

Patriarchy to Modernism: Real or Circumstantial (with special reference to Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man)

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ABSTRACT --*The present paper intends to highlight the transgression from patriarchal system to modern thoughts. Dattani brings a ray of hope for all the suppressed classes that every person has his day. The work aims at discussing the deep roots of the traditional norms that gradually seem to be changing but the fear remains as the change be circumstantial alone. The main purpose of the paper is to bring into light the arbitrary rule of a man in the house and its acceptance even by the second generation. The third generation seems to be relaxed and follows its own will. The paper targets the suppression of the views of the marginalised. Dattani depicts how a rebellious couple accepts the patriarchal win. In fact, the present paper demonstrates the circumstantial changes in the attitude of the people. The work does not claim the change has definitely been accepted by the patriarchs but sometimes many reasons altogether bring about a new change.*

Keywords--*Marginalised; inequality; class; patriarchy; modernity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is a Sahitya Akademi award winner playwright of Indian drama in English who writes to reform. He has been described as ‘one of the best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English’ (by Alexander Viets in the International Herald Tribune.) In the 90’s he put his efforts to question the prevailing inequality in the country. He started proclaiming space and acknowledgement for the deprived sections of the society. India, as the largest democracy in the world, has not marked its democratic stamp in many sections, except, of course, in the area of universal enfranchisement. The superficial attitude of the Indian society has forced the sane human beings to come forth and give a voice to the unvoiced. Dattani does not approve of the social construct of the society and hence arranges facts in a story line. Being a social realistic writer, he has dealt with numerous tabooed subjects. He has even never hesitated in bringing into light the diseased mentality of the people. He targets the urban class and gradually clears the doubt of its being the civilized one. Dattani’s plays are set up in a concrete jungle where human beings act as animals and even win in being the most brutal creation of God. Dattani portrays the reality without exaggeration. He pens down whatever he has observed in the society. His realistic style of writing has brought him the title of a realistic writer.

“Realism is a movement in art, which started in the mid nineteenth century in France, and later spread to the entire world. Realism entered literature at almost the same time. Its real objective was to root out what is called fantastic and romantic in literature and art, to insert what is real”. (Online)

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The selected play *Dance Like a Man* was first staged at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 22nd September 1989, as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. The play was later performed at NCPA Experimental Theatre, Mumbai, on 14th February 1990, with Mahesh Dattani, Anjali Jayadev, Vivek Shah and Hema Mandanna, directed by Mahesh Dattani. It was again presented by Prime Time in 1995, with Lillette Dubey, Siddharta Basu, Shivani Wazir and Joy Sengupta, directed by Lillette Dubey. This production continues to tour occasionally.

The play has been accepted and appreciated worldwide. The unnecessary impositions of patriarchal restrictions have been a blow to the humanity. The play also depicts how one man's rule can spoil the healthy environment of the house and they are forced to live in the suffocating place. The title of the play *Dance Like a Man* itself smells superiority. In today's world where all talks of equality, how does an autocratic rule gets enough space within the four walls of the house?. Dattani cleverly chooses the title of his plays to let the readers come up with their own notions about the story line. The concept of marginalized used by social realistic writers discriminates between the two classes, one is privileged and the other one is marginalized. Peter Barry states:

"Man. as the Renaissance slogan had it, was the measure of all other things in the universe: while the Western norms of dress, behaviour, intellect, outlook and so on provided a firm centre against which deviation, observations, variations could be detected and identified as Other and marginal". (Barry, 67)

Dattani even uses his characters to speak as much as they can to arouse emotive response from the readers. He himself says:

"I also know that I have a lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough.

