

**PERFORMING IDENTITY: GENDERED BODIES IN MAHESH DATTANI'S
*DANCE LIKE A MAN***

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Abstract

*The nature of human identity in our contemporary lives has become so diversified that it is impossible to explain it a single discursive realm. Gender studies has looked upon identity as a question of agency in the binary of heterosexuality. But the continuous proliferation of gender roles beyond the limits of dualism is interrogating the authenticity of normative constructs. Judith Butler has challenged the complacency of gender studies by introducing the concept of gender Performativity which tries to explain the tentative nature of gender signification and allows space for re-signification of gendered bodies. Mahesh Dattani as a dramatist engages critically with such questions in *Dance Like A Man*. He questions the gender hierarchy and the normalisation of gender roles in a society. The present paper attempts to study the repetition in gender roles in patriarchal institutions like dance, family, kinship and to deconstruct the performative nature of gender by identifying the failures of such repetition.*

Keywords: Identity, Gender, Dance, Queer, Performatives, Essentialism.

I. Introduction

In Postcolonial theories as well as Feminist theories the question of identity has been a very contentious one. In the postcolonial social discourses 'colonial' subjects has been defined as being under the impression of the colonizer. In the socio-cultural plain it then becomes difficult for the colonized to utilize political agency to subvert the hegemony and assert themselves as different and autonomous identity. To resist such normative discourses social scientist Homi Bhaba coined the term 'Mimicry' which declared that the colonized is a mimic who strives to be almost as same as the colonizer but not quite (89). For Bhaba the human subject is never grounded in a fixed identity but rather is a discursive effect which depends on its articulation and difference. Therefore this gap between fiction and the effect of reality enunciated by repetition created a site for resistance against stereotyping and Othering. Pivoting on the same argument Judith Butler utilized similar logic of enunciation and

iteration when she proposed that gender is not fixed but produced as a cultural effect through the performance of normative acts. In her 1988 essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" Butler argues that, "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (527). She in effect speaks against the ontological essentialism of gender pairing like man/women and conceives the body as sociologically signified by convention. Such endeavour to normalize and produce a stable identity can be challenged by her theory of Performativity which wants to show gender identity as "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (520).

As a playwright Mahesh Dattani is concerned with the changing faces of gender roles in modern India. He reinterprets and challenges the social complacency with traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity in Indian society where even after radical changes in economy and society individual persons are considered in the light of oppressive social mores. His characters are drawn from the urbanized and empowered sections of the society. They are seemingly the most progressive and educated mass under whose leadership India aspires to overcome the handicap of the Third World. However Dattani systematically reveals the paradoxes inherent in such society through individual portrayal of discrimination, stereotyping, orthodoxy in the name culture and tradition. He chooses gender and sexuality as his playground to build up a polemic against oppression and marginalisation. He views sexuality in an individual to be fluid as against natural or essential. Society is oppressive and wants everyone to conform to gendered identities and reproduce such identities time and again to retain the hegemonic power relations. Identities are constructs to enunciate the binary matrix of heterosexuality and to resist alternative versions of the same. Dattani tells us, "Others are not marginalised because they are gays or lesbians. They are ostracised because they challenge the mainstream constructs" (Subramanyam 131).

II. Gender and Performance

The Title *Dance like a Man* acts like a performative utterance which at once is a functional declaration that there are separate and distinct dance forms and styles for man and woman. The illocutionary motives of the phrase also voices a certain control which borrows its meaning from the idiom "to dance attendance" meaning to serviliely follow the rules and regulations laid down by an authority or institution. In this sense the word 'dance' means social functions which has to be 'performed' in order to become a man. So a close analysis of the title reveals the performative nature of the utterance that, with the help of linguistic conventions, acknowledges an essential form of 'Man' that must be reiterated in speech, gestures and actions, or rather in such constructive performances to maintain the gendering status quo. 'Dance' here, in both of its meanings (artistic performance and traditional norms) performs as a jussive verb which expresses an order or command. Here an implied first person is commanding the listener to dance in the way a man is conventionally obliged to

dance. Upon such conditions we can also presume that the person giving the command is also a performer or practitioner of the same act i.e. normalized and regulated dance form for man, otherwise his expression would produce little or no constitutive effect on the performance.

