

## **Toxic Masculinity as portrayed in Mahesh Dattani’s “Dance like a man.”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Contemporary Indian dramatists in English raise several questions about what we call today as the modern problems like love,sex,religion and most importantly gender roles.Mahesh Dattani through his plays dwells on certain social issues hovering over the modern era like homosexuality, gender discrimination and communalism which need to be talked about in terms of the taboo surrounding them and the eventual amalgamation with Indian values that Dattani gives these subjects. Dance like a man is a power play between tradition and modernity and the conflicting ideologies between two generations and their distinctive notion of masculinity. Dattani succeeds in giving voice to the voiceless and raising several gender based undertones throughout the play. The notion of masculinity might be different for both generations but it eventually comes down to answering the question “what one is supposed to do like a man”.*

**KEY WORDS:** Contemporary, masculinity, conflicting, gender, voiceless.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary Indian Drama in Indian English Literature has seen vast growth and development. The dramatists have not been hesitant in making bold innovations and experimenting with new techniques and forms of drama. Experimentation is one of the most important concerns of Modernism and Post- Modernism and we also see reflections of Modernism in contemporary Indian English Drama. The Modern dramatists have turned to the ancient myths, legend and folklores to pick up various thematic perspectives for their plays. We also see that the contemporary dramatist also strike the moral chords of their audiences through the actual staging of violence and inhumanity which are major problems of the post-modern world.

The contemporary dramatists raise several questions about love, relationships in modern times, sex and the prevalence of moral values in Indian society which are now fading considerably. We also see how the dramatists use the element of Bathos to mock the hollowness of the morality in lives of common people. Vijay Tendulkar was the first playwright who openly staged violence without dressing it up in its actual raw form. Dattani in his plays also makes use of various rituals and Indian traditions which make his plays have a universal appeal. Although his writings originated in Karnataka they have a Universal appeal not only in India but across the world. The dramatic effect and visual spectacle are of utmost importance in all of Dattani’s plays. All of his plays address the problems of today and the growing complexities of human relationships.

Dattani’s plays are regarded as a new arrival in the field of Indian English Drama and his plays also portray the classical concerns of Indian drama. The immense popularity of his plays is because of the linguistic simplicity. He uses the kind of English which is spoken by people across India which gives his plays a wider appeal. His plays have broken linguistic, geographical and Cultural barriers thus making him a leading dramatist of our times. Dattani has a number of plays to his credit. A few of them are: ‘Where there is a will’, ‘Bravely fought the queen’, ‘Tara’, ‘Bravely fought the queen’, ‘Final solutions and other plays’, ‘On a muggy night in Mumbai’, ‘Seven steps around the fire’, ‘Thirty days in September’, ‘The murder that never was’.

His plays deal with the themes of gender discrimination, homosexuality, communalism and various other social issues. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998 for Final solution which is based on the recurrent echoes of partition and human psychology which portray ‘mob tendencies’. Dattani has written several radio plays for BBC.

His Sahitya Akademi award citation says:

“Dattani....probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender....a brilliant contribution to Indian English drama.”(Das 126)

For Dattani theatre acts as a medium to hear the voices of those who have been deliberately silenced for years. He addresses the problems of the subalterns in a realistic manner. We see that his plays address the

untraversed and unexplored areas of the problems of discrimination, Taboo against HIV positive people, homosexuality and the issues of the LGBTQ+ community. He started his own theatre group 'Playpen' in 1984. His plays can be broadly classified into three categories namely Stage plays, radio plays and screen plays. In all his plays Dattani has addressed the issues of the people living in the urban social milieu and the his plays are gthe extensions of the issues faced by the commoners. Also his understanding of his own social surrounding and the society in general make his plays have a much wider appeal and reach.

We see that Gujrati and Kannada plays had a huge impact on Dattani in his growing up years and therefore we find that his plays have ample use of Gujrati, Kannada and Hindi words along with traditional Gujrati setting in some of his plays. Thus we see that his plays have a cultural concern and are deeply rooted in the Indian traditional system along with a modern urban tone to them.

