

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*: A Depiction of the Trials and Tribulations of an Androgynous Personality

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the leading Indian dramatists who responded to the problems of sexuality on the canvass of Indian theatre. He examined various facets of subjugation and marginalization rampant in Indian society. His plays focus on the sub-urban Hindu family and its trifle with gender and alternate sexuality. His plots revolve around the damaging implications of patriarchal constructs and his characters strive for liberty and self-satisfaction beneath hegemonic masculinity, compulsive heteronormativity and prejudiced cultural domain. Regarding his famous play *Dance Like a Man*, this paper critically examines the existing socio-cultural domain which practices politics of exclusion of androgynous identities behind the façade of peacefully cohabiting heterosexual Indian family and shows how Dattani, has remarkably countered the presentation of the polarized association of gender roles with conventional practice through performance of his protagonist. Set against the backdrop of patriarchal mindset, this paper delineates that the victim of patriarchal norms is not a woman but a man, who has traits of androgyny. It gives a brief account to highlight the significance of androgyny and portrays how androgyny is directly proportional to creativity. It elucidates how androgynous men undergo searing experiences of stigma and social untouchability in a traditional setup and how patriarchal norms reinforce dominant powers of society to stunt the growth of their personality.

Keywords: Androgyny, Creativity, Exclusion, Hegemonic masculinity, Patriarchal norms.

Introduction

The word 'androgyny' has been taken from the Greek word 'andro' meaning man and 'gyne' meaning woman. It has been defined differently by various people, but there are two basic ways of defining it, one being the traditional and other the contemporary. The former definition has been derived from the Greeks, who used the term androgyny to describe people having both male and female physical characteristics i.e. the hermaphrodites and the latter is used to address those people who combine socio-psychological attributes typifying both males and females like being rational and emotional, analytical and intuitive, active and passive, combative and tolerant, assertive and receptive, independent and dependent. Androgyny as something creative was discussed quite early by authors like S. T. Coleridge and Virginia Woolf but serious research in this field began only in the late 1970s. A research conducted by MacKinnon (1962) established the fact that men and women with greater creativity have characteristics and notions which are normally not associated with their respective sexes; rather these are peculiar to their opposite sex because "creativity, by its very nature, requires both sensitivity and independence" (Torrance,

1963, p. 138) and these two elements are an amalgamation of both the masculine as well as the feminine traits. Similarly Harrington & Anderson (1981), Norlander & Erixon (2000), Jonsson & Carlsson (2000), Hittner & Daniels (2002) too elucidated a vast range of creative behaviors in androgynes. They observed that an androgynous person had a greater extent of creativity in the field of art, theatre, and literature than a non-androgynous person because its existence as an androgyne in a sex-stereotyped society makes the person flexible enough to accept apparent opposites, courageous enough to remain unconcerned about the dominance of social norms, and independent enough to practice his/her creativity. The significance of androgyny has also been outlined by theoreticians like Herbert Marder, James Hafley, Bram Dijkstra, and Francette Pachteau (Hargreaves, 1994). They unanimously accept androgyny as a concept that gives vent to the unrealized potential of an individual. It acts as an integrated medium both mental as well as physical that shows strong resistance to the socio-political and socio-cultural ideologies of inequality between the sexes. It is a tool through which people carve their own space and identity both in terms of gender and sexuality under the repressive glare of patriarchy. The opinions of theoreticians also delineate that the higher the liberty given to people to transcend stereotypical limitations of gender norms and exercise their unique selves emotionally and physically, the greater their creativity quotient. It results in a flow of positive attributes like a high level of self-esteem, flexibility in behavior, greater adaptability skill, assertive personality, and enhanced cognitive skill as in the case of androgynous identities (Bem, 1974). So there should be little doubt about the significance of androgyny in our society because we do not refer to androgynes as only those “individuals with male and female sex organs but to individuals who are capable of behaving in integrative feminine and masculine ways, who are assertive and yielding, independent and dependent, expressive and instrumental” (Kaplan & Bean, 1976, p. 2-3). These are all remarkable characteristics fused in a single body, indeed a rare composition. Here a very important question arises as to why people feel uncomfortable associating themselves with an androgynous person. Related to this is another question why an androgynous person is so shy about openly accepting its own androgyne identity. The present paper is a critical examination of such questions and also an attempt to find a solution to these questions. Concerning Mahesh Dattani's famous play *Dance Like a Man*, it examines the existing socio-cultural domain which practices politics of exclusion of androgynous identities behind the façade of peacefully cohabiting heterosexual Indian family. Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal mindset, it depicts that the victim of patriarchal norms is not a woman but a man, who has traits of androgyny.