As a dramatist Dattani has a tendency to alter the attributes accepted of men and women to produce an alternate discourse of gender roles. In *Dance like a Man* we find Ratna, the wife of Jairaj, to be performing various character traits that are conventionally accepted as attributes of a masculine personality. She is assertive, outspoken, domineering, while Jairaj is submissive, indecisive, emotional and nostalgic to some extent. Jairaj lacks the virile traits that characterises masculinity in Indian narrative tradition. In sharp contrast, his father Amritlal is available as a foil to his personality. He is the epitome of power, a freedom fighter, a great leader, calculative, rich and proprietor of Indian tradition.

Following the Poststructuralist claims it is now difficult to identify a human as a biologically determined body. Sexuality has little influence over the social functions of the body. Rather it is the gendered significations of Man and Woman and the power relation governing it is the theoretical language to be utilized to identify bodies in the social sphere. The binary of man/woman that both patriarchy and feminism holds fast to stabilize each one's position becomes redundant if we question the validity of such fixed essences of gender. Butler points out that the second wave feminism utilizes the tool of social constructivism to understand the social formation of feminine identity (*Performative Acts* 520). She highlights the tenuous nature such identification which has been constructed through a repetition of acts and been perpetuated in social conventions. She thus contends that the identity of the sexualized body is not natural or prior to the formation of gender, rather it is the repetitive "performance" of such acts that constructs the body as a particular gender. The 'body' thus becomes an empty vehicle for signification which must be identified in its social milieu. In a traditional (as opposed to radical) discourse of gender any performance that does not conform to the normative iteration of gender roles, is marginalised due to lack of conventional signification (Loxley 121). However, the performative nature of identity formation itself provides agencies for marginalised bodies to resist normative stereotyping and create alternative renditions of the functioning social body.

III. Dance, Tradition and Repetition

The characters in the play can be divided into two pairs. One is Ratna and Jairaj, the previous generation and the other pair is Lata and Viswas the younger couple. Ratna is a former dancer of Bharatnatyam, a form of Indian classical dance. She is one whose heyday as a performer has ended with the aging of her beauty. Jairaj was also an experienced dancer however somewhat overshadowed by his wife's popularity. Lata is their daughter, herself an

accomplished artist of the same art and Viswas is her fiancée. It becomes clear from the conversation between Lata and Viswas that 'dance' is a very important part of their family and individual identity:

VISWAS. Why? Aren't they anxious to know who their lovely Lata is marrying?

LATA. Actually they could not care less who or what you are. As long as you let me dance.

VISWAS. Hmm. And what if I whisk you away to Dubai and sell you to a sheikh?

LATA. Well, at least I'll be dancing in his harem! No, seriously, they are not worried. (Dattani 4)

As I have already stated the word 'dance' has different implications for different characters of the play. For Ratna 'dance' is sacred art that has to be preserved by learning it from the traditional *Dev Dasi* or Temple dancer like Channi amma. Jairaj dances to achieve happiness, the bliss to dance in unison with his wife. Lata has become a skilled dancer because of the enthusiasm of her parents and now it has become the part and parcel of her identity. The grand father, Amritlal Parekh approved of Ratna's passion for dance only to save his image as a progressive and liberal nationalist but he has reservation for his son taking up dancing as his profession. Viswas is a weakened reflection of Amritlal's personality who cannot express his objections to Lata's dancing due to his lack of authority over her life. The presence of such paired characters is also a dramatic strategy to unveil the disruptive nature of gender signification to be found in performance. In revisiting the memory of Jairaj's youth Dattani uses the same actor in the role of Jairaj to play the role of Amritlal Parekh. This strategy of interchange makes visible all the specific 'stylization' of the persona that typifies gender roles in the society. In its mere physical aspect the actor exchanges his role only by wrapping Amritlal's shawl and embodies a posture of authority. This basic change of gesture and appearance gives the performance a believability that reflects Butler's dictum that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). Therefore, Jairaj who is accused by his wife for not being manly in his conducts and decisions can be immediately made believable to the audience as the most masculine character in the play i.e. Amritlal.

