
THE OTHER SIDE OF EQUALITY: A STUDY OF GENDER SUBJUGATION IN DATTANI'S "DANCE LIKE A MAN"

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Abstract: Gender is a sociological construct to define and restrict a person based on their biological sex. The society has divided both the sexes and bestowed upon them a few functions that they are expected to fulfil. If anyone of them tries to break that mould then they are labelled as “misfits”, “effeminate”, “tomboy” and the like. Women all over the world are shattering this glass ceiling and proving to the world that they are not just home makers and child bearers. The condition of women has progressed in leaps and bounds thanks to movements like feminism but men are still stuck in the race to prove their manliness in case they take up something unconventional or “womanly”. The world has become a very different place now, women are no more damsels in distress waiting for their knight in shining armour, they are their own knights now but the knight still has to be brave and an epitome of manhood. Gender equality has been an issue that women have been battling with for over a century now but men are yet to address this as an actual issue, because most of the members of their own gender cannot relate to them or understand their struggle.

“A woman in a man’s world may be considered as progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.” This dialogue from the play “Dance like a Man” aptly describes the psyche of the patriarchal society which equates a man’s manliness with his profession and passions. Mahesh Dattani has beautifully taken up the issue of gender subjugation from a different perspective. All of his plays focus on urban spaces and a man and woman’s place in a patriarchal society. This paper will take up Dattani’s play “Dance Like A Man” to explore the issues of gender equality, gendered stereotypes people are subjected to and their impact on one’s identity and psyche.

Keywords: Gender Bias, Patriarchy, Gender Stereotyping.

Introduction: Gender is nothing but a sociological construct to confine humans according to the norms of the many without considering the psyche of an individual. Like once Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, “A gender line... helps to keep women not on a pedestal, but in a cage.”, it’s not just the women that are caged but also the men that show the slightest deviation from the popular idea of what a man should be. “Many men are far more oppressed than any women, and any feminist who was determined to support women in all situations would certainly encounter some where her support of women against men would increase the level of injustice in the world.” (Richards 31) This statement pertinently describes how feminism demands equality not superiority, a fact that a lot of people forget both, feminists and anti-feminists. People cannot be free until there is gender

equality, not in a true sense though. Until people are allowed to do what they really want to do instead of conforming them to the prescribed gender roles injustice will always prevail. According to Judith Butler, gender is functional and is learnt by an individual based on their upbringing and the society that surrounds them. No one is born into a gender, sex is biological but gender is a sociological construct whose values are predetermined.

Women in this century are better off than men because when they say they are being discriminated against, people understand it but when men say the same, they are asked to “man-up”. The idea being that a man is a strong and brave individual who is emotionally stoic and rational, commands the respect of other men, contributes towards the welfare of the society and supports himself and his family. A manly man is not dependent on others for food on his table, he is the bread earner and that is his function in the family. Jairaj Parekh from *Dance Like A Man*, according to this narrow understanding, does not qualify to be a man in the views of his patriarchal father, Amritlal Parekh. In his youth he was dependent on his father Amritlal, a freedom fighter and social reformer, and later he lets his wife, Ratna, take control of his life. He is a Bharatnatyam dancer and according to his father this career choice makes Jaipraj less of a man as is clearly evident in this dialogue by Jairaj expressing the views of his father, “ The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares- what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man.”(25). In patriarchy, even art is gender specific so a man cannot be a classical dancer, cannot have long hair and should have a proper gait especially if he is in a field dominated by females. Long hair and slightly effeminate walk of Jairaj’s *guruji*(teacher) makes Amritlal uncomfortable but the long hair of a *sashu* (*monk*) is acceptable to him. The same physical aspect is desirable in one man but not desirable in another because of the difference of profession, this is the hypocrisy of gender construction and patriarchy.

Dance Like A Man questions the patriarchy in the light of predetermined norms of gender roles and the conflict that arises in such a society when any individual attempts to deviate from these accepted norms. Dattani through the premises of his play has brilliantly provided an insight into gender roles and inequality. He presents the predicament that results from the stereotypical gender construction of the society through the life of the protagonist, Jairaj Parekh. Jairaj would make every patriarch uncomfortable with his passion for dancing and the will to follow this passion and make it a profession. With his dancing bells and sometimes dressing up as a woman for a role, Jairaj breaks all the norms of what a ‘man’ should be. Jairaj is far more progressive than the society of his time and this causes conflict in the family whose head cannot tolerate non-conformity with the ‘normal’. Amritlal Parekh likes to maintain an image of progressive man but it’s a fake one. He is progressive to the extent where his fundamentals aren’t compromised with but as soon as he is confronted with an alien situation, like his son taking up dancing as a profession, he discards the sham and reverts to his conservative self.

