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The Social Construction of Gender in *Mahesh Dattani's 'Dance like a Man'*

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Abstract:

Gender is means of determining the socialized role of male and female. It decides either men or woman's roles and works in Society and these are to be played by the male and female. The identity of man delineates his work and sexuality. Doing female's work is challenging to his gender role in social construct. Hence, man's favor to female activity like dance could be criticized by the society. Mahesh Dattani's through his '*Dance like a Man*' has dealt with problem of social construction of gender which has devoid and socially exploit male protagonist from his art of dancing Bharatnatyam.

Keywords: Gender, *Dattani's*, Social Construction, Socialized Role

Introduction

Gender is used as a means of describing the distinction between the biological sex and socialized aspects of femininity and masculinity. It is described as the achieved status by the feminist theory in early childhood. As a social construct, gender sets the behavior such as masculine and feminine. The role of gender is very significant in society. Specifically, a reality in which women are typically oppressed by men within a social structure that establishes roles for women, which are of explicitly lesser capacity for accruing and exercising arbitrary power. The system which manifests and exercises this power is typically referred to as "patriarchy". Besides, males are tending to be favored the power element and insist to be the part of male centric activity. Therefore, the identity of man delineates his work and sexuality. Doing female's work is challenging to his gender role in social construct. Hence, man's favor to female activity like dance could be criticized by the society.

Mahesh Dattani, a prolific Indian playwright and Sahitya Akademi Award Winner writer. His *Dance like a Man* has portrayed the hidden truth of orthodox Indian patriarchal society that decides the gender role of man. Dattani has raised questions on man's sexuality and social position. The title of play itself entails that man is supposed to the work which suits the man and not pursue their career in anything else which makes them less of a man. This two-act performance presents three generations and their personal ambitions, their struggle and their sacrifice. Dance being is discussed as the central topic of the debate between father and son and daughter in law.

Dance like Man is deal with a set of principles being a man in the traditional Indian Society. It is a depiction of recent and ancient history of India. Although, the story is concern with the dancer but the subjectivities of the play lie with emotional social dance.

Dance like a Man presents the life of a budding dancer, Jairaj. It also presents how he loses his career, his passion, his dreams and his purposes in life to societal notions of gender. Jairaj and his wife Ratna are dancers. They are under the shelter of Jairaj's father Amritlal Parekh. It is mentioned in the text that Ratna chose Jairaj as her life partner so that her career would not be compromised. But Amritlal Parekh is a man of fixed notions. So he is unable to tolerate his son wanting to become a professional dancer. *Bharatnatyam* is good as a hobby, but to be taken up as a profession by a man is something unthinkable.

Amritlal Parekh could not bear his son lack gaudy costumes, growing long hair and practicing dance all the time. Even he does not like his daughter-in-law going to meet a *Devadasi* to learn this art form. He refused his son's dependence on him and makes him obey

his dictates. He just completely spoils his son's profession. In this bad Endeavour, he uses Ratna also as his collaborator. He assures her that her career would be safe, if his son is waned away from dance. To safeguard her own interests, she too conspires with her father-in-law and she supports him to spoil her husband's dream.

The play deals with the conflict between art and society. It also focuses on the sense of competition among the artists themselves. Young Jairaj and Ratna are practicing dance in the house of Amritlal Parekh. He is representative of the society of the nineteen thirties and forties. He is a freedom fighter and a reformist, but limits the freedom of his son. His son, Jairaj wants to become a male Bharatanatyam dancer. Amritlal Parekh is an autocratic father for him. Bharatanatyam is the "craft of prostitute to show off her wares". Hence a man has no business to learn such an art, and anyone who "learnt such a craft would not be a man". But Amritlal never thought the interest of his son in dance "would turn into an obsession". According to Jairaj, Amritlal Parekh was "a conservative and prudish" as the white rulers.

In the earlier days Bharatanatyam was preserved by Devadasis and was associated with temples and rituals. It was performed by professional dancers in temples. These dancers were neglected by priests and society. Finally, due to the economic needs this turned to prostitution. Therefore, dance was completely refused by the people of all ages. It further led the society to oppose this dance form. The artist's societal condition compels them to accept this vocation. But the individual space they want must not be denied by so called civilization. And such gender discrimination regarding the dance form is the hyper discrimination in the world of artists. So no man wants to learn this dance form. If anyone wants to learn such a dance, he ceases to be man.

Bharatanatyam and its practice by the male considered the person having the female characteristic. Though Shiva was the divine exponent of Bharatanatyam this art form was associated with women by a misconception and by social consciousness. Jairaj's passion of Bharatanatyam goes unappreciated by his own father. His dancing is a way of expressing his own identity. He is a man who defies social norms. But his life is defeated by his father and his wife. "If the play questions conventional male stereotypes and points out that male identity is a construction conditioned by social norms and expectations, it does so by involving those very same constructions for the female characters" says Angelie Multani in her paper, "On Mahesh Dattani's Dance like a Man: The politics of production and Performance." Jairaj and Ratna might have succeeded as dancers but they have failed as human beings and as wife and husband. The play ends with Jairaj's admission that they were only humans and lacked the 'grace', 'brilliance' and magic to dance like God:

Jairaj: We dance perfectly. In unison. Not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes we made in our previous dances... We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God. (Dattani, 1989)

At the conclusion it reveals that in order to protect and continue any art form, the artist should devoid above human weakness. It is a state of human consciousness that cover up the difference of male and female into a state of 'totality'. In his self-realization, Jairaj finds that the divine

essence of human being is neither male nor female. The Issue of gender discrimination is not only socially and culturally constructed but also associated with anyone's social and self-identity. It is a strong determinant of human personality and its suppression is bound to lead to terrible consequence the role models professional achievements, habits, dresses and morality are expressed in terms of gender bias.

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