Amritlal is a direct contrast to his son and he makes it apparent in the performance and repetition of his convictions. He leads his household as he had led the revolutionary movements to achieve freedom. His beliefs are rooted on conservative social ideas and conventions. In him masculinity functions as a form of regulating power that shapes and forms other subject identities. He emphasises the virility and firmness of character as the essence of a man and derides all symbols of femininity in a male to be a corruption of that essence. As a man he becomes a modulator and investor of power in the family and that is

why he manipulates the power relation between Jairaj and his wife by conspiring with Ratna in his project to make Jairaj a 'man':

AMRITLAL. Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.

RATNA. How?

Pause.

AMRITLAL. It is hard for me to explain. I leave it to you. Help me and I'll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done.

RATNA. I will try.

AMRITLAL. You'll have to do better than that.

RATNA (*more definite*). All right. (Dattani 51)

According to Foucauldian genealogies of power, discourses regarding gender generally prefer the conventional classification of 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexuality and tend to regulate and normalize or chastise those who perform beyond the proper limit of gender norms (Loxley 122). The 'normal' gains its authority in the repetition of those conventional norms that signifies the bodies as real or natural and this re-enactment empowers the otherwise fragile connection between the body and its gendered codes. Hence being a man for Amritlal would be to embody manly features like short hair, to play cricket and definitely not dancing. He considers dance to be a woman's affair. So the dance teacher with long hair and the sound of Jairaj's dancing bell is despicable to him. However, historically the proprietors of Bharatanatyam have been Brahmin males who codified and patronised the dance while non Brahmin *gurus* taught that to women (Thomas 123). Jairaj tells him that the dance teacher is comparable to a *sadhu* or a sage who keeps long hair as a symbol of renouncing the material world. But Amritlal refers to the normal or rather the conventional man who follows all the gender roles assigned to them. It is apparent that he is trying to define the dance teacher as the other based on gender stereotypes and masculine role playing. It is futile for him to refer back to any essential idea of masculinity as it is transformed and developed by means of being performed. The bodily space is vacant and free so it resists any essentialisation of its meaning:

AMRITLAL. Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

RATNA. No.

AMRITLAL. In being a man.

RATNA. That sounds profound. What does it mean?

AMRITLAL. Does Jairaj know where his happiness lies?

RATNA. He does. But I don't think it fits in with your idea of where it should be. (Dattani 49)

As gendered bodies are constructed by means of linguistic conventions, therefore it entails the shortcomings and slippages that are characteristic of discourses. Gender functions are reiterated with the aim to approximate its ideal form. However, since there is no ideal form available for the gendered bodies to imitate it becomes a failed imitation of its previous instance. Butler notes that “The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.” (*Bodies* 231) Both the father and the wife repeatedly reminds Jairaj that he does not conform to the masculine role playing that is expected of him since he is male. Amritlal virtually explains that gender roles are given a factual nature with the power of social expectation (Dattani 37). Ratna illustrates the paradoxes inherent in gender role-playing when she denies considering Jairaj as a man because he returned to his father’s care. Jairaj did this to protect her from the lascivious uncle but on another context Ratna says, “A young and beautiful woman! And you are jealous of me for that? What kind of man are you?” (70). This shows the ambiguity in social expectation, revealing gaps and mismatches in convention and practice. Viswas provides us with the mockery in imitation that can be found in forcible performance of stereotypes when he tries to imitate the authoritative Amritlal by wrapping his shawl around him. His performance defines the limit to the repetition of acts pertaining to a particular gender role which always hinders the perfect performance of gender. Although he voices the same patriarchal attitude towards dance as Amritlal, his lack of authority relegates his performance to a mockery of patriarchy. Whereas Jairaj tells Viswas about an incident when he had to perform as a woman in front of an army. In such an instance dance becomes an agency for the marginalised to assert their queer identity which is situated beyond the limited boundary of heterosexuality. Dance creates an illusion of femininity which can be adopted by both man and woman. Bharatanatyam was traditionally practiced by woman temple dancers and it is conventionally regarded as women’s art. But as the performative aspect of gender allows anyone to resist stereotyping by enacting unconventional roles, Jairaj’s identity as a dancer and Viswas’s role playing as young Jairaj highlights the fluidity of such identities.

