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Dr. R. Anuja, MBA, M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor

## Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

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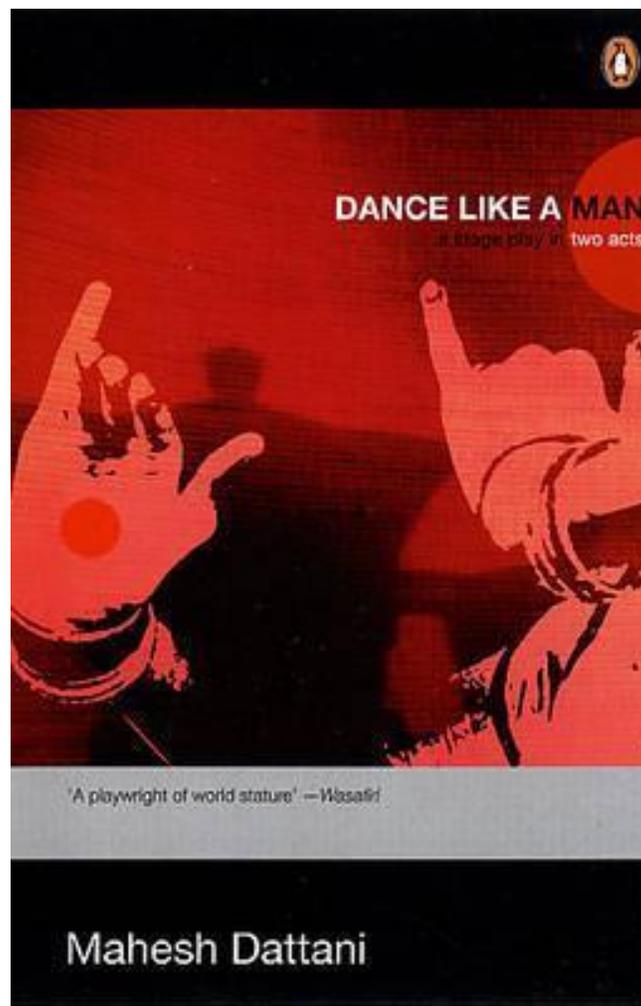
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### Social Issues in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

R. Poornima, M.A., M.Phil.

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#### Abstract

This paper highlights the notion of social issues like Gender inequalities, society versus tradition, Religious intolerance, social construct, sufferings and depression faced by both men and women with reference to the play *Dance Like a Man* (1989) written by the Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani. Hailed as one of the “Most serious Contemporary playwright” by Alyque

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Padamsee, Mahesh Dattani bares life to the bone. Pre-Occupied as it were with gender issues, Dattani is a spokesman for all the marginalised people. The three generations of conflict has been clearly revealed in this play with a comparison of ancient history of India.

**Key words:** Mahesh Dattani, *Dance Like a Man*, Gender Inequality, Social Conflict, Gender Discrimination.

## **Introduction**

**Gender Inequalities** refer to treating an individual or a particular group uniquely on the basis of some social and cultural bias. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines discrimination as “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex”. Gender based inequality has been the ancient practice in India and also across the world. Gender inequality has been in the roots of our society since the birth of civilization. It is a practice which shows that mankind is still in the hands of discrimination which is particularly leading to the fragmentation of the society in spite of the technological improvement. As the branch of human civilization aroused which was once a delight giving cause as it brought certain rules in the life of humankind it unfortunately also contains the evil seeds of inequalities on the basis of sex, colour and caste, etc. Men and women are compelled to face the darkness of inequalities which often results in the suppression of their desires and certainly the progress in life. The artist explains the dark side of life also so that to create awareness among people and also to bring differentiation in the thoughts of the people.