According to Amritlal a “man’s happiness lies...In being a man.”(49). Here Amritlal means the patriarchal definition of what a man should be and thus colludes with his clever daughter-in-law to make Jairaj a man who is ‘worthy’. The only reason Amritlal deems Jaial unworthy is because of the choice of his profession. Dattani constantly questions the idea and definition of man throughout the play. Through the character of Jairaj, Dattani has presented the inner turmoil of a man who is

oppressed both by the member of his sex and the opposite sex. Thus, such a man becomes doubly marginalised, first by the opposite sex that considers him weaker and incapable and then his own that is unable to understand the reason for such a diversion from the acceptable norms of society and is considered queer. The perfect example of this is the discrimination meted out to gays because they are considered weak by women and effeminate by men. People have a tendency to link sex with performance of gender roles and sexual orientation without realising the different ideas they represent.

Jairaj thus becomes a tragic figure. He neither fits his father's definition of a man nor his wife's definition, which are quite similar to one another. Ratna married Jairaj because he was a dancer but the same quality renders him dependent on his father and this makes Jairaj less of a man in Ratna's opinions, as is evident in the dialogue, "You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't stay away from his father's house for more than forty-eight hours." (21). In another attack she says, "You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house..." (21). She rebukes Jairaj for returning to his father's house but does not address the circumstances they had to return in. Jairaj questions her idea of a man, "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?" (31). The dialogue displays Jairaj's anguish, his frustration with the idea of a man, the idea he does not conform to but is expected to abide by. In another dialogue he questions Ratna when they are unable to find a musician for their daughter, Lata's performance, "Will finding a musician make me a man?" (21). Jairaj is tormented by the idea of man that he cannot be nor understand. His father would have preferred if he had a hobby like playing cricket instead of becoming obsessed with a woman's art. After years of being rebuked by his father and wife, Jairaj internalizes their idea of what a man should be resulting in identity crisis, as it becomes apparent in this dialogue, "After forty years, she tells me she doesn't think of me as a man. Just a spineless boy. And you know what I think? I think she is right!" (26).

Amritlal's schemes for his son and his ideas like "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (50) destroy Jairaj. When Ratna and Amritlal conspire, they both think of their own interests instead of thinking about what was best for Jairaj, this is the tragedy of humanity. Jairaj's career is destroyed by his own loved ones so they could achieve their own motives at the stake of his wellbeing. He in turn blames them for the failure he becomes in life. Jairaj's frustration and longing for dignity are well expressed in this dialogue when he asks Ratna to give him back his self-respect, "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." (70). Ratna did not treat him as an equal even though he was her life partner and instead of encouraging and helping him, she wrecked him beyond repair.

Thus, Jairaj becomes a symbol for the other side of gender inequality, the one that is practiced against men, and the one that is neglected. In his book, *The Second Sexism* David Benatar addresses this discrimination:

In those societies in which sex discrimination has been recognized to be wrong, the response to this form of discrimination has targeted those attitudes and practices that

(primarily) disadvantage women and girls. At the most, there has been only scant attention to those manifestations of sex discrimination whose primary victims are men and boys. What little recognition there has been of discrimination against males has very rarely resulted in amelioration. For these reasons, we might refer to discrimination against males as the “second sexism,” to adapt Simone de Beauvoir’s famous phrase. The second sexism is the neglected sexism, the sexism that is not taken seriously even by most of those who oppose (or at least claim that they oppose) sex discrimination. (10)

Male gender subjugation is no laughing matter, not in these times where it has become an actual threat to a person’s wellbeing. Our ideas of progress are hollow until every man and woman feels they have a right to live their life on their terms instead of that of the society. Dattani has proficiently conveyed the quandary of a man who is treated differently because of his passion. The Parekh family becomes a microcosm for the society and Jairaj’s plight becomes universal.

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