Structural Limitations

The answer to the above-discussed questions lies in the strict conventional beliefs and cringing ideologies of patriarchy that consider androgynous people as unnatural and effeminate. Since patriarchy believes that “gender is synonymous with sex [...] women and men are ‘naturally’ different; [...] maleness is inherently rational and femaleness is inherently emotional” (Enloe, 2017, p. 5). Therefore, a fusion of these characteristics would not be an ideal condition. It will depreciate the value of each sex because, on one side, an emotional man is not an ideal model of masculinity and on the other, a strong woman will surpass her domain. Thus, the complete ontology of patriarchy and its structure can get subverted because of androgyny. The notion of control and command may lose its meaning. So to protect its hegemony and dispel any chance of subversion, patriarchy has created behavioral norms and patterns that compel men to internalize its stifling conventions blindly. If they refrain from accepting it, they easily become susceptible to social anathematization. It is so because in our society sex, sexual orientation, and gender are viewed as essential qualities that are closely linked to one other. The common opinion is that sex

is the biological entity. It exists in a binary proposition i.e. male vs. female. It is natural and essential and gender is the cultural construction of sex. However, it is refuted by Butler (1990). She says that it is not merely gender which acts as a social construct; the biological and physical differences between the sexes originate from the same gendered concept. The sexual identity of a person is also a social construction. Let us take an example. When a child is born with a penis, society identifies him as a boy who will grow into a man and perform all sorts of tasks that are designated for a man like earning money or protecting his family. Similarly, if a child is born with a vagina, she is identified as a girl who will grow into a woman and perform those tasks that are meant to be performed by a woman like domestic activities and bearing children. So this distinction which is created by the traditional view that there is a distinction between sex and gender is meaningless. As Butler (1990) says, "this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; [...] perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (p. 9). Do the scientific concepts of "genitalia", "chromosomes" (Butler, 1990, p. 9) and hormones always align in the similar polarized manner as sex and gender? Indeed not. Even the biologists, who normally see body as pre-discursive and natural, refrain from having such a simplistic view. They too opine that the binary view of human sexuality is too simplistic. About ten percent of children are born with characteristics that hardly fall into the specific categorization of male and female (Arboleda et al., 2014). Sometimes children are even born with traits of intersex. They are deliberately put under knife for sex correction surgeries and then raised as male or female subjective to their sex post-operation in order to maintain and safeguard the constructions of sex (Human Rights Watch, 2017) and those who do not conform to this specific sex categorization of male and female are regarded as unnatural and abnormal. Therefore there is no 'objective' or natural sex; it is all 'performatively' (Butler, 1990) constructed and gender is neither biologically determined nor essential. It is entirely based on performance. So far as Mahesh Dattani is concerned, he has remarkably countered these patriarchal formations that compel an individual to discard his innate identity and adopt an imposed one under the pressure of hegemonic performance through the protagonist of his famous play, *Dance Like a Man*.

