

**DANCE LIKE A MAN-A STUDY OF THE COMMUNICATION ASPECT IN  
MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS**

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*"I know that I am an artist....I write for my plays to be performed and appreciated by as wide a section of the society that my plays speak to and are about"* -Mahesh Dattani's own words occurring at the beginning of the Preface to his Collected Plays (volume 1) cements his stance as a commentator and critic of society. The twentieth century India witnessed a literary boom with the advent of playwrights like Bijan Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Manoj Mitra and Girish Karnad. Moreover very recently Indian English drama has shot into prominence with the contribution of young writers like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani, both focusing on the ugly and unhappy things of life and the distorted world that we live in. Infact, Dattani is the most well reputed Indo-Anglican playwright. Concentrating on themes related to the complex workings of the modern Indian urban family, his central concerns stem from the opposition between tradition n modernity in perception of matters related to core human relationships like love, sex, marriage, religious faith, as well as problematic areas like homosexuality, alternative sexuality, violence against women, incest, and promiscuity. He also raises several universal questions regarding tradition and stereotyped gender roles. All these issues are shown through the prism of middle class or upper middle class Indian family. Infact like Shaw and Ibsen, Dattani uses the stage to condemn several drawbacks prevailing in contemporary society.

In an interview with Rumi Uniyal, Dattani states, *"I think there are so many things, tensions and conflicts that we are dealing with....I'm writing these because these issues are inspiring*

to me". In this context, *Dance Like A Man* is a powerful drama of post-independence society, involving the aspirations of a middle class South Indian couple, who by their choice of profession as a Bharatnatyam dancer reflect the past and the present Indian culture, problems of identity and gender roles. Written during his days as a Bharatnatyam trainee, Dattani's play opens with Lata Parekh and Viswas's entry into the "dimly lit room" of an 'old fashioned" house in the 'heart' of Bangalore' to discuss their marriage prospect with Lata's parents, Jairaj and Ratna, who have, however, gone to see one of their musicians who has been hospitalised. Viswas learns from Lata that her parents are "different" and that her father will not sell the house despite lucrative offers, owing to sentimental reasons. She also hints at her grandfather Amritlal's disapproval of her father's choice of career. Ratna and Jairaj's serious discussion after their return, involving Lata's upcoming performance, is soon followed by Ratna's explosive remark, addressing Jairaj as a "*spineless boy*". The embarrassed Viswas is prevented from making an exit by Jairaj who offers him drink and also promises to give him his favourite 'shawl' at the latter's marriage. When the overwhelmed Viswas has left, the old couple once again digs their bitter past, involving the indecent proposal made by Ratna's uncle and the disturbing reference to Shankar.

Dattani uses the flashback technique as one of his dramatic devices in the second part of act1 to focus on the conflict between art and society. Young Jairaj and Ratna face tremendous opposition from Amritlal Parekh for their unflinching passion for dance. While Ratna is prevented from learning the Mysore school of dance from an old devdasi, Chenni Amma, Jairaj's heated argument with Amritlal culminates in his abandoning of the house with Ratna. The first flashback ends with this defiance. Act2 continues the flashback with Jairaj and Ratna's return to the mansion, within forty eight hours, absolutely defeated. Their helplessness is exploited by Amritlal, who strikes a deal with Ratna, promising to allow her to excel as a dancer, only if she schemes to prevent Jairaj from evolving as a male Bharatnatyam dancer. As Amritlal buys her at the ambition of Jairaj's passion, she deliberately 'destroys' Jairaj by undermining his "self esteem" as an artist. In the second flashback, one sees how the neglected Jairaj is reduced to drunken impotency, while Ratna continues to deliver brilliant performances, often sponsored by Amritlal himself. The flashback ends with the death of their infant Shankar owing to an overdose of opium, while Jairaj accuses Ratna of parental irresponsibility. The play finally ends in the present times- while Jairaj and Ratna have been united in matrimony, Jairaj admits that being 'human', they 'lacked ' the 'grace', 'brilliance', and 'magic' to" dance like God". Simultaneously the young

Jairaj and Ratna are seen to pose “ready to dance” while music takes over and “spotlights fade”.

