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Narratives of (Un)Becoming: Generation and Gender in Dattani

Dr. Shubhi Tiwari, Assistant Professor, Christ Church College, Kanpur.

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Abstract: This paper seeks to look at Mahesh Dattani's play, Dance Like a Man, as a dramatic expression that attempts to address the narrative conflicts that the playwright encounters in the world he inhabits, concerning gender and generational differences. Conventional gender roles and expectations are questioned with the younger characters challenging the worldview of the older patriarch which relegates the man to non-artistic and non-creative realms of existence. The attempt to subvert male and female stereotypes is complicated by the figure of Ratna. Further, as part of the unique stagecraft that Dattani employs, the same actor plays the double roles of the younger Jairaj and Viswas. The patriarch Amritlal and the older Jairaj are played by another actor. Similarly, the younger Ratna and Lata are played by another actor. This technique posits interesting possibilities of analysis with regard to becoming another self, and unbecoming the person's own self. Intersecting with these artistic possibilities are ideas that originate from pre-existing narratives about gender roles and stereotypes, patriarchy and questions of masculinity. Ultimately, the titular 'dance' emerges as a symbolic space representing an escape from societal boundaries as well as divine perfection devoid of human limitations. This offers a possibility of gaining better understanding and clarity toward conflicts amounting from human imperfections.

Keywords: Gender, Generation, Performative Metaphor, Narrative Conflicts.

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Introduction

Dance Like a Man is about many things—the rise of self-made urban seths in a newly independent Indian society, jokes on the cultural melting pot that modern urban India is, the dying of, and the need to preserve, old art forms like that of the devadasis, and mothers-in-law checking the tan-lines of their prospective daughters-in-law to decode whether they wear mini-skirts. The play is about all these and yet at the centre is a family drama brimming with haunting pasts, hidden secrets, and shattering memories spanning three generations. Generational expectations and warring aspirations interlace with gender prejudices and stereotypes to reveal the festered wounds beneath the initial happy-go-lucky surface of a well-to-do dancer family. The plot deals with Jairaj and Ratna, a dancer couple now in their sixties, their daughter Ratna, who is preparing to marry Viswas, the son of a businessman, and Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father and the late patriarch who had a deciding role to play in the turns the lives of Jairaj and Ratna took. The play opens with Lata bringing over Viswas to meet her parents, and before any of the marriage discussions can happen, the reader/audience is in the middle of the crisis the family is dealing with – arranging for a mridangam player for their daughter's dance recital at a high-profile event.

Discussion

Generational conflicts and gender roles quickly emerge as the two central concerns that imbue the play with complexities. The narratives of expectation and aspiration that separate Amritlal from Jairaj and Ratna, and position Viswas and Lata as more hopeful versions of the former, are also the narratives that simultaneously satisfy and shock the reader/audience in their gendered readings of all characters. At the heart of the conflict is Jairaj who by way of titular significance accorded to his character's situation spends a lifetime attempting to answer whether "he can 'dance like a man'. In other words, is the very notion of dance opposed to that of maleness or masculinity? Jairaj is the figure whose predicament occupies centre stage, but this position is defined in opposition to his wife, Ratna" (Multani 35). We are told through the text that Ratna married Jairaj because he too was a dancer and would thus let her continue her dancing after marriage. Jairaj, on the other hand, faces a constant struggle with his father's opposition to his Bharatnatyam dance, who had initially 'allowed' him to pursue it as a hobby. Now Amritlal finds himself in a place where, as a father who wants the best for his son based on his understanding of the world, he feels that dance will lead him nowhere and that Jairaj needs to grow up and 'become a man' in order to be socio-economically respectable. Ratna, ambitious for her own career, ends up teaming with Amritlal so that he is helped in his goal of enabling the gradual withdrawal of Jairaj from dance, on the promise that Ratna's dance will continue unaffected under the care of the decision-making father-in-law. There is an interesting generational and gender dynamic playing out here. The fact that Jairaj will not oppose her dancing after marriage but 'allow' it, is a major deciding factor for Ratna in choosing her husband. Until here, as wife, she is bound within the confines of patriarchal permission. She continues to operate under the same rubric of male authority when she has to agree to her father-in-law's insidious plan of slowly sabotaging Jairaj's Bharatnatyam pursuits, just to ensure that her own dance career flourishes with the 'permission' of Amritlal. But a countercurrent may at once be discerned here. In recognizing that the greater power in determining her career rests with Amritlal, she actually ends up covertly subverting the pact of patriarchal submission to Jairaj. Ratna's figure is made complicated by the non-womanly characteristics she is bestowed with—manipulation and over-ambition. This is a paradox as Multani is quick to point out that in exercising dominance and control, Ratna is most clearly defined "as the 'wrong kind of woman' (36). Later, when the domineering patriarch in the figure of the father-in-law is out of the scene, the tables have turned with Ratna questioning the worthiness and 'masculinity' of Jairaj. "You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house!"—Ratna castigates Jairaj during their argument over the mridangam player (Dattani 402). Moreover, later in the play, in response to Jairaj's "[L]ook at me. I never cry", Ratna proclaims "[T]hat is because you are a …man!" (437) Multani writes, "Ratna shows that she herself is not above using gender politics when they will work to her advantage" (37).

