

DOES GENDER LIE IN THE HIPS? CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The term gender is perceived as a social, historical and cultural construction expounded on the sexual differences and the connections built between both sexes. Construction of gender is multidimensional as it is based on social, cultural, institutional, economic, historical etc. aspects of society. This in turn determines the range of choices or options related to work and production process, social and political presence and mobility, access to dress and food and social behavior that are open to women and men. Gender construction of women in an Indian patriarchal society had been an important part of a patriarchal society as it is conceived to be linked with caste implications as well. It indirectly lays down the prescriptive gender construction of men and roles that they are to embrace and work on. This article, with reference to Mahesh Dattani's famous play, Dance Like a Man, interrogates the entire process of gender construction of men in a patriarchal Brahminical Hindu society and the masculine roles that they are expected to take up, It also attempts at evaluating the influence of toxic masculinity in undermining a person's natural talent and desires in order to reinforce stereotypical gender roles. This article also explores the cultural history of Bharatnatyam dance as an art form that influences gender construction and inhibits a male dancer from pursuing dance as his career.

Keywords: gender, gender construction, gender roles, patriarchal society, toxic masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of 'self' and 'identity' are extensively discussed, defined and explained in different streams of social sciences. The term self is often used to indicate the conscious, reflective personality of an individual in totality. It is usually perceived as a set of discrete identities or internalized role designations. On the other hand identity is conceived as the distinct personality of an individual that is regarded as a persisting entity. According to the Symbolic Interactionist theorists self reflects society that means society shapes self, which in turn shapes social behaviors and based on society's definition of masculine and feminine, distinct gender roles are passed on and reinforced by different mechanisms within society (Blumer, 1969; Lipman Blumer, 1984; Mead, 1964). Hence, it is quite evident that the process of social construction of gender identity is closely associated with the culture and institutional arrangements of the society through which it operates. Culture covers almost every aspects of life ranging from organization of production, structure of family and institutions, ideologies and normative patterns of the society and forms of interactions or relations. Cultural construction of gender also includes construction of masculinity and femininity in the context of socialization. The construction of femininity and masculinity is an important phenomena as it further decides the shaping of social institutions like the institutions of family, economic organization and other political and religious institutions. Cultural implication in gender construction is regarded as of vital importance since it reflects the structure of stratification, power relations between men and women and the process of acquiring masculine and feminine behavior and roles in society. Hence, masculinity has always been associated with being powerful, dominating, strong and heroic, while femininity with softness, submission, beauty and grace. The social roles that a woman and man are expected to take up reflect their gender conformity. The typical art form of dance, especially the classical dances are often been misinterpreted as styles with only exquisite feminine movements which can be justified by the soft, graceful gestures of female gender only.

THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Building on the symbolic interaction theory of gender which suggests that gender roles are social constructs, the problem of this study is to explore the subject of gender, socio-cultural influences that define gender and pressures of gender performance that is generated out of these socio-cultural determiners. The play under consideration primarily rests on the broad topic of gender. The study of gender is "multidimensional" in that it crosses the boundaries of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, leadership, and organizational development. Because of the far-reaching impact of gender, "Research from other disciplines can therefore do much to inform one's own work and to provide new perspectives and a broader context for understanding research in one's own field" (Stevenson, Paludi, Black, & Whitley, 1994, p. ix). Given that plays are a lens for

understanding society, Mahesh Dattani who is not only a very renowned theatre artist and director but also someone who is well known for his empathetic treatment of marginalized gender, resorts to theatre to sensitize his audience on themes related to gender construction, gender exploitation and marginalization. Dance Like a Man is one such play that depicts the ruthless process of gender construction of a man that gradually rips him off his desires to become a Bharatnatyam dancer and eventually annihilates his identity altogether.

Dance Like a Man is one of the best plays written by an Indian in English. It was first performed in Bangalore on September 22, 1989 as part of the Deccan Herald Festival with the playwright Mahesh Dattani playing young Jairaj/Vishwas. Dance Like a Man has also been filmed by Pamela Rooks; starring Anushka Shankar as Lata Parekh, Mohan Ahashe as Amritlal Parekh, Arif Zakaria as Jairaj Parekh, Shobana as Ratna Parekh and Samir Soni as Vishal; and has won the National Award for the best feature film in English (2003). In this play, Dattani shows how the society and the oddity of the individuals work. It is a play in two-acts and Dattani incorporates the traditional Bharatnatyam dance form and brings together the historic India and the property-minded, money-minded society of the 1990s, with a drama moving between generations and across time in ways which are technically astounding.