Subversion of Conventional Masculinity and Assertion of Unconventional Androgyny

In *Dance Like a Man*, the individual, as well as the collective consciousness of people which are circumscribed by patriarchal norms, have been critically analyzed by Mahesh Dattani. This play was first staged in 1989. It can be studied as a family drama that represents a strong tussle between hegemonic identity and individual identity. It relates to a time when dancing in India was considered a profession of a prostitute. The prevalence of this social hypocrisy is exemplified by the predicament encountered by an Indian man, Jairaj, who took dance as his career and chose to challenge the existing norms of gender. Through him, the dramatist brilliantly deconstructs the defining roles of masculinity and projects the limitations of its performance.

The taint attached to the word effeminate is marvelously presented in the play. Amritlal Parekh, the father of Jairaj, is a well-educated Hindu freedom fighter and a cunning *Gujju* (Gujarati) businessman. In his opinion, men were expected to perform tasks that exhibited their physical strength, and undoubtedly dance as a profession for men was beyond his imagination. His objection to dancing as Jairaj's career was basically guided by the internalized concept of fixed gender roles. In his opinion, this performative art does not fit into the ideal role set for his gender. It was perfectly fine for Amritlal till the performance was confined to his daughter in law, but the moment he encounters the sight of his beloved son practicing the traditional dance form of

Bharatanatyam, it moved the earth beneath his feet. Amritlal could not even tolerate the sight of Jairaj's *guru* (teacher) with his elongated hair. He had "never seen a man with long hair" (Dattani, 2000, p. 417). He ironically says, "I meant normal men" and pours scorn at "the way he walks" (Dattani, 2000, p. 417). In his opinion, Jairaj's dancing interest would raise a question on his masculinity and would make him effeminate and an object of mockery in society. Amritlal's patriarchal mindset is clearly visible when he says: "I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. [...] my son is interested in dance" (Dattani, 2000, p.414) "[...] Where is your dance going to lead you? Why must you dance?" (Dattani, 2000, p. 415). Although he presents himself as a freedom fighter that fought for India's independence from the tyrannical hold of the British, he himself becomes the tyrannical intruder who compels Jairaj to discard his freedom or his personal space of dance and opt for something else that could be in consonance with his masculine identity. Here, Dattani lashes out against the "conventional social framework" which quashes the passion of an artist under its idealized "close fist ed gender roles" (Agarwal, 2008, p. 24).

It is against this rocklike figure Amritlal, who had the sanction of an entire prejudiced society with its universally accepted norms of masculinity that Jairaj, the son, confronts and tries to assert his individuality. He doesn't feel there is anything effeminate in taking dance as his career. For him, dance has not got anything to do with gender. It is a sheer artistic desire forming in the mind of an artist. Jairaj through his art poses a strong opposition to the ontology of binary division based on gender norms. He tries to actualize his identity through dance, because identity is not merely a socio-political marker of one's position in a particular social setting but also a strong means to claim recognition in the same social setting (Devine and Savage, 2005).

In the play, home becomes the open ground on which at times covert and at times overt clashes between conformists and deviants, modernists and traditionalists, oppressors, and resisters occur simultaneously. Jairaj becomes the 'other' and the 'second sex' (Beauvoir, 2010) which is completely marginalized. When Amritlal hears that his son is learning *Kuchipudi*, he feels pathetic and addresses him "sick" (Dattani, 2000, p.427). He tells Ratna "Do you know where a man's happiness lies? [...] In being a man" (Dattani, 2000, p. 425). Gender here becomes a design, "[...] a performance that constitutes the identity that it purports to be" (Hawkesworth, n.d., p.155). It is apprehended that if the traditional norms are not accepted, it can result in the complete breakdown of masculine hegemony. This fact was the prime reason behind Amritlal's attempted subjugation of Jairaj. Jairaj could not succeed despite his consistent efforts and genuine artful talent, because the idealized behavior, speech, gestures, dressing style, way of walking related to the cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity, develop a pattern of limitation on practice "in the social structure of gender" (Connell, 1987, p. 245) which affects the performance of an individual. In order to make Jairaj fit into the appropriate gender role, on the one side, Amritlal continues scheming by raising doubts in Jairaj's wife Ratna's mind regarding Jairaj's masculinity, and on the other side, he raises doubts in the mind of his son about his wife's sincerity towards him. He says: "[...] Is it because of your wife? Is she forcing you to dance? [...] She may be by influencing you. Maybe it's her, not you" (Dattani, 2000, p.415). Thus, he is successful in killing two birds with a single stone. Here we can see that the patriarchal norms are the cultural means through which identity is created "by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture" (Butler, 1999, p. 11). Amritlal sums up: "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (Dattani, 2000, p. 427). His evil scheming creates havoc in the personal as well as the professional world of Jairaj. Throughout his life, Jairaj was reduced to a spot boy who stood at the periphery, while Ratna occupied the centre stage in the general drama of life. Even while