Dattani’s works encompass issues that are not conventional in terms of mainstream or ‘entertaining’ theatre. Conversing with Sachidananda Mohanty, he sheds light on the theme of *Dance Like A Man*, “*It is about an old couple, dancers , ex- dancers. They are in their sixties and they are looking back at the past when they struggled against the stigmas attached to Bharatnatyam in the fifties, that it was a devdasi’s dance, compounding the problem for the man*”. The very title of the play anticipates the conflicts and complications that the audience is expected to encounter: the primary focus is on the construction of male stereotypes and the question of one’s essential identity. As Anjalie Multani observes, the simile contained in the title is suggestive of the central question put forward by the male protagonist, Jairaj, “is [if] he [can] dace like a man”, as the very notion of dance is opposed to that of maleness. Amritlal Parekh, the autocratic father, views Bharatnatyam as a “craft of prostitute”, and thus a man must never learn it, or whoever learns it” could not be a man”. Here we are reminded of Judith Butler who elaborates that gender is a ‘performative’, a socially pre-established pattern of behaviour, and a cultural process. Performing arts is conventionally associated with femininity and therefore when Jairaj oversteps his jurisdiction by taking to dancing, his position is several stigmatised for choosing a woman’s profession, though dancing is his way of self expression and his only medium of discovering his identity. As in *Bravely Fought The Queen*, Dattani here interrogates gender binaries. The gender constructs of society is made explicit through Amritlal’s statement that is central to the play, “*A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic*”. Thus the social bias against the art of dance is highlighted in the play.

Dattani largely focuses on the ‘different’ or the ‘handicapped’. Jairaj struggles in quest of freedom and happiness, under the weight of tradition, gender constructs and repressed desire. “*The individual versus society, I guess, is a theme that’s in all my plays*” asserts Dattani himself. He perceives the family structure as a macrocosm of microcosmic society, with unwritten laws of conduct. Jairaj follows his heart’s desire to become a dancer, but this infuriates his father who nurtures a different set of opinions. The father-son tussle is first implied by Lata, “*They must have had some terrific fights*”. The nature of their fight is clarified in one of the flashbacks:

Amritlal: "... I didn't realise this interest of yours would grow into an obsession."

Jairaj: "didn't you have your obsessions..."

Amritlal: I would like to see what kind of independence you gain with your antics".

Jairaj: "The independence to do what I want".

Amritlal: "...But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you..."

Later Amritlal tells Ratna, "*Do you know where a man's happiness lies...In being a man.*" The concept of masculinity once again focuses on gender binaries in society as well as the struggle between what one wants to do and what one must do.

Jairaj's masculinity is questioned by Ratna too when she hurls abuse at him, "*You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house...*" It is only later that a devastated Jairaj clarifies, "*I stopped being a man for you because we couldn't survive on our own*", elaborating that he was compelled to return to Amritlal only to protect her from being sexually exploited by her own uncle. The plight of the helpless is accentuated when the couple comes back: Jairaj entry into the mansion seals his fate, closing all his doors for artistic emancipation. He is gradually deprived of his abilities. Failure in career, in marriage and failure as a son culminates in terrible hatred for the father and loathing for the wife. Social prejudice compels him to prove his masculinity for his choice of Bharatnatyam as a profession; on the other hand he is also a conventional husband accusing his wife for his failure as well as for the loss of their son. A victim of patriarchal oppression and stifled ambition, he finally seeks refuge in alcoholism, joining the list of social victims that people Dattani's plays, such as, Subbu in *Seven Steps Around The Fire*, Kamlesh in *On A Muggy Night In Mumbai*, the Muslim family in *Final Solutions*, Baa, Dolly, Alka in *Bravely Fought The Queen*, Shanta and Mala in *Thirty Days In September*.

The play largely focuses on the conflict between Amritlal Parekh, embodying the attitude of the older generation, and Jairaj and Ratna representing the younger generation. However it is Amritlal who wields power in the play, as well as in society. Dattani's play is also about patriarchal domination and Amritlal stands for the repression initiated by orthodox patriarchy.

He holds the financial and paternal authority to stop his son from dancing and prohibits Ratna from visiting the old devdasi that might bring ill repute to his family. Therefore there is a power equation at work reminiscent of Foucault's theory, according to which all relationships are power relationships. Amritlal is the oppressive master while Jairaj is the victim whose long cherished dreams are crushed by the former's colossal power. Amritlal is also shrewd enough to manipulate his daughter-in-law:

Amritlal: "You can do a lot..."