A MAN SHOULD DANCE LIKE A MAN

Dance was traditionally considered a woman's art and a man pursuing dance as career was considered to be less manly. Hence, a common didactic statement "A man should dance like a man" is quite prevalent in dance communities articulating the very scope and space for the dancers, especially the male dancers. In a patriarchal society where so much emphasis is given on gender construction and roles, men taking up dance as hobby is acceptable. However, men choosing classical dance styles as their profession is perceived a matter of shame and therefore totally unacceptable and condemned. Implied in this gender specific hobby ideas is gender construction and gender specific roles that a male should take up as a part of his social existence. Any deviation from this gender specific roles indirectly leads to gender oppression and marginalization. It is this desire to deviate from the normative gender roles that leads to anxiety and tension between Amritlal, the old patriarch who is politically established and a well-known social reformist and his young son Jairaj in Mahesh Dattani's highly acclaimed play, Dance Like a Man and consequent oppression of the latter in his own home by his father. Gender is performative and conceived as a cultural process with a pre-established pattern of behavior which in the play brings Jairaj's plight to the fore. The widely accepted social perception of men and women is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize masculinity and femininity. The very notion of dance seems to be defeating the very idea associated with manliness and is regarded as an enterprise associated with feminine qualities. In Dance like a Man, it is Jairaj's love for dance and his keen desire to pursue dance as his main profession, transforms his father, the social reformer, Mr. Amritlal's house into a dance studio. In order to meet his dream, he arranges rehearsal classes at his home where his guru with his troupe of instrumentalists comes to train Jairaj and his dancer wife, Ratna. However, Amritlal, the social reformist does not approve of his son's passion for dance and repents for converting 'the library into a practice hall' (Dattani 1: 414) for his son. He condemns his son's obsession for Bharatnatyam dance and denounces it as 'antics' (Dattani 1: 415). Amritlal even challenges his son, "I would like to see what kind of independence you gain with your antics" (Dattani 1: 415). Nevertheless, being a tensed father, he also tries to explain Jairaj the ideal role of a man, "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" (Dattani 1: 415). In this context of enforcement of gender roles on individuals, Multani says "gender is constituted by some acts which when repeated come to form and give shape to a 'coherent' gender identity" (238). Trying to push Jairaj to the outside world, which he considers is a man's world and to take up a job, Amritlal is thrusting on him the conventional role of masculine gender as the breadwinner of the family who takes up an office job and works from morning till evening. Besides the fear of seeing his son stepping into the shoes of a female, is the embarrassment that Jairaj wants to take up as his profession the traditional dance form called Bharatnatyam, which is usually regarded as Devdasi's only profession for livelihood. Also associated with devdasi system is caste issues. Amritlal who belongs to an upper caste family has absolutely no tolerance to anything that interrogates his family's caste reputation. Hence, he is determined to dissuade Jairaj from continuing as a Bharatnatyam dancer professionally.

CULTURAL HISTORY OF BHARATNATYAM DANCE AND ITS GENDER IMPLICATIONS

According to the savarna history, the Bharatnatyam as an art form was practiced by the women from the hereditary dancing community, known as devadasis. Devdasi (servant of God) or jogini is a girl "dedicated" to worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. These women came to be known as Devdasis, a Sanskrit term that actually means 'slaves of God', a woman thus ritualized was entitled to freedom from widowhood by means of marrying the Gods and thereby devoting her entire life in the service of God and the

temple. It was easily accepted by women folk as it was regarded as a ritualized means of freeing a woman from torturous widowhood (Anandhi 739).

A close observation on the historical perspective of dance reveals that Bharatnatyam dance has its roots in the Devdasi system, the existence of which can be traced back to apparently pre-Aryan times. Though there is no mention of it in Vedic Sanskrit literature, but Tamil Sangam literature, which dates back to 200-300 BC, describes a class of dancing women called parattaiyar. They were courtesans who performed some ritual function, lived in a separate part of the city, and eventually came to be associated with temples. Later, in the post Vedic and post Buddhist age, the system seems to have spread through India, though it remained the strongest in the south. Young girls were usually dedicated to their clan Goddess, or occasionally to Gods, very often after the appearance of matted hair called jath which is taken to be a sign of the call of the goddess. The dedicated girl was forbidden to marry (Omvedt 16-19).