But my characters have a lot to say too, and they seem to be doing rather well at having their say. Every time a critic says something awful about my writing, I realize that they are pointing out something that I have wanted to say and have, as usual, been hopelessly unconvincing. Every time audiences have applauded, laughed, cried or simply offered their silence in response to some moment in the play, I am completely aware that it is my character that has done the work for me".(Dattani, Preface)

Dattani gives more importance to presentation as he believes that people rely more on the seen incidents rather than the heard ones. Moreover, the efforts of the playwright have done wonders in the theatrical field. Naik quotes Dattani talking about the importance of drama:

"Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of that audience. A play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience". (Naik, 11-12)

When it comes to theatre and social realism, Ibsen and Shaw can never be ignored. Dattani has followed the same steps and confronted the Indian society with its social ills. His works are an attack on the society and its prevailing system. The critics also compare him with many foreign social realistic writers. Beena Agarwal states that:

"He prepared the stage for a specific realism on the lines of Ibsen and Shaw. For him, man is an integral part of society and consciously or unconsciously the creeping influences of societal set up, determine the fabric of relationship around him".
(Agarwal, 25)

Drama has always done its part in informing the masses. Its origin demonstrates that it used to celebrate religious occasions in the very beginning. Now in modern times, it has taken the form of representation of the social ills that are responsible for a country's instability. Dattani also considers theatre more effective than any other source of entertainment. Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta quotes him:

"My milieu is theatre; you cannot operate in isolation. I do want a theatre movement to happen. The major block for that is lack of sound training and professionalism. We have the talent, but theatre is more than that, it's a craft of communicating through the language of action". (Dasgupta, 2001)

Dattani gives importance to the audience as well. He feels that it's the audience that popularizes any piece of art. The theme of the work should aim at the human psyche only then realistic works can do the needful. Dattani says:

"Audience needs to make the effort. Unlike TV or cinema where the viewer doesn't have to contribute, theatre is collective experience. In fact, at a moment of truth, you will find how people who don't know each other join in from all corners of the darkened hall to applaud and declare their appreciation of that important moment. And that's when you know a play works". <http://www.anitanair.net/profiles/profile-mahesh-dattani>

Dance Like a Man is a wonderful play that shows how three generations witness a transgression from patriarchy to modernity though its circumstantial, yet it proves to be successful. Dattani uses flashback techniques to help the readers to understand the sequence of actions properly. The play starts with a conversation between Lata and Vishwas. Lata is the daughter of Jairaj and Ratna, Bharatnatyam dancers. It's a casual one with a few comments from Vishwas. Actually, Vishwas has been invited by Lata's parents to have a talk about their marriage. They had to go somewhere in urgency that was not appreciated by Vishwas.

Vishwas. So this is where I get killed. Lata. They should have been here by now. Vishwas. They are not in? You said it was all arranged. Wait a minute. They said seven o'clock. Lata. I know, but they had to go out. Emergency.

Vishwas. Only doctors and firemen go out on emergencies. Dancers stay at home till its show time. They also stay at home when they have invited their future son-in-law to their house. (Dattani, 387)

After sometime Lata's parents come back, they seem to be very tense and do not show much regard to Vishwas. They enter into conversation with each other.

RATNA: In all our lives, I cannot remember ever being in such a crisis.

JAIRAJ: It's not a crisis.

RATNA: Crisis, problem, whatever!

JAIRAJ: We've had problems before.

RATNA: But never one like this. Oh God! What will we do?

JAIRAJ: We'll think of something. First, shut up. (Dattani, 398)

Vishwas is uncomfortable when he hears all these things, he asks:

VISHWAS: Look, I know I have not made a very good first impression, but I would be more comfortable if you did not think of me as a crisis or a problem. (Dattani, 398)

Jairaj and Ratna are more concerned about Lata's dancing career rather than her marriage. They are cynically involved in making Lata a top dancer. But their behaviour seems to be very possessive. They are very happy when they come to know about Vishwas's wealthy family. Vishwas agrees to Lata's dancing even after their marriage which elated Jairaj and Ratna. The writer wants to depict human psyche that once if someone has not made it in

his career, he wants his children to follow his paths so that he can satisfy his mind of ultimately achieving the target. Same is the case with Lata's parents.