Ratna: "I married him because he is a dancer..."

Amritlal: "Or did you marry him because he would let you dance?"

Ratna: "That too"

Amritlal: "More of that than the first."

Ratna: "Well...yes"

He even uses Ratna as a tool to curtail his son's ambitions that devastates Jairaj completely.

Amritlal's character is largely associated with the theme of appearance and reality in the play. When Amritlal pleads to Ratna, "*Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up*", it is quite clear that he is not as omnipotent as he declared. He is exposed as a vulnerable man seeking aid to have his son discover his inherent manliness, which according to Amritlal is lost owing to his love of dance. He is revealed not as a "liberal-minded person" but a vehicle of subjugation and repression that he blindly patronizes under the facade of an upholder of 'progressive' ideas. His mask is ripped off when Jairaj confronts his hypocrisy, "*Don't pretend. It suited your image...to have a daughter-in-law from outside your community*", revealing the discrepancy between what Amritlal is and what he pretends to be. The concept of masking and unmasking is also evident early in the play. Lata informs Viswas with conviction that her father will never part with the 'shawl' as it is a fond memory of her grandfather. But Jairaj promises to offer it to Viswas at his marriage with Lata and says to himself with a sense of relief, "*Your last memory. Soon I'll be rid of you too*". While Lata tells Viswas that her father hero-worshipped his father, Jairaj himself tells otherwise:

Viswas: “You must have hated your father.”

Jairaj: “May be”.

Viswas: “Lata told me you respected him a lot. That’s why you have kept this portion unaltered...”

Jairaj: Rubbish. This is my world. I have kept it same because it’s mine....When he died I had everything removed. Pulled out from the roots.”

Amritlal, the freedom fighter and social reformer, may be revered in society but he objects to his son’s choice of his own independence. The thematic thread can be traced from Karnad’s *Kanayadan* where the father is an ardent social activist but cannot accept his daughter’s marriage to a Dalit. Jairaj represents another freedom: by embodying individual liberty he emerges more successful than Amritlal, living life on his own terms, unlike Hansmukh Mehta in *Where There Is A Will* whose affluence is ridiculed when he is revealed as his father’s shadow. Nonetheless Jairaj takes pride in whatever reminds him of the “glorious past” like the mansion or the shawl. Like his father he too shunned western outfits and assimilated tradition by wearing kurtas and shawls on most occasions. This process of negation and assimilation produces a hybridized or postcolonial context for Jairaj. He builds up his own identity by adopting Indian dress and rejecting gender roles in dancing. Also Ratna like Kiran, Hansmukh’s mistress, belongs to the postcolonial era and stands for the ‘new’ woman, bold, self assertive, and confident. Like the protagonist in *Tara* or *Uma* in the ‘Uma’ series, Ratna too faces the feminine question of identity that highlights the colonial perspectives of society.

The most dominant woman character in the play is Ratna. As a south Indian married to a Gujarati she is particular that the food served in the house will be coffee, dosas, idlis or other south Indian delicacies; she completely controls the lives of her husband and daughter. In fact the “non womanly” attributes of control and dominance define her as the ‘different’. Lata too is transgressive like her mother- not only she is about to marry outside the community like Ratna, but also rejects the ‘feminine’ virtues of obedience, coyness, and quietness. Moreover both the women are ambitious and outspoken. Nonetheless Ratna is a failure. But she is

confident that Lata can soar to the heights which she could not achieve because of Amritlal's opposition. She accuses Jairaj's incompetence and stifled masculinity, and holds his spinelessness as the prime reasons behind her frustrated ambition. Her obsession with Lata's career is implicit of the fame and fortune that she had aspired for herself. Therefore she boasts at Lata's success, "*Why shouldn't she get reviews like these? I deserved it...My hard work has paid off...*" Her verbal tussles with Jairaj not only expose their embittered conjugal life but also the temperamental difference between the two- while Jairaj sees dance as a worship, a passion that is 'more' to 'money', Ratna hankers after eminence by commercialising the art form.