His plays 'On a muggy night in Mumbai', 'Bravely fought the queen' and 'Do the needful' touch down upon the issue of homosexuality. 'Do the Needful' is a story about Alpesh and Lata who are about to get married but Alpesh is a homosexual who is in love with someone else. 'On a muggy night in Mumbai' is a play which deals with the issues of gay community and the protagonist of the play Kiran herself says "I really wish they would allow gay people to marry". The play also unmasks the taboo in our society which regards same sex love as unnatural and undesirable.

'Tara' a three act play deals with the issue of gender discrimination where conjoined twins are born and the couple asks to save the male child at the cost of life of the girl child. This temperament of frowning over a girl child's birth is not unknown to us. Today it has become one of the most relevant issues and various NGOs and Government policies are working towards the issue of gender discrimination.

'Seven steps around the fire' deal with the issues of the Eunuch community and our rotten mind-set towards them. Kamla a eunuch falls in love with the son of an affluent minister 'Subbu' and when her identity is revealed she is brutally murdered.

Thus we see that Dattani presents a psychological perspective into the human psyche. He presents various emotions which are deep routed in our human psyche namely distrust, discontent, rage and resentment. The innovative genius which Dattani is blessed with helps him see beyond the normal daily lives of the people living in our society. He dwells deeper into the basic human emotions of love, Happiness and individuality. His creative genius makes his plays out of the ordinary and takes Indian theatre to a global level.

Dattani has also achieved to maintain a balance between art and seriousness of thought. Michael Walling in this context says

"His plays fuse the physical and special awareness of Indian theatre with the textual vigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It's a potent combination which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy and its ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives. Post-colonial India and multi-cultural Britain have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary; they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influences can take place. Through this fusion of forms and influences Mahesh Dattani creates such a space. This is in itself is a political and social statement of astonishing force."(Collected plays 225)

## **II. THE PLAY AT A GLANCE**

We see that family is a significant unit in all of Dattani's plays. The one that we are going to discuss further is "Dance Like a man" is clearly a play portraying the conflict between the old and new, tradition and modernity. We see that the protagonist of the play Jairaj faces backlash from his father when her tells him he wants to become a Bharatnatyam dancer. We see that through this play Dattani sheds light upon the toxic masculinity that is deep routed in our society. We see that the title itself is suggestive of the fact that a man should pursue a career which suits his masculinity. Dance was traditionally considered a woman's art and a man pursuing dance as career was considered to be less manly. Thus all the obstacles that Jairaj faces are because his father wants him not to behave or dress like a woman.

The play opens and we see that the setting itself is a blend of the old and the new. We see that the room itself brings forth the transition from tradition to modernity. We see that the furniture in the room is almost forty years old whereas the paintings are modern. We also see that telephone which is a feature of the modern age is also placed on the front panel. The play opens on the note that Vishwas and Lata are in love and she has brought him to his house so that they can talk to her parents about getting married. We see that Vishwas has no ties with Bharatnatyam. He is the son of a rich 'Mithaiwala' who owns a lot of commercial buildings as well. Further Lata informs Vishwas that she is the sole heir to the property which is worth Ninety Lakhs.

Lata tells him that her mother's house was just five miles away and both her parents practised under the same guru before they were married even. We see that Dattani tries to portray that it would have been quite a modern scenario for a woman forty years ago to live at her husband's place before getting married. We

see that Lata feels a sense of nostalgia when she shows Vishwas the pair of dancing bells Jairaj use to wear during his Bharatnatyam performances. Vishwas however can be seen of a mindset which cannot be regarded as patriarchal. He is supportive of his wife's profession as a dancer and also of the fact that they might not have kids immediately after getting married. As the play progresses we see that Lata talks about her grandfather Amritlal Parekh. She says that she does not know much about him but he was a social reformer during the British era. Further we see that Lata shows Vishwas a large ornate cupboard. There are some books and a brocade shawl which was gifted to Amritlal by the 'Maharaja of Mysore'. The shawl itself is a symbol of 'toxic masculinity'. The shawl is an objective personification of all that is called masculine or a man's world.

When Vishwas puts on that shawl and tries to imitate Amritlal he also mocks Jairaj for taking up dance as a profession which is considered as effeminate. Also Lata stops Vishwas from opening the books or else the pages will crumble. This in itself is symbolic of the fact that the exterior appearance or veil cannot hide what is the internal conflict in the house. Hence if the exterior peels off it will expose Jairaj's hidden effeminacy. We see that Ratna and Jairaj come home and Ratna is worried because the 'mridangam' player Srinivas who was to accompany Lata for her performance has broken his arm. Lata constantly excludes her husband by constantly saying 'my' instead of 'ours' which hints at an unhappy married life.