In such contexts if we consider ‘dance’ as a performative, it would partake various subversive meanings. In Indian mythical narratives Nataraja is a dance pose of Lord Shiva which symbolizes a simultaneous destruction and creation. We also find the same Lord Shiva in his *Ardhanarishvara* (meaning ‘Lord who is half woman’) form which emphasises a synthesis and balance of male and female self. In her essay *Classical Indian Dance and Woman’s Status*, Judith Lynne Hanna tells us “In Kathakali, Chhau and the original Kuchipudi, men playing women show their ideals and fantasies about them and in so doing exaggerate female characteristics” (Thomas 128). Such mixed gendered performance in spite

of its patriarchal motives, allows space for performative re-signification in seemingly antithetical identities of male dancers who perform feminine expressions but are masculine in body. This situations open up newer possibilities of interpreting the body as connotative beyond the fixed iteration of heterosexual identities. The play interprets 'dance' both as a political instrument to regulate gender norms as we find it in Ratna and as a subversive tool to deconstruct and reorganize conventional mores regarding gender in the character of Jairaj.

The source of power in structuring gender is not only the male members of the society. Amritlal may be the source of financial and paternal authority but he lacks agency in regulating his son's alternative attitude towards his gender roles. Here he seeks the agency of woman i.e. Ratna. Without her help he would fail to manipulate Jairaj's nature. So to quash Jairaj's passion for dancing Amritlal apparently uses his political power to highlight Ratna and to reduce Jairaj's popularity as a dancer. But engaging Ratna in moulding Jairaj's personality has an overall negative effect on him. It creates a sense of alienation in him because he is not performing the role of his own volition. He sat at his house while Ratna doused the patriarchal audience in her feminine charms and received fame and acclaims for reviving the ancient art of Bharatanatyam. If Ratna's ability to establish herself as a dancer is dependent on the favours of Amritlal then it is also subject to the patriarchal control. The heterosexual matrix then functions as a complicit binary relation where both man and woman work hand in hand to stabilize and repeat their gender identities.

IV. Conclusion

Dance Like A Man delicately moves on the edges of proper definition of masculinity and femininity and poses questions on how such fragile constructs can answer for the possibilities that reside in the subversive repetition of identities. It focuses on the man and wife pair of Jairaj and Ratna who engage in a contest of gender roles between themselves. They continue to confront and evaluate their gendered functions and in the process relive their subjugated lives under the patriarch Amritlal Parekh. The play's intense analysis of dance as a socio-cultural function highlights its impact on constructing individual identities. The exchange of power between Ratna and Amritlal probes into the power hierarchies that regulate tradition to normalize conventional identity. Through Amritlal the playwright revisits the historical reality of the Devdasi tradition and shows the stigmatization of male dancers. Masculinity is portrayed as a performative feature of the male body in Viswas and Jairaj. While the former can only imitate the patriarchal gender codes of masculinity, the later subverts those codes by imbibing antithetical feminine codes. This in effect produces a conflict between essentialisation and deconstruction of gender identity. Lata as a character appears as a repetition of Ratna who is empowered by patriarchy but lacks the agency to resist or subvert the gender norms. At the end of the play the older Jairaj laments that they "lacked the magic

to dance like God” (Dattani 74). This mythical allusion may suggest the chaos and paradoxes that arise when culture tries to delimit the human body into a duplication of an essence which is actually an imaginary possibility enacted only in performance.

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