Dattani weaves a realistic story and presents very lively characters, even the audience can easily relate to any of the scenes. The story is a domestic one revolving around a few characters. Dattani generally takes a few characters to portray whatever he wants to. In this play also, he has Amritlal, his son Jairaj, his daughter-in-law Ratna, his granddaughter Lata, Vishwas, Lata's would-be husband. The general discussion within the family represents the clash within the family, but the autocratic rule wins. The marginalized people often have to surrender. The patriarchy is not always gender biased; it also targets the males of the house who support the weaker section of the society.

In the play *Dance Like a Man*, Jairaj likes dancing like her wife Ratna. His father Amritlal does not approve of his dancing. He hates his choice of taking dancing as his career. He forces him to do the things like a man. Dancing has been related to femininity according to the patriarchal notion. The scenic beauty of the play makes the scene lively and entertaining. Amritlal who is the patriarch of the house curbs the activities of his son thinking that he needs strict discipline to be a man.

There have been arguments between Amritlal and Jairaj regarding the latter's dancing interests. The clash within the family has spoiled the relationship between the father and the son.

AMRITLAL: I'm expecting some people and I want those musicians out before they arrive.

JAIRAJ: They will leave when your guests come, I assure you.

AMRITLAL: I want them out now.

JAIRAJ: I can't just ask them to leave!

AMRITLAL: Doesn't he have any other students, your guru?

JAIRAJ: He is the most sought-after guru in India.

AMRITLAL: Then why is he spending his entire day in my house? (Dattani, 414) Amritlal is a social reformer but he does not bear the responsibility of dancers. He even calls devdasis corrupt and whores. He again argues with his son.

AMRITLAL: We are building ashrams for these unfortunate women! Educating them, reforming them. . .

JAIRAJ: Reform! Don't talk about reform. If you really wanted any kind of reform in our society, you would let them practise their art.

AMRITLAL: Encourage open prostitution?

JAIRAJ: Send them back to their temples! Give them awards for preserving their art.

AMRITLAL: My son, you are the ignorant one. Most of them have given up their 'art' as you call it and have taken to selling their bodies. (Dattani, 416) Dattani tells Rana Uniyal: "Well, the other play which I think I could talk about is *Dance Like a Man* which is because we talked about my Bharatnatyam background. It is about Bharatnatyam dancers. Again in their old age, when they are in their 60s and they are looking back on their struggling days, when they had their ideals and in the 50s where there was a stigma attached to the dance forms; that it is a dance form of the Devdasis. It's a prostitute's dance and people from respectable families did not perform or practise that dance form. It is doubly difficult for the man. You know, what business does a man have learning a prostitute's dance. So it brings about gender roles, as to what is expected of gender. The play also brings out the tensions between the couple and how they solve them. It also shows how they felt when they used their relationship

to develop their careers of dancing and how they reconcile to the fact that the time wasn't right for them". (Uniyal, 182-183)

Infact, the clash is between the ideologies. In the previous times, dancing was the art of poor and needy. The rich class looked down upon the dancers. They were the sources of entertainment and amusement for them. Same ideology is still followed. But the times have changed and dancing has been taken up by some of the wealthy sections as well. But it's really very difficult to come out of the shackles of the traditional norms. Even Jairaj and Ratna have also failed in doing so. Jairaj decides to go away from his own house. He says:

Jairaj: Come on. I've packed some of your clothes. We're leaving.

RATNA: Where?

JAIRAJ: We'll decide that later. First, let's get out of here. (Dattani, 423)

This is a step towards modernity, breaking the shackles of old traditions and moving in search of liberalism. He further says:

JAIRAJ: We don't need anything fancy. As from now we are no longer under your care. And will never be again. Never. (Dattani, 424)

The second generation flutters to fly but people like Amritlal holds them with the conservative chains. The times have failed in changing the rusted mentality of the old patriarchs.