The fissures in their marriage are slowly exposed by Dattani leading to the last and second act of the play where we come to know the real reason behind the marital problems. Ratna constantly blames Jairaj for not doing anything significant financially in his life. She says that when they left his father's house they had to come back after forty eight hours because dancing did not give them enough finances to live on their own means. Also we see that now the gender conflict comes to the fore. We see that Ratna blames Jairaj for not being able to financially support his own family without his father's help. There is a notion that you are not a man if you do not 'earn' enough and Ratna supports her father –in-law's ideology that Dance as a profession has made Jairaj 'less of a man'.

Further when Jairaj and Vishwas have a conversation Jairaj tells him that his father consider dance as a 'craft of a prostitute'. Amritlal believed that there was no logic for a man to learn such a craft and it would be no use to a man. We see that after leaving the house Jairaj and Ratna went to Ratna's uncle place but he tried to sexually assault her and they had to leave and come back to Amritlal's house. Thus we see that Amritlal was never in favour to let both Jairaj and Ratna dance. He believed that it was only Jairaj's fancy to dance but it cannot be turned into a profession. He believed that his son should be interested in sports like cricket and not indulge in dancing. Amritlal believes that at a certain age you have to do what the society expects from you leaving behind your personal interests. He felt that Ratna's feminine presence or she was the reason that Jairaj was interested in dance.

Jairaj believed that Amritlal was a hypocrite. He claimed to be a progressive social reformer but on the inside he was a shrewd patriarch forcing his beliefs on his children. The play progresses and we move to the second act where Lata and Vishwas take up the role of younger Jairaj and Ratna and older Jairaj taking up the role of Amritlal Parekh. The act begins on the note of Amritlal trying to manipulate Ratna so that indirectly he can achieve what he wants that is to stop Jairaj from dancing. We see that Ratna admits that she married Jairaj not because he was a dancer but he would let her dance after marriage.

Ratna finally agrees with Amritlal and starts foreshadowing Jairaj from all their duet performances. He bit by bit becomes the shadow of Ratna and she a successful dancer. Ratna to some extent herself is a hypocrite because her love for Jairaj is only limited to her craft of dancing and not beyond that. When she grows old she puts on the weight of her unfulfilled expectations on Lata's shoulders and wants her to be the best no matter what. Although Lata herself is a brilliant dancer it is clear that Ratna wants to achieve fame through her daughter's success.

We also see Jairaj believes that Lata has got success and fame on her own terms and not because of his wife's contacts with people in the business. Ratna herself does not quite admit but her hypocrisy is clearly visible as she is ready to push the envelope as far as possible for Lata's success even if it is making friends with Chandrakala whom she call 'bitch'. As the play progresses further we come to know the actual reason behind the unhappy married life of Jairaj and Ratna. Jairaj believed that Ratna took away his self-esteem for him. He mentions several reasons and instances when she constantly demotivated him. He says that she took all the finances for the dance shows, made him dance his weakest choreographed performance and apparently arranges the stage lights in such a way that Jairaj always danced in Ratna's shadow. He says that she called him by demeaning names which he cannot even admit in public.

Ratna on the other hand believed that Jairaj drowned himself in alcohol and never worked hard to achieve success. She believes that he got what he deserved. It is now revealed that the couple had a boy named Shankar. Jairaj wants to fulfil his expectations from his son by teaching him 'Shiva tandav' which is called or known as 'the dance of man'. However we see that he also thinks that Ratna's passion to some extent pulled her back from becoming a dutiful mother. We see that One day during Ratna's absence the 'ayah' who looked after Shankar gave him an overdose of opium to make him fall asleep. However due to the overdose Shankar died in

his sleep. This itself became the weakening ground for Jairaj and Ratna's relationship which could never be mended.