## **An Invisible Coat over the Society**

Gender inequality is a form of discrimination which is especially found in Indian culture and also in certain other cultures. Gender is often called as the ‘social construct’ which means that the inequality between man and woman on the floor of gender is the result of the social authoritative principle set in from the ancient period while Sex is a considered to be called as the ‘biological construct’. The voice and protest against the rights of a woman have become powerful in the present period but unfortunately the man has been given priority in this aspect and is always considered as ‘a citizen of a privileged class’. In India, it is an assumption that only

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women have been suppressed of their desires, dominated by the power of others and are the victims of the gender discrimination but that is not the fact, as men also have to face the bigotry. Men like women are also the suffers of the society as men are judged on masculinity floor and gallant qualities.

### **Plays of Dattani**

There are clear undercurrents in the plays of Dattani which relate to the greatest traditions of the native country: his incorporation of traditional dance forms in *Dance Like a Man* brings together the historic India and the property-minded, money-oriented society of the 1990s, with a drama moving between generations and across time in the ways which are technically astonishing. Indian men's desires and wishes are ignored if it 'sounds feminine' or are related to the fields where women have upper quality. The man has to be strong, stout, dominating and hard in nature while the woman has to be obedient, silent and submissive. It is a social framework designed by the very people of the society and it has become the basis of gender discrimination which acts like a black cover on the psyche of Indian people.

### ***Dance Like a Man***

Mahesh Dattani in *Dance Like a Man* has generously expressed the social issues of contemporary Indian society. The theme of the play is dealt with tradition, relationship, career, and society. The plot revolves around Jairaj and Ratha and their daughter Lata and her fiancé Viswas. A fine metre traces the past of Jairaj, Ratna and Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father through the technique of flashback concept. Jairaj and Ratna are exposed to the wrath of Amritlal Parekh who fails to understand their passion and their devotion towards dance and particularly of Jairaj.

Mahesh Dattani indicates the typical Indian views about dance through Amritlal Parekh who assigns that dance is made only for females. He sums up that a man with self-respect will never take up the dance as a profession, especially a man. The Dramatist has sketched the discrimination based on gender faced by Indian man and woman and its consequences.

### **Patriarchy**

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Dattani, in *Dance Like a Man* has highlighted that patriarchy is an element of Indian society. Men hold primary power and predominate in the culture of the family. Men ignite to hold the reins of authority over women, children and other members of the family. Gender inequality has been present in society since the birth of civilization and up to date humanity is in its shackles. The Dramatist says “gender is constituted by some acts which when repeated come to form and give shape to a “coherent” gender identity” (2009, 36).

### **Amritlal Parekh, Head of the Family**

Dattani portrays an Indian family in which Amritlal Parekh possessed unquestionable power over Jairaj and Ratha. Parekh being the head of the family, he declared himself to be responsible head for taking important decision of all their life. He is a reformist and freedom fighter yet a prudish and conservative. He was supporting India to get free from the Britishers. Ironically he controlled and framed strict regulations over his own son’s wishes. He rejects the freedom of his son who wanted to become a Bharatnatyam dancer- “Do you know where a man’s happiness lies? In being a Man...” (425, Act II). Father implements his wish on his son and wants him not to take up dance as his career because it is not a ‘male oriented’ profession. Man is declared to be the bread earner and he is expected to be in such a profession in which self-esteem is concerned with it, in Indian society. In the other term, man did not get freedom to undergo art form like Bharatnatyam. Jairaj’s father equates the art of dance with prostitution. “The craft of a prostitution to show off her wares- what business does a man have to learn from such a craft? No use when compared with dance” (406, Act I).

Dramatist has clearly indicated that Amritlal Parekh felt really bad and ashamed of Jairaj because he being a ‘real man’ is in the profession of lower quality. He considered Jairaj a cause for the shame for the family, because he judged Jairaj on the floor of masculinity in which he didn’t allow himself to fit in. He says,

“Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an obsession”. (415, Act I)

### **Adverse Judgement and Inclination**

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Dattani introduces ironic element but still an adverse judgement and inclination are always visualized under the surface. When Amritlal Parekh compares dance with womanly mannerism, it evokes comical work yet underlined with satirical work. He expresses his doubts towards “guru ji” who teaches dance in an effeminate ground which disgusts and irritates Jairaj - “I have never seen a normal man with long hair. I have also noticed the way he walks” (417, Act I).