Implicit in the Devdasi system is caste and gender exploitation of the underprivileged sections of the society. The young girls who were turned into devdasis were usually from very low caste and low income background. They were often dedicated by their parents in the service of Gods for some sort of economic independence. The girls were assigned to jobs in the temple premises that involved cleaning washing the temple premises and vessels and preparing the flower garlands. But with the laxity of morals in the priestly class and corruption in temple administration, they were forced to take up dancing and music and eventually were exploited by the patrons of the temples for sexual pleasures (Singh 3).

The socio-cultural perception on the social status of the Devdasis is a mixed one. While some critics like Srinivasan is of the opinion that the Devdasis enjoyed a privileged position because of their temple association and earned economic benefits from their patrons which in return ensured them social honor (Srinivasan 1869-71), there are many others who believed that it brought moral degradation as their lives were strongly based on tradition and social stigma. However, it is an undeniable fact that once the girls were dedicated to God and married off to Him, it became extremely difficult for them to dissociate themselves from the temple complex. The system of Devdasi had grave socio-economic implications. Women from economically deprived background women found in this age old form of Devdasi, a chance to earn their livelihood. Though it involved exploitation of the body, it was heartily welcomed because of its religious implications. It was a social practice of claiming that not all women got a chance to serve the God, but only a chosen few had and therefore, they should not deny the call of the God to serve him. However, the young and innocent girls before they could actually realize their body, were married to the God and were confined within the temple premises only to be exploited by rich patrons of the temple. Thus, the Devdasi system was interpreted as a means of controlling the sexuality of women from economically deprived class by the socially rich and hence powerful men (Singh 17).

Gail Pheterson in *The Prostitution Prism* highlights the underlying gender hierarchies that are reflected in the system. Regardless of religious sanction and economic independence, devdasi system interrogated a woman's morality and sexuality (30-6). According to upper caste Amritlal Parekh, therefore, any dance form that centers round women sexuality is highly unacceptable. He shudders thinking that Jairaj in Bharatnatyam profession and attire would engage in feminine body movements and facial expressions like his guru. Moreover, when a man can be the king of his own world controlling and regulating the sexuality of the woman he is married to, there is no point to slog in a woman's world. Unable to accept emasculation of his son, he dismisses it as "anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man" (Dattani I: 406). As Jairaj boldly tries to argue and rebel against 'such logic' (Dattani I: 406), Amritlal kills his confidence step by step.

COALITION OF POWERS: A MOVE AGAINST JAIRAJ'S DANCE CAREER

The kitchen is a woman's world and the world outside largely belongs to a man is a common understanding of gender roles in a patriarchal society. A daughter-in-law of a respectable family like that of Amritlala's is expected to be an angel of the house, keeping herself contained within the boundaries of the house preoccupied with the duties of a responsible woman. Amritlal too wants his daughter-in-law to be a docile, submissive one who devotes herself entirely for her family. Obviously he does not like his daughter-in-law, Ratna accessing the outer world for something like dancing and public performance that is considered shameful for a respectable family like his. Yet he is ready to allow Ratna pursue her dream in order to man his son. Amritlal's only desire was to detach Jairaj from his passion for dance and restrict him to masculine gender role.

The first step that the old patriarch takes to attain this was to damage the bond of guru-shishya; the mentor and mentee which is regarded as holy as any religious ritual. Amritlal slow poisons and vitiates each other by indirectly insulting Jairaj's dance guru and his troupe by cancelling the scheduled classes without prior notice and sometimes even forcing them to stop their rehearsal on the pretext of his urgent social meetings. Gradually as Amritlal's insulting of his dance, dance guru and troupe reaches an unbearable limit, the enraged Jairaj takes an 'impulsive decision' (Dattani 1: 411) to leave his father's house, only to realize the limitation of it because of

his economic dependence on his father. The turning point in his life takes place as he decides to return home within forty-eight hours. His decision reduces him to just a 'spineless boy' (Dattani 1: 406) in the eyes of Ratna and provided his father ample scope to subject him to his hegemonic power.

The incident marks his initiation into a life of a caged bird, whose wings of fancy and desire for dance will be gradually curbed. He becomes the victim of emotional oppression, gradually silenced by the authoritative, calculative, malign and vicious male power coupled with another calculative, ambitious and witty feminine power of Ratna. Jairaj is Dattani's best example of how men also suffer under gender stereotypes constructed by the patriarchal forces and systems. Though the society has invested them with superior position and powers, yet the same society does not allow them the freedom to go astray. The male gender is allowed to exercise their freedom of choice as long as they follow the norms set by the society. As they go astray from what is expected of them to be and do, they are susceptible to the forces of the patriarchy that then write their destiny. Therefore, when Jairaj chooses to subvert the set role of a male by taking dance as his profession he becomes the victim of his orthodox, revengeful father who is hell bent to "make his son an adult" (Dattani 1: 427).