This complex gendered reading of Ratna vis-à-vis Jairaj and Amritlal presents a striking comparison with her daughter Lata, who is moulded by the same transgressive strain, but is delineated as "the more 'redeemable' woman, as she is quite willing (after a brief argument), to marry Viswas and have children, "one child right away, and another…let's see" (Multani 36). The criteria that the text implicitly uses to judge both Ratna and Lata as women is categorically within the heteronormative stereotypes that society has conventionally created for women. The 'good' woman or the 'bad' woman is adjudged by the same standards that are used to paint the man as the economically and socially dominant counterpart. If a man fails to meet this expectation, he is not a 'good' son or a 'good' husband—both dissatisfactions that characterize the life of Jairaj in the most direct analysis of the play. Multani comments, "Dattani's text is certainly not 'anti-women', but falls into a trap…of exploiting mainstream female stereotypes in order to raise questions about the construction of male stereotypes" (40).

The disappointment that Ratna's figure evokes in the narrative, is attempted to be compensated for by Lata's character—a generational shift contributes toward a hope for improvement and redemption. Dattani's choice in stagecraft presents immense possibilities for another kind of reading with respect to the characters. The same actor who plays Viswas, plays the younger Jairaj, while the same actor who plays the older Jairaj, plays Amritlal. Similarly, the same actor playing Lata, plays the younger Ratna. The older Jairaj and Amritlal being played by the same actor perhaps indicates power shifts and at the same time, that power is retained eventually in older men, the head of the family, the patriarch. Reading along similar lines, the characters of the younger Ratna and Lata being embodied by the same actor perhaps point toward the lack of any potential shift of power in case of women vis-à-vis the men in their lives.

There is another crucial possibility lying within this choice made by the playwright of making the same actor play double roles. In his essay titled "Me and My Plays", Dattani talks about his experience of six years of learning Bharatnatyam from his gurus, and how he wrote the play during this time: "I wrote my play Dance Like a Man out of my experience as an aspiring male dancer, largely inspired by my gurus, though the play is nowhere near a biography. The play went on to become the biggest success of my career to date" (26). When he started learning dance from his gurus—a renowned Bharatnatyam dancer-couple—they were well into their seventies. Dattani generously remarks about the beauty and grace that a photograph showing his gurus as young dancers exuded (24). Given this detail about the playwright, it is interesting to explore the ways in which Dattani creates his dramatic narrative out of a necessity to address conflicts that he encountered in his real experience. These conflicts stem from both the inner world of the playwright's self and the external world that he inhabits. In an interview with Poulomi Banerjee, Dattani expresses how "by and large dance is still considered unmanly, although dance requires an athlete's stamina and muscularity, along with rhythm and grace". Further, he articulates that "the play is really a metaphor about finding the balance within. Like all internal conflicts, they can never be irrelevant."