We see that the end of the play has perhaps a surrealistic ending. The parental home of Amritlal is demolished and Jairaj and Ratna move to a posh flat. The ending is symbolic because the house which caused so many troubles to the couple finally gets knocked down. Jairaj himself believed that no matter how conservative a person is hinting at his father is, one day death knocks down even the greatest of human beings. Death finally unites Jairaj and Ratna in Heaven. Now they dance in perfect unison and harmony. The perfection to dance like God and divine grace can be achieved only after death and not in this mortal. They finally after death resolve all their difference and laugh on their past mistakes. The play ends on a note that we human beings can never achieve the perfection of the Almighty.

### III. THEMES IN THE PLAY

#### **Toxic Masculinity**

This not only is one of the major themes in the play 'Dance like a man' but is a problem that is faced by men globally. The idea that is put into the psyche of men from the very beginning makes them not only drift away from what they want but also void of emotions and feelings which supposedly 'a man' cannot show. Cixous in 'Laugh of Medusa' clearly points out that there is a need for separate masculine and feminine writings because only people from the respective genders can understand the psyche at different levels. Dattani uses surrealism to bring out the idea that man and woman individually can unite in complete sense only after death.

We see that Amritlal who clearly is a patriarch and misogynist believes that a man has nothing to do with dance which he calls 'the craft of a prostitute'. He is the one who what we can call a firm believer in the idea of toxic masculinity and all things that traditionally 'a man' is supposed to be. Amritlal believed that Dance for a man can only be a hobby and cannot be pursued as a career. Dance is what a woman is supposed to do. He wanted his son to be interested in cricket like most boys are. Thus we see that young boys from childhood itself are taught that hobbies like cricket should be taken up by them and dance was considered to be a feminine in nature and practise and learning such a craft would make young boys grow up as 'less manly' and more effeminate.

We see that men in our society are supposed to be the protector of their family and children and if they fail to do so then they are not close to anything that 'masculinity' stands for. Ratna herself backs the idea that Jairaj was a 'spineless boy' because he could not arrange for enough finances so that they could live on their own means and not under the care of Amritlal. She regrets that what Amritlal thought about Jairaj was right and he had to be changed and become a man. Thus she herself takes away all of what Jairaj believed in his art and his passion and gradually he becomes an alcoholic drowning himself in the darkness of what are the repercussions of toxic masculinity. Jairaj believes that he would fulfil his dreams through his son, Shankar. He will teach him the 'Shiva tandav' which is supposedly called 'the dance of man'. He believes that when his son grows up he would not have to go through the same shame that he went through.

However Shankar's death also destroys all what is left in the couple's marriage. They become distant from each other for life and finally unite in death. Thus 'Toxic masculinity' not only destroys relationships but also dreams and lives. Men should be given the freedom to choose whatever art form they wish to practise and masculinity is all about being compassionate and empathetic, not like 'Amritlal' who believed that men should be brought up in a certain way and behave in a certain way. The day we oppose his philosophy that women and men both are equally progressive in each other's world we will be able to achieve complete egalitarianism.

### IV. CONCLUSION

The setting of the play the family home merely becomes a physical presence because people living in it are no longer attached to each other. Amritlal passes on his set of beliefs to Jairaj and Ratna who in turn push their preference to Lata. The misogynist structure that Amritlal passes down to his son causes irreparable harm to Ratna and him. Lata however is a different person. She is content and happy with her career as a dancer and to marry Vishwas who has absolutely no ties with Bharatnatyam. She goes on to becoming a loving mother as well. We see that Dattani also tries to explore the key aspect that Jairaj and Ratna have done enough harm to each other in the course of their marriage and now Ratna tries to thrust her own unfulfilled ambitions on her daughter Lata's shoulders. At the end of the play the house which caused so many problems is finally demolished symbolically hinting at the fact that old value systems need to be done away with in order to give the new modern era a breeze of fresh air.

Dattani has displayed the sensibility of a master dramatist by innovatively using time shifts to fluctuate between the past and present and taking us through different generations. He uses innovatively the characters of Lata and Vishwas to play older Jairaj and Ratna and older Jairaj taking up the role of Amritlal. Thus Dattani concludes the play that no matter how hard we try the complete perfection in any art form can be achieved only

after death. We as human beings can never be perfect like God. We can only strive for perfection but complete grace and perfection can only be achieved after death Like Ratna and Jairaj dance in complete unison in Heaven.

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