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PERFORMING MASCULINITY: GENDER, BODY AND RESISTANCE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S DANCE LIKE A MAN

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man is one of the most important contemporary Indian plays that explores the dark reality of socially constructed ideas of masculinity and patriarchy. This paper explores the play through the interconnected dimensions of text, body, space, and spectator. Dialogues between Jairaj, Ratna, and Amritlal reveal the conflict of gender identity and artistic freedom. Jairaj's male dancing body becomes the center of conflict and shows the way he resists and goes against the traditional patriarchal setup and social expectations. It also explores the relationship between performance and patriarchal authority. By placing Bharatanatyam within a modern family conflict, Dattani invites the spectator to question conventional ideas of gender roles and changing meanings of Indian performance traditions. The paper argues that Dattani uses performance to question gender stereotypes and presents Indian theatre as a Centre for social change.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, Dance Like a Man, Indian Theatre, Performance Traditions, Masculinity, Patriarchy.

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1. Introduction

India is a land of culture and traditions. Indian drama have always tried to put forward the traditional and culturally rich heritage of India. When we see the development of Indian drama, we can see many social interventions that helped its citizens to know the dark reality of Indian society as well. Indian theatre addressed those social prejudices that were dominantly ruling Indian society for decades, such as gender discrimination, the dowry system, and patriarchy. Indian theatre frequently questioned the development of these practices and how they destroyed the lives of individuals and societal harmony. Mahesh Dattani is one of the significant contemporary Indian dramatists. He is known for his social interventions as he brings forward sensitive social issues on stage. His plays often present individuals who are dwelling between their personal aspirations and family and societal expectations. Dance Like a Man is one such play that explores the complicated relationship between artistic identity, gender, and tradition.

The title of the play Dance Like a Man raises an important question: what does it mean to "Dance like a Man"? The question exposes the relationship between performance and gender. Both male and female genders are assigned gender roles by patriarchal society, and this society expects all these roles to be followed without question. The character of Jairaj in the drama Dance Like a Man is one of the clearest examples of understanding the patriarchal setup of India. Of course, the patriarchal system has always limited the freedom of women, but it also controls men by defining what activities are masculine. Jairaj's desire to pursue Bharatanatyam professionally becomes a central source of conflict in the play. Jairaj's father, Amritlal, believes that dance is not an appropriate profession for a man. Therefore, the conflict extends beyond the personal difference between father and son to a conflict between social expectations and individual identity. Jairaj's artistic aspiration challenges the traditional image of a man as strong, authoritative, financially successful, and socially respectable.

Patriarchy and Masculinity

Patriarchy is a traditionally accepted social element that is closely associated with masculinity. The word patriarchy comes from the Greek words pater, meaning father, and arche, meaning rule. In other words, it can be said to mean the rule of men. In the play Dance Like a Man, Jairaj's physical appearance does not come under masculine standards, and his desire to accept Bharatanatyam as a profession cannot be accepted by patriarchal society.

Amritlal Parekh represents the traditional understanding of masculinity. He expects Jairaj to follow the socially respected path rather than dedicate himself to that profession which is meant for women. According to Amritlal, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic". (Dattani 52)

This statement of Amritlal gives a clear idea of how both patriarchy and masculinity define men's identity. This also shows the double standard in gender expectations. Bharatanatyam is treated by Amritlal as a "woman's world". Jairaj's desire to become a dancer therefore threatens Amritlal's conventional understanding of masculinity.

Gender is a socially created concept; it is not something biologically formed. Gender defines a set of social behaviours associated with every individual. In the play Dance Like a Man, both Ratna and Jairaj desire to pursue dance and gain fame and recognition from it, but the opportunity and freedom that both of them get are not identical according to gender roles. Bharatanatyam is associated with females, so Ratna gets more artistic freedom than Jairaj. Jairaj is bound to accept society and its expectations.

The Male Body as a Site of Conflict

Dance involves movement, grace, expression, and emotion. Years of practice in the dance form definitely bring changes in the everyday movement of any dancer. When a male body undergoes these changes, it is not societally accepted. In the play, Jairaj's growing long hair and walking with feminine movements are not accepted by Amritlal. The stage becomes an important space for this conflict. Jairaj's body is not only a performing body but also a body that challenges social expectations. The audience who are watching him dance, instead of appreciating his dancing skills, may question his manhood. Jairaj's artistic ambition reflects a social discomfort with the male dancer. The conflict is not just about the dance alone. It is also about who has the right to decide how a male body should look. Through this, Dattani questions the dual nature of society, which divides qualities according to gender.

Ratna as an Instrument of Control and Jairaj's Resistance

Amritlal's treatment of Ratna reveals another form of patriarchal control in the play. Amritlal tries to control Ratna's association with Chinni Amma, a skilled dancer but also a Devadasi. He considers that a respectable house daughter-in-law should not be associated with a Devadasi like Chinni Amma. This shows the typical nature of patriarchy. Very importantly, the way Amritlal uses Ratna's ambition and desire to become a popular Bharatanatyam dancer as a weapon to control his son and stop him from dancing is evident when he promises Ratna that if she stops Jairaj from dancing, he will make Jairaj a man. Through this, Amritlal gives Ratna certain freedoms while using those freedoms to maintain his authority over Jairaj.

On the other hand, Jairaj shows the strongest resistance against all the odds of patriarchy. His decision to leave home can be considered his resistance against patriarchy. Dattani creates the character of Jairaj to show the resistance to conventional masculinity and gender roles.

The Interplay of Text, Body, Space and Spectator

In Dance Like a Man, a visible interplay of text, body, space, and spectator can be seen. The presentation of clever, powerful dialogue between characters like Jairaj, Amritlal, and Ratna gives glimpses of unseen aspects of social discrimination and society's expectations. Jairaj's voice in the text becomes powerful when

he firmly opposes established gender roles and expectations. On the other hand, the body also plays a very important role in the play, as the male body in the play is restricted from performing Bharatanatyam, which is considered to be an art form associated with women. It questions the traditional stigma associated with the body. The space of the house or family also contributes to the development of the play. It symbolises authority and control over the artistic freedom of both Jairaj and Ratna. By using all these three elements, Dattani engages the spectators and raises questions in them about the dual nature of gender roles.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man questions socially accepted gender roles that limit people of all genders from achieving what they desire in life. Through the text, particularly the dialogues between Amritlal, Jairaj, and Ratna, Dattani reveals the different expectations placed on men and women. Jairaj's dancing in the play and the opposition that comes from Amritlal question the artistic freedom of the male body. His body becomes a site where traditional masculinity and individual identity come into conflict.

Home becomes a space in the play where gender differences begin. Family becomes a space of authority and control. Individual desires are controlled by the family in the name of "honour". The artistic identities of both Ratna and Jairaj are questioned and restricted. Finally, Dattani involves the spectators in observing the conflict of the play and in questioning socially constructed ideas about patriarchy and masculinity.

Through experimental theatre, Dattani demonstrates that Indian performance traditions can preserve cultural heritage while simultaneously creating room for new understandings of gender, identity, and individual freedom.

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