performing on stage, he remained a shadow to the central performance of Ratna. She occupied the focal point "wearing a splendid Bharatanatyam costume" while he remained a background dancer "in an ordinary kurta-pyjama" (Dattani, 2000, p. 440). Professionally Ratna was shining and Jairaj was lamenting: "Bit by bit. You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow" (Dattani, 2000, p. 443). Ratna, however, still accuses him "you couldn't support your family on your own" (Dattani, 2000, p. 411) "a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours" (Dattani, 2000, p. 402). Thus Jairaj gets caught between his father's hegemonic identity and Ratna's patriarchal expectations as she thinks that a man is bound to be a breadwinner for his family. Jairaj is marginalized as the 'orients' in colonial discourse and as the 'other' in gender discourse. He is oppressed and compelled to abide by the norms and structure of the socio-cultural patriarchal set up. As he fails to create his mark as a successful performer and as an ideal husband, a sense of insecurity overwhelms Jairaj's masculine identity. Seeing no future or better career prospects, he drowns himself in bouts of alcoholism. Jairaj is reduced to an object that carries the cross of patriarchy on his shoulder silently and is a mere puppet whose strings are tied to the hands of his father. Although he fails in his genuine attempt yet his attempt to deconstruct the existing socio-cultural structure could not be minimized. His battle against the normalization of gendering process makes him a rebel and an outcast in his own family. When the older Jairaj utters: "We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God" (Dattani, 2000, p. 448), he meant that he lacked the fierce spirit and a stiff upper lip to steer clear the decadent traditional forces to pursue the yearnings and desires dear to his heart. His utterance also brings into relief the damaging dimensions of social constructs which have overturned the real motive behind the formation of the institution called family. This institution was originally created to keep people organically integrated into one structure. It was a cohesive arrangement that kept people glued to each other. But due to selfish colonial desires engulfing the minds of people to control and command the vulnerable in the family, it lost its meaning and social significance.

Conclusion

This family drama thus is about an androgynous personality who was compelled to invisibilize his real identity to accept the ideals of masculinity under the "dispositifs" (Valerie, 2019, p. 83) of hegemonic heteronormativity which celebrates the pseudo concept of gender division i.e. masculinity and femininity. It also raises profound questions with regard to the norms of patriarchy that grant an authoritative monopoly to the head of the family who categorizes several limitations on performance based on gender identity. The deviants become mere puppets. They have to pay a high price because the matrix of normality is formulated and exercised by the highly powerful uncompromising heterosexist society. Overcoming these heterosexist approaches, therefore, requires a formidable assertion of identity instead of succumbing to the intimidation and domination of the patriarchal forces. Social constrictions should not deter an individual from following and fulfilling his biological and other kinds of urges and aspirations. Only by taking head-on the disruptive agency of patriarchy, one can emerge victorious to give a free and unimpeded run to one's positive, innate desires and passions. Androgyny serves its purpose better than any other identity because "the ideal of androgyny begins with the recognition that, out of the whole range of human potentialities, [...] androgyny is a form of life in which every person [is] enabled to become a whole human being" (Valerie, 1981, p. 15).

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