Perhaps the complexities that Dattani the playwright encountered in the narratives of gender in his experience, both within his self that is uniquely positioned beyond the binary of heteronormativity, as well as without—in the society that he inhabits, evoke a creative response in the playwright that make him create performative metaphors of the self. These metaphors of the self, as James Olney describes them, are a means to objectively look at the disturbing parts of the narrative experiences concerning gender. The narrative of patriarchy oppressing both the woman and the man equally though in different ways, the narrative of the manipulative woman, and the narrative of the progressive man/woman—all render complexities in the experiences relating to gender. In writing the play and articulating the trials and tribulations of his characters, Dattani creates a performative metaphor for the internal and external conflicts that he encounters.

To better understand and attempt to address these narrative conflicts, Dattani creates a fictional narrative—something like what T.S. Eliot does in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", or O'Neill does in Long Day's Journey Into Night, or even Tennessee Williams does in The Glass Menagerie. In creating a fictional narrative, Dattani chooses a dramatic narrative because, perhaps like his Chandan/Dan in Tara, he feels it is most suited as a medium that has a live-wire quality for his purpose of better understanding the conflicts in the real-life narratives he experiences—both external, his gurus', and internal, his own.

In the dramatic narrative created by Dattani, Jairaj may be understood to represent Dattani's guru's fictional alter ego and Ratna, his guru's wife. Lata, the young daughter who is perhaps not as ambitious herself, becomes the space for Ratna's fulfillment of her own ambitions. Amritlal, the old patriarch and the conservative father, becomes a symbol of the oppressive norms of society. Viswas becomes the performance space for negotiating the real narratives of Dattani's life, concerning the external narratives of his guru, and the internal narratives of his own self. Viswas is what Jairaj could have been alternatively, as a more acceptable version of himself to Amritlal and society; but in the performance narrative, Viswas is also made the younger Jairaj by Dattani the playwright. So Viswas (the actor's body) also gets to be an alternative self for himself. Viswas is what Jairaj is not and therefore could have been as a more acceptable 'man'. Moreover, Viswas gets to become what he himself is not and therefore could have been as a non-conventional man. Viswas is also on the verge of ridiculing Jairaj but perhaps falls short—this can also be perceived as a subtle hint by the playwright of a possibility that perhaps Viswas has a latent Jairaj within his self. But then Viswas also briefly transforms into Amritlal—initially in the play, he wears Amritlal's shawl and enacts the way in which he imagines Amritlal would have chided Jairaj. Viswas thus may be visualized as the performance space for negotiating between the existing narrative and the potential narratives concerning Viswas, Amritlal and Jairaj. Lata becomes the negotiating space between Ratna's narrative of ambition and Viswas' practicality as a businessman. Responding to a question by Banerjee about what he thinks is the enduring appeal of the play, Dattani opines that "the sub-text and undercurrents between the four protagonists are open to several interpretations. A director can offer subtle interpretations of the father-son, man-woman, society-individual and mother-daughter relationships. The permutations are many."

Dance in the play emerges as a symbol for escape from the rigid boundaries that society creates and imposes on human beings. Dattani expresses, "To me dancing, singing or performing in general has always been a metaphor for living life to the fullest. Perhaps it is this metaphor that resonates most with audiences who love to see the play twenty-five years after I wrote it" (Me and My Plays 39). Further, he reveals, "Dancing, in the play, represents the ideal world, almost impossible to attain in one lifetime. Yet it is the world that the protagonists strive for at all costs" (39). The ending of the play is crucial for this idea.

Conclusion

The narrative concludes in a beautifully fantastical and artistically symbolic manner with Jairaj and Ratna uniting in heaven after finishing their mortal roles, and dancing perfectly, in unison: "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" (447). The failings of the characters attributing to their human limitations are negated as they transcend the physical human realm and enter into a world of cosmic harmony. This is where the divine dance is possible. Afterall, dancing like a man has its flaws. It is the cosmic dance of the divine Shiva and Parvati that surpasses all, and emerges as the only possible alternative where idealism exists.

This concluding idea in the dramatic narrative does two things: it reinforces the idea that the way to deal with narrative conflicts in human experience—internal and external—begins with acceptance; secondly, it posits the idea that there can be no closure in the human realm—by way of creating his performative metaphors, Dattani seeks better clarity and understanding of the conflicts rather than conclusive answers.

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