But like Jairaj, Ratna too is a victim, but of overambition. Becoming Amritlal's accomplice in making Jairaj a man, she succumbs to her father-in-law's allurements that has disastrous repercussions. While Jairaj resorts to drinking, Ratna too has to abandon her career after the unfortunate incident of the premature death of Shankar. Though Jairaj has always accused Ratna for the loss, Dattani himself defends her, "*How come it is only a woman's responsibility to play the nurturer? It takes two to breed remember?*" implying that Jairaj is equally responsible of irresponsibility.

As Dattani deals with the various hurdles on the path of a progressive society, he employs symbolism and metaphors in abundance to communicate those truths that cannot be explicitly talked about in the traditional milieu of India. The 'shawl' is a significant metaphor of autocracy perpetrated by Amritlal Parekh and also stands for Jairaj's unfulfilled desire to be recognised as a dancer. Everytime Jairaj puts on the shawl his tussle with his father is enacted and thus the shawl symbolises the menacing past, similar to the cruelties inflicted by Baa's husband on her, in *Bravely Fought The Queen*, that she seems to recount during her occasional fits. The antique mansion with its "old furniture" and the "dead phone" is a stiff reminder of the authoritative past. The musical instruments and dancing bells suggest the culture of the house, Guruji's long hair is a defiant protest against gender stereotypes, the "shopping complex" hints at the newer ways of life where commercialism and capitalism replace the traditional order, Ratna's album symbolizes her unfulfilled aspirations, the "rose garden" stands for Amritlal's haunting presence, Jairaj and Ratna's re entry into the house is their metaphorical entry through the gates of hell, and the playing of the flute towards the end, Lord Krishna's instrument, symbolising eternal love, seems to rekindle the old couple's love for each other as well as their love of dance. Shiva, the supreme God, is the Creator,

while his dance, the “tandava nritya”, symbolise destruction. The maker-destroyer binary is thus epitomised by Shiva.

Dattani’s theatre is urban theatre on everyday life and the audience can connect with the actors, and thus the issues raised. His language incorporates modern abbreviations like ‘gujju’, ‘southie’, and also combines levity with the serious. Viswas is a comic character who indulges in playful antics, makes peculiar comments on dance owing to his inadequate knowledge of Bharatnatyam; even his conversations with Lata and her parents at the beginning of the play amuse us. Nonetheless he acts as a catalyst to reveal the dark secrets of the family relationships and its generational conflicts. Amritlal’s resentment for the Guruji who keeps long hair is countered when Ratna informs him that his son has decided to grow his hair longer as in “Kuchipudi, the men dress up as women”. Here not only Amritlal but all those people are ridiculed who assume that a long-haired man cannot be a ‘real man’. But at the same time one cannot afford to forget that Amritlal is the decider of the family and all others are subservient to his will and authority.

The Sahitya Academy Award praises Dattani’s works as it “*probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India*”. His plays are of “*action and ideas, illuminating our times*” (John McRae) that grant universality to his works. Dattani observes, “*Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe*”, and like Shakespeare, he holds to society a mirror of itself. *Dance Like A Man* is akin to traditional folk theatre in its minimalistic set design. Dattani revives one of the oldest classical dance forms, reminding us of our roots, and showing in the process how heredity and society both condition an individual. His issue is traditional and so is his structure: so form and content do not contradict each other. But his modernity is evident as he focuses on the conflicts in the psyche and the inner turpitude of man. He neither divides his characters into water tight compartments nor is conclusive about anybody. Though the play is multifaceted and thought provoking, quick change of location and time, and cuts is likely to make the performance clumsy; the fact that unlike in films, stage space is limited seems to have escaped his attention. A successful play is a director’s play, an actor’s play, and the spectator’s play. Dattani’s play is dialogic; ample stage directions concerning light, music, scene, focus and emotions reduce the director’s challenge. His is a ‘problem play’ following Ibsen’s realistic tradition, where the audience’s imagination gets restrained as almost everything is told, unlike in the ‘Absurd’ genre. Dattani’s play is highly cinematic, probably due to which he re wrote the play as a ‘screenplay’ in a later volume. Dattani does not seem



to be a regular practitioner of theatre and therefore the stageability of *Dance Like A Man* can be put to question.