generally associated with men. No man would have offered his wife to another man for food and shelter. Thus, Jairaj proves his masculinity by showing the traits—determination, decisive power, and rationality—that are generally associated with men.

When Jairaj returns to the house of his authoritative father within two days with Ratna, Amritlal changes his mind and allows them to live in his house. But he makes everything clear. He says:

...So I have changed my mind. I will allow you to dance. And I shall be very happy if you can earn your livelihood from it. If you ask me for money, I shall not refuse but I will be disappointed. ... You carry on using my library as your practice hall and your guru may come here twice a week in the mornings. I hope I have made myself clear. (No response.) Have I made myself clear?” (CP 425)

Though he makes it clear to Jairaj and Ratna that they can dance, immediately he conspires to spoil Jairaj’s dance career with the help of Ratna who is cunning, scheming and selfish. Amritlal Parekh, reminding Ratna her intention behind marrying Jairaj, assures her that he will allow her to dance if she helps him in making Jairaj an adult. He tells her that a man’s real happiness lies in being a man. He remarks: “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.” (CP, 427) To him, for a man to dance like a woman “isn’t being progressive, that is...sick” (CP, 427). The following conversation between Amritlal and Ratna reveals it clearly how they conspire to ruin Jairaj’s dance career:

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

RATNA. How?

AMRITLAL. It is hard for me to explain. I leave it to you. Help me and I’ll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done.

.....  
RATNA (more definite). All right...And once he stops dancing—what will you do with him then?

AMRITLAL. Make him worthy of you.

Here, Amritlal Parekh seems like a white coloniser in using ‘the divide and rule policy’ to control the household activities. He knows that as long as Jairaj and Ratna are united they can fight back against his authority. That’s why he very cunningly compromises with Ratna, his daughter-in-law, to ruin the dance career of his son.

Ratna is very ambitious. She is ready to do anything to become a famous Bharatnatyam dancer. She is so selfish that even she does not hesitate to compromise with her father-in-law in destroying the dance career of her husband who has encouraged her to dance. Ratna, being aware that Jairaj cannot dance alone, stops dancing with him making him to reject the offers of dance. She demoralizes her husband until he stops dancing and turns into a drunkard. She goes on scolding him to “do something useful before it’s too late” (CP, 442). Knowing her participation in his father’s perverse plan of making him an adult, Jairaj blames Ratna for his present condition—for his drunkenness and his failure as a dancer, and asks her to return his ‘self-esteem’. He says:

Bit by bit. You took it (self-esteem) 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.” (CP 443)

These words of Jairaj expose Ratna’s manipulative nature. Regretting her participation in the plot, she places all the blame on her father-in-law, Amritlal Parekh. When Jairaj asks about her perversity she remarks: “Agreeing with your father. Letting you off so that he could shape you into whatever shape he thinks a man should have. I should have guessed the result. When I say I regret it, I really mean that, Jai” (CP, 444). But Jairaj blames his wife more than his father for his miserable condition and calls her “quite a looker, quite a dancer, and quite an actress”. He says, “...You destroy me first, then give the impression that there wasn’t much to destroy in the first place, then blame it all on my father, then suggest I make myself useful by being your stage prop, then use words like ‘regret’ and expect me to shrug my shoulders, resign myself and believe that my calling in life is to serve you” (CP, 444).

It is a tragedy of Jairaj’s life that his own wife does not respect him. As he says, she does not have “the decency to talk to me when I’m lonely” (CP, 442). She always calls him ‘a drunkard’ and expects him to do anything except be a dancer. Her words “Stay here, you drunkard. Don’t you dare come up” (CP, 441) reveal what kind of respect she has for her husband. Again she does not fail to tell him that he deserves his present doom. She tolerates him thinking that her son Shankar will need him. She says:

...When he is a little older, he will feel the need for a father. Oh, you will be around all right. Where will you go? But all he will see is your exterior. It won’t take him long to realize that (points to his head) there’s nobody home!” (CP 445)

Ratna abuses Jairaj only because he does not dance like a man. If he had behaved like any other husband in the patriarchal society, she would not have misused him. Due to his liberalism and his passion for dance he cannot prevent her from acting like a man. In fact, Ratna too goes against the societal norms by neglecting her motherly duties and behaving like a man, but no one blames her. She becomes alcoholic like her husband. The death of Shankar, the male child of Ratna and Jairaj, due to over dose of opium indicates the carelessness of Ratna as a mother.

The play *Dance Like a Man* throws light on the husband-wife relationship—the relationship between Jairaj Parekh and Ratna Parekh. In man-woman relationship, more often than not, it is the woman who is on the receiving end of the patriarchal oppression. But here in the play, Jairaj Parekh, the husband of Ratna Parekh, is subjugated because he goes against the societal norms by accepting Bharatnatyam, a dance of devdasis, as a career. As he performs the woman’s dance, he is marginalised in the house. Ratna Parekh occupies the central position in the house pushing Jairaj to the periphery. She takes all the important decisions, forcing Jairaj to implement them. It is she who decides what career her daughter Lata should take on; it is she who manipulates Lata’s dance in the festival; it is she



who manages the rave reviews of Lata's dance performance. Here, Ratna Parekh acts like a man; dances like a man. In the house, in a true sense, she acts like a husband and controls all the household activities. In the very first scene of the play, Vishwas, when he learns from Lata that her father is Gujarati and tea is not made in the house, remarks "What a cruel thing to do a Gujju. Not giving him tea! Your mother must be dominating the poor man!"(CP, 391) Lata, too, admits that her father is under the influence of her mother and he is "a bit more... pliable than usual" (CP, 392).

Dattani's *Dance like a Man* shows that a woman can play the role of a man if an opportunity is given to her. By making Jairaj dance like a woman and Ratna like a man, Dattani seems to convey that gender roles are socially and culturally constructed and they can be done away with. Again by making one actor to play more than one role—for instance, Jairaj plays the role of his father Amritlal Parekh, Vishwas plays the role of Jairaj, and Lata plays the role of Ratna, her mother—Dattani wants to suggest that any person can play any role. Thus, we are actors and the world the stage as Shakespeare says. We perform the role given to us either by patriarchal society or chosen by ourselves. In short, what one performs is not necessarily what one is. There is need to make one understand that "woman is really only a man in petticoats, or if you like that a man is a woman without petticoats" (Shaw qtd. in Beena Agrawal, 71). There is no basic difference between the man and the woman. As Butler says, gender roles are performative and they can be dismantled. As gender is a social construct, it can be undone.

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