Mithran Devanesen expresses himself:

"Are we the liberal-minded persons; we would like to believe that we are or do we blindly kowtow to unwritten laws of family conduct that is the easier path to take?" (Devanesen, 383)

Jairaj and Ratna left their house to follow their dreams but they could not make it and came back. Jairaj and Ratna are now more quiet. Even Amritlal has given them a hall for practice. But as we can say that old habits die hard, there have always been arguments regarding different temperaments and ideologies. This incident further deteriorated the situation for them in the house as they are the losers now. Ratna always blames Jairaj for all this. There always has been a cold war between husband and wife. Their dependency could not let them take any decision for their future. It seems as if they did not have any confidence in them or the confidence had been crushed by the patriarch.

RATNA. Finished! Just like me. Yes, your father was right, Dance has brought us nowhere. It's his curse on us. Nothing seems worth it any more. 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.

JAIRAJ. Lata is not an average!

RATNA. If she can't dance, what else she can be?

JAIRAJ. There were times when we did not dance,

RATNA. And look where we are.

JAIRAJ. We are fine. At least I am

RATNA. You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who could not leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours.

JAIRAJ. Ratna! Don't

RATNA. You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house. . .(Dattani, 402)

Amritlal has not left any stone unturned to humiliate his son. The house has always been a battle ground for them. They always have some argument. The patriarch of the house ensures his rules should be followed. He interferes even in very small matters as well. When his guruji comes to teach him dancing, Amritlal criticizes his looks.

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 mean normal men.

JAIRAJ: What are you trying to say?

AMRITLAL: All I'm saying is that normal men don't keep their hair so long.

JAIRAJ: Are you saying that he is not. . . Are you saying. . .?

AMRITLAL: I've noticed the way he walks. (Dattani, 417)

Amritlal is least bothered about the feelings of his son and his wife. He takes unwanted advantage of his position and age. He criticizes his daughter-in-law and tries to establish his unchallenged monopoly. He is no other than an intruder in his own house. He does not understand that times have changed and he needs to change as well.

RATNA: Yes. Dancing the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati.

AMRITLAL: And you feel what you are doing is right?

RATNA: Yes. My husband knows where I go and I have his permission.

AMRITLAL: Your husband happens to be my son. And you are both under my care. It is my permission that you should ask for. (Dattani, 42)

Traditions are difficult to cope with. The human beings have to act diplomatically without boldly criticizing any one. Vishwas seems to be an intelligent and practical person who smartly deals with his conservative father regarding his inter caste marriage with Lata. He simply states his father's condition before others.

VISHWAS: My father almost died when I told him I'm marrying outside the caste. Wait till he hears this! (Dattani, 389)

Dattani is a considerate writer who knows that breaking traditional norms and moving ahead is not the solution but understanding of the need of the change brings about a difference in mind set. Though Lata's parents could not do well in their career but they have started living their ambitious life again through Lata. They want her to succeed in her life. They both are very concerned for her. She performs before a minister and gets appreciation, Ratna receives a call from Dr. Govind, a famous minister, Jairaj interrupts again and again.

RATNA: Hello. Oh, hello, Dr. Gowda. How nice of you to call?

And thank you for the flowers. Lata was so pleased. . . Yes. Yes.

Thank you. Oh—thank you! Yes, I'll tell her. She will be thrilled to hear that. . . Compliments like these from you.

JAIRAJ: He was in hurry to go to the toilet.

RATNA: . . . I can wake Lata up, but she is too tired. And after last night's performance she deserves a rest. Still, if you wish I could call her. . .

