



CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN MAHESH DATTANI'S DANCE LIKE A MAN

K. Santhi Maheswari

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri S.Ramsamy Naidu
Memorial College, Sattur, Tamilnadu

Abstract:

Gender describes the traits and behaviour that are regarded by the society and culture as appropriate to men and women. These are all the ideas that talk about behaviour, personality and attributes of male and female in a society. These words refer to everything that is associated with an individual's sex and its cultural attributes. The roles, attributes, behaviour, preferences, personality, characteristics and expectations are important gender factors that define what is male and female in the gender narrations and orientations. Though the sexual orientations and features predetermine the gender aspects, few more genders are budding or their presence are being felt in recent days. Gender is thus a social label and not a description of biology. The description of man in the Indian context is totally different. Few masculine gender descriptions are self-imposed on masculine gender. Moreover he is restricted to do the female works like cooking, washing, cleaning etc., he is restricted to have a long hair and practice the dance Bharathanatyam etc. He must be brave, cannot be a coward. He has to get married or at least he should keep a mistress and he should demand dowry from his life partner. Talking about Bharathanatyam, it is limited as it is the dance of women and those men who want to practice it will have scar on their masculinity. Gender constructs are as oppressive to the male as to the female. A classic example of this is seen in Mahesh Dattani's play Dance Like a Man.

Key Words: Gender Ambiguity, Gender Hegemony, Gender Biological & Grammatical

Mahesh Dattani is the genuine voice of the urban middle class society of India who is the first Indian playwright writing in English to be given the Sahitya Akademy award. His plays focus on issues that are both contemporary and timeless. The family is at the centre of Dattani's dramatic concern using which he unravels the complicated dynamics of human relationships. For Dattani, no issues is either too sacrosanct or a taboo to be dealt with. The disarmingly honest way in which he analyses the human condition is remarkable "Dattani's work probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English", says the Sahitya Akademy award citation about Dattani. (qtd in. The Quest dec 2006 .P.2).

Mahesh Dattani chooses themes related to sexuality and gender issues. His characters represent people of contemporary society who are usually set aside as perverse by authors and dramatists. Dattani has tried to speak about taboo issues, sexuality and gender discrimination. Though he has dealt with varied subjects of communalism, human relationship, moral conflict of post colonial period his major focus is the rendered self pitched against the contemporary urbanscape.

Gender is a representation and Dattani's theatre is representation of representation .Gender is not a product of different properties of bodies but is a product of social behaviour and practices. The media, the schools, the families, the courts, literature and art- all construct the notion of gender and Dattani seems to unearth the excesses and repressive forces behind such constructions. Classification of sex in terms of biology or ascribing connotation to words in terms of logic of grammar as masculine, feminine and neuter that produces the gender system has not categorized

homosexuality under another independent gender. The biological and grammatical classifications exclude the real relations in conformity to the ideology that govern the system of relations among human beings in the society.

Social construct of gender, the role of patriarchy, the plight of homosexuals, the institution of marriage – and the hypocrisy surrounding all these, are the issues taken up by Dattani. The Indian middle class society with its double standards, its show of respectability, its veneer of the close knit, perfect family- the benevolent father, the adoring wife and the submissive children- where gender roles are almost sacrosanct, irreversible- man the provider, woman the homemaker- these people inhabit the stage space of Dattani. Dattani tackles what he calls the “invisible issues” of the Indian society, issues not unknown to us, but of which we would rather not talk about; issues we would conveniently cover up with a rug and act as though they do not exist. Pretence has become a way of life and keeping up face is an essential survival strategy. Dattani forces us to confront these issues. He tries to shake us out of our complacency and for this honesty in approach; his plays have won critical and public acclaim all over India and abroad.

An interview of Mahesh Dattani’s works reveals a recurring theme: ‘Gender identity’ observes C.K.Meena in her paper, *‘Unmasking the Middle Class; The Drama of Mahesh Dattani’*. Sex is a natural phenomenon whereas gender is a societal construct. The so-called traits of masculinity and femininity, if found in the opposite sex are unacceptable to society. Gender roles are fixed in the middle class Indian society. ‘Gender ambiguity’ is a recurrent theme in the plays of Dattani. In his plays ‘common assumptions about male and female roles get pushed about and turned around remarks Kusum Haider in The Book Review Dttani deconstructs the common conceptions about gender and criticizes male hegemony, at the same time bringing to light the compromises that a man has to make to live up to societal expectations. Dattani does not take sides’ with either of the sexes; on the other hand, he points out the inconsistencies in the prevalent gender hegemony in society.

Gender construct is as oppressive to the male as to the female. A classic example of this is seen in Dattani’s play *Dance Like a Man*. Dance, particularly Bharathanatyam, is a very beautiful art form and like any art, if practiced by committed exponents, is elevating and spiritual. But the middle class Indian society does not approve of a man being a practitioner of this form, as it is considered to render him effeminate. A man must act like a man, be the provider to the family and if needs be, indulge in manly sports that befit his ‘sex’.