### **Men Growing Long Hair**

Amritlal brings out the fact to the light that all those men who believe that a man with long hair is not a man in true color and sense. He got angry, almost lost his temper when Ratna informed him of Jairaj’s desire of growing his hair long to “Improve his abhinaya”. Amirtlal says that if Jairaj grew his hair even to one inch longer, he will shave his head and throw him on the road.

### **A Tale of Woe**

Dattani has traced an outline of the tale of woe in which men and women act as the powerful tool of Amritlal’s authority, which covers not only Jairaj but also Ratna. The poor woman is ‘instructed’ and ‘ordered’ by her father in law that she must stop visiting the aged woman, who is so-called as “devdasi”, for practicing and learning dance since visiting an ‘old withered’ prostitute would bring bad reputation to his family. Amirtlal, in a grim manner, orders Ratna saying “You will not. That is all. I need not give you any reason for it” (421, Act I).

### **Dance Separating Men and Women**

Dattani has pointed out the irony that on one hand Amritlal Parekh brings the equivalence of the dance with prostitution and withholds Jairaj from dancing and on the other hand he accepts and permits Ratna to dance. This concept indirectly suggests that men and women are not given equal power and position in Indian society. The skill of dance is considered to be of least and inferior thing in India and hence it is said to be meant only for woman. Amritlal very smartly makes Ratna feel that Jairaj can never be as good as she at dancing and demands the grace and beauty to be only as the quality of womanly identification. He says, “A woman in the man’s

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world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic, yet being progressive is ... sick" (427, Act II).

### **Lata and Viswas – Conflict Resolution?**

The society versus tradition's conflict has also been highlighted through the growing relationship of Lata and Viswas. Lata had to look for Viswas's permission whether he would allow her to dance after marriage or not. She asks, "Viswas, when we are married, you will let me come here to practice, won't you?" (389, Act I).

### **Embodiment of Household Chores**

Indian society and culture expect women to be an embodiment of household chores. In the words of Multani, "Women in Indian society work in office as well as in the kitchen at their home but women working in kitchen is meant to be the real women. For men, its vice versa" (2009, 32). Mahesh Dattani has highlighted this in his play *Dance Like a Man* as Viswas says to Lata "Accepting a daughter in law who does not make tea is asking too much of him" (391, Act I).

### **Consequences and Repercussions of Gender Conflict**

Mahesh Dattani towards the end expresses the sad and very painful reality; the consequences and repercussions of gender conflict which overwhelmed Jairaj. Innocent Jairaj has been lowered to empty space and loneliness "spineless boy" as his obstinate father and the society made him realize that he is worthless and fit for nothing, not even for the dance, at last. He blames Ratna for taking away his self-possession, self-esteem, respect and confidence which once again adverts towards gender inequality as a husband without a single thought blames his wife for his decline.

"You took it away bit by bit. You took it away when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it away when you arranged the lightening so that I danced in your shadow" (443, Act II).

### **Conclusion**

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The play *Dance Like a Man* brings to light the painful and hurting reality about men and women who are meant to be the victims of gender conflict. An individual's quality, their desires, capability and success are based on the yardstick of gender, particularly in the Indian society. The man with the passion and love to dance is considered to be lower and inferior in quality and status whereas woman has no rights and voice in the family. Gender inequality is the social evil which has overwhelmed the Indian society and it can be erased only when the people change their support to gender inequality. We should understand that gender inequality is a 'mere social construct'. A person should be judged based on his or her quality and capability, but not on the basis of gender only. Then the society will improve in true sense. Every individual has got their own purpose and rights and hence they deserve equal respect on earth.

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