Amritlal's anxiousness to settle down his son in the society erases the thin line between an affectionate and doting father and an obsessive, egoistic one. Thus under the guise of a compassionate father, Amritlal exploits very safely and subtly the ambitious Ratna to seek the most desired man's world for his son. He lays before her two very lucrative options, both of which any woman would like to possess in her life. The first one is the freedom to pursue her dream, i.e. dance, and the second is to see her husband, like any other man, as a successful bread winner for the family rather than waste his life dancing. He hits two birds by one stone. By giving Ratna the freedom to dance, he tries to buy son's happiness by settling him in a man's world. Emphasizing on the making of Jairaj as a complete and successful man, Amritlal emotionally blackmails Ratna to achieve his objective.

AMRITLAL: Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

RATNA: No

AMRITLAL: In being a man... I have no intension of stopping you. I will let you dance.

RATNA: And Jairaj?

AMRITLAL: A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's pathetic.

RATNA: May be we aren't progressive enough.

AMRITLAL: That isn't being progressive, that is...sick...help me make him an adult. Help Me to help him grow up (I will) make him worthy of you. (Dattani 1: 426-27)

As Amritlal strikes a deal with Ratna giving her the space to practice and excel in her dance, Ratna deviates from the ideal image of wife as friend and company, sahadharmini and steps into the shoes of her father-in-law. Ratna becomes the scheming mistress working against Jairaj. The ambitious and overconfident Ratna with no hesitation becomes an accomplice to her father-in-law to destroy her husband's passion and talent. This in turn introduces Jairaj into another episode of oppression, betrayal and frustration, now in the hands of female gender. She starts undermining Jairaj's self-esteem that serves the purpose of both the patriarchal father and his daughter-in-law. Gradually she reduces Jairaj to drunken impotency and she keeps on delivering brilliant and extra ordinary performances one after another. She cold-bloodedly misguides Jairaj, keeps on curbing his artistic creativity and abilities and ultimately successfully destroys his artistic finesses and reduces him to a shadow of hers.

Dattani, the master of stage crafts, brilliantly depicts Ratna playing a pivotal role in marginalizing Jairaj both at home and outside. Through an evocative stage direction in which Ratna dazzles in her brilliant dance performance at the center of the stage, Dattani focuses on how she pushes Jairaj to the periphery of the stage, where in the dim light, he struggles to shine with his not so important role and steps. Jairaj's marginal space on the stage reflects his marginalization at home too. Ratna becomes the decision maker both at home and in their professional life, reducing him to a state of nothingness. Jairaj too admits:

Bit by bit. You took it 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 (Dattani 1: 443).

It is the coupled effect of patriarchal support with economic independence that invests Ratna temporarily with superior powers and confidence to rule over his husband.

DEFEAT OF THE DANCER

In a patriarchal society, the very process of gender construction many a times prove to be more destructive and annihilating than constructive. In Jairaj's case it leads to a life that can be counted as a total waste. By forcefully keeping him away from dance Amritlal, loses his son forever. He is no match for either his father or his dominating wife. So he can neither behave nor dance like a man. One of Jairaj's deepest regrets till the end was that he had not been able to dance like a man. This is the tragedy of his life, he silently lives with it and eventually tries to explain away at the end: "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God". Alas! (Dattani 1: 447).

CONCLUSION

Dattani's Dance Like a Man raises very sensitive issues regarding gender construction, perception and marginalization in case of deviance from normative ones. He is ostracized for his choice of a unmanly profession of dance and chooses to express his identity through dancing. Jairaj, the protagonist, is shown the door because he goes against the unwritten norms of the society in his gender performance and establishing his gender identity. This lands him in great trouble. Jairaj's case exemplifies that normative gender roles and performance still matters in a patriarchal society. By silencing Jairaj slowly but steadily and efficaciously removing him from the focus of stage lights during dance performances, Dattani depicts the subtleties of gender construction in a patriarchal society and how authoritative parents like Amritlal still believe that gender lies in Jairaj's hips and in his actions; his passions and desire determine his gender.

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