The title itself becomes the topic sentence for the play and it speaks lot about the play. We shall see in this play, how Jairaj, the young protagonist who takes Bharathanatyam as his professional career, becomes pawn to the gender conception of his father Amirtlal, a representative of society. The play *Dance Like a Man* explores the life of a budding dancer Jairaj and how he loses his career, his passion, his dream and consequently his purpose in life to societal notion of gender.

Jairaj and his wife Ratna, are dancers under the shelter of Jairaj’s father Amirtlal Parekh. It is implied in the text that Ratna marries Jairaj because he is a dancer and he will let her to dance so that her career would not be compromised. But Amirtlal Parekh, being a man of fixed notions, is unable to tolerate his son wanting to become a professional dancer. According to Amirtlal Parekh, Bharathanatyam is meant for women dancers alone. If a male dances for that, there is a disbelief all around the world that he will walk like she and at the extent will become she. The only Bharathanatyam form that was allotted for the male is “Siva Thandavam,” the only lord Shiva dances fiercely.

Amirtlal's basic understanding of gender limitation does not allow a man to have long hair since keeping long hair meant for women alone. This is well portrayed in the conversation between Amirtlal and his son Jairaj;

Amirtlal : I have never seen a man with long hair.

Jairaj : All sadhus have long hair.

Amirtlal : I don't mean....

Jairaj : what are you trying to say?

Amirtlal : All I am saying that normal men don't keep their hair so long (417).

Amirtlal understanding the masculine limitation tells him the style of walking of a man. It should be straight like a soldier walks in an army parade. A mere change of walking style will check mate one's own masculinity. Thus Amirtlal suspects the masculinity of his son's dance master and he substantiates his point by posing two masculine limitations.

Jairaj : Are you saying that he is not....

Amirtlal : I've also noticed the way he walks. (417)

He also firmly believes the men who break their masculine limitations cannot be hailed from a reputed family.

Jairaj : who do you mean?

Amirtlal : Your Guru. What kind of family is he from? (417).

Amirtlal thinks that growing long hair is the check mate to his son's masculinity via prejudice to his family pride. He is ready to throw his son away from his home, though Jairaj is his only son. Slowly the gender limitations and preconceived gender description ask him to be a dictator on his son. Since he is the sole proprietor of his property, he threatens that he will throw his son out of home if he does not follow all the limitations and descriptions of male which has been derived by the male dominated society.

When his son goes out of his house, runs short of money and comes back to his house, Amirtlal puts forth the first condition as to keep his son's masculinity as per the gender limitations and descriptions. He firmly believes that boy should not dance but he has to play cricket that is an outdoor game. Indoor games are meant for girls and outdoor games are meant for boys. This gender understanding takes to the formation of class society in which the women were considered as the productive tools and they should be kept under the master of males.

Amirtlal : 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... (414- 415)

Here, Amirtlal is a wonderful example to the male dominated society that creates and preserves masculine ethics and limitations. He is an autocratic father for whom Bharathanatyam is the "craft of prostitute to show off her wares", hence a man has no business to learn such a craft and anyone who, "learnt such a craft could not be a man." (421). Amirtlal approves of the marriage between Jairaj and Ratna, according to Jairaj, "because it suits(his) image -that of a liberal minded person, to have daughter-in-law from outside his community"(421).

With the help of Ratna, Amirtlal successfully achieves his desire to stop his son from dancing bharathanatyam. He informs Ratna that man's happiness lies "in being a man ". He assures Ratna that she will be allowed to dance if she helps him in making Jairaj "an adult" who could be worthy of a woman. He has handed over this responsibility to Ratna.

Ambition overtakes Ratna. In order to prove herself to be a dancer, she “destroys Jairaj by undermining his self esteem as an artist”. (402) .She deserves her husband not as a dancer, but a mere spectator of dance and who does back stage arrangement for his wife’s dance programmes. The husband-wife relationship between Jairaj and Ratna exhibits so many visible and invisible facts. The marriage is a deed like as Ratna gets her freedom of choice to dance.

Jairaj’s son-in-law named Viswas also faces the same masculinity and its descriptive nature problem. He gives importance to his profession that he takes care of his father’s business, a mithai shop. This statement substantiates the male gender ethics and limitations that a man should be employed.

Viswas : Did you tell them about my father?

Lata : Yes,

Viswas : That he runs..... Street (388)

The very important gender limitation is to have children. When Lata is not ready to have children and when she proposes this idea to Viswas, Viswas’ masculinity is really shocked and he is in a position to save his masculinity which is at the mercy of the society’s male dominated gender description.

Dattani’s gender relations are well portrayed in this play. His subaltern genders are suppressed by co-genders. Though the suppressions have own societal reasons to back up, dominative genders’ dominations on other genders should be taken into account with the concern of solving the societal reasons first and Cultural Revolution and psychological approaches next. It is clearly made in all the plays of Dattani that all gender relations in India are tangible, interconnected and they deserve through reading. Dattani has done it successfully in all of his plays. He further asks the society to make needed changes in the gender relations for a better a gender world that is full of freedom to all the invisibles and abate the suppressed people.

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