Then I'll ask her to call you back? No. No. It's no trouble. (Dattani, 428)

JAIRAJ: You're overdoing it . . . (Dattani, 429)

The fact is that rising sun is always greeted. One's work speaks rather than once's words. The play is a story of ambitions, failures, transgressions. The play does not carry just one subject only as life is not about a theme rather it's a complicated version of different bullet points which need to be proof read always. Mithran Devanesen feels:

"In a city like Chennai, where everyone knows a dancer or has a dancer in the family, *Dance Like a Man* was bound to strike a familiar chord. The challenge to both my actors and myself as a director was not just to bring the issues the play raises to the fore but also to bridge Dattani's verbal ingenuity with a strong visual element". (Devanesen, 383)

The success of Lata definitely depends upon her parents. Their cooperation and zealotness for life has been unending. They all together decided to bring their daughter in a liberal environment that should curb anyone's desire to live. They are alive only in their daughter's works otherwise a patriarch killed them decades ago. The ending is very dramatic and convincing, a step towards modernity where one is modern through actions and thoughts at the same time. They say: "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God". (Dattani, 447)

The play is all about learning from mistakes and bowing down before the changes. The writer's style of writing is convincing and assertive. The characters have gone through a transgression from complaining attitude to realization. Beena Agarwal believes:

"The play *Dance Like a Man* begins with a socio- cultural spectrum, passes through psycho-cultural dynamics and culminates in psycho-philosophical suggestiveness and here lies the strength and distinction of Dattani's art". (Agarwal, 104)

Dattani focuses on the three generations in the play. The first generation believes in old traditional set up which strongly recommends patriarchal set for better functioning of the family. The second generation is of Jairaj and Ratna who aims at some space and desire to pursue their dreams. This generation is a next step to patriarchy. The second generation fails most of the times as new ideology is not easily accepted. The third generation is of Lata and Vishwas who are reasonable and practical and they are born lucky. Their ambitions have no bounds and they know how to fulfill their targets. In the play, the story moves from patriarchy to modernity. The path has been long and tough but has already sown the seeds of success for future generation. The modernism is real and circumstantial at the same time. The past plays a very important role in making modernism real or circumstantial. The failure sows seeds of circumstances for the future generation where as a satisfied person sows the seed of challenges for the next generation. Actually, the conflict of past and present brings no rewards. Jairaj is a passive patriarch; he does not try to hold the lives of people but keeps mum even at the appreciation of one's own blood. Ratna has matured after going through the miseries and accepts the fate and learns how to be happy in her daughter's success. After reading reviews of Lata's dance performance in a newspaper, Ratna gets elated and says:

RATNA: I heard. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! The dancer of the decade!

And why should not she get reviews like these? I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging things? Sweet-talking the critics. My hard work has paid off, has not it? (Dattani, 439)

The transgression should be welcomed warmly without discussing on its being real or imaginary. The play is all about regretful past and hopeful present and future.

A. Nicoll feels:

“Many modern tragedies depend not on certain personalities presented in isolated surroundings, but on individual placed in the midst of social powers from which they deserve their joys and sorrows”. (Nicoll, 97)

II. CONCLUSION

Dattani ends the play with a realization that one should never repent for the past, rather accept the changes open heartedly. The play is an eye-opener for the society. It is a story of three generations. The transgression from patriarchy to modernism brings about numerous challenges from the people. The failure and success are a part of one's life if accepted intelligently. No change comes without sacrifices; the new generation should understand the challenges faced by the previous sections of the society.

III. FINDINGS

Dattani has dealt with the subject diplomatically. He has webbed a simple but strong story of generation gap. The psychological battle is more difficult to fight, for which one needs to be calm and patient. *Dance Like a Man* is an aversion to patriarchy and rigid societal norms. No human being is fit to fight the same battle; the temperament and intelligence act as the key to success. Dattani's style of writing attributes to the social development of the society. His themes target the brain and the heart at the same time.

IV. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Dattani deals with numerous social ills that pose a challenge for the development of the society. The present paper targets at the transgression from patriarchal set up to modernity. The characters find themselves amidst a number of problems. Patriarchy has always been the worst social scenario that has always spoiled people psychologically.

The paper looks at the transgression from patriarchy to modernism. The researcher strictly follows the path. The problems in the process of transgression are themselves a challenge.

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