

**Intricate Human Relationships in Mahesh Dattani's Plays:  
A Study of *Dance like a Man* and *Final Solutions***

**Dr. Satya Paul, M.Phil., Ph.D.**

Associate Professor of English

Govt. National P.G. College

Sirsa, Haryana (India)

[satyapaul73@gmail.com](mailto:satyapaul73@gmail.com)

Contact No: 9416944090

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“One of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights” (Viets) writing in English, Mahesh Dattani is known for exploring invisible issues of modern Indian middle-class society. Intricate web of human relationships in a middle-class Indian family appears to interest him, as he is always keen to underline the latent issues of social and familial life of his characters. He is the first Indian playwright to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his contribution to theatre. He has penned famous plays such as *Where There's a Will*, *Dance like a Man*, *Final Solutions*, *Tara*, *Do the Needful* and *Bravely fought the Queen*. He is a keen observer of life around him and he handles the situations and character very carefully so that the audience can carry a message for good while departing from the theatre.

The present paper proposes to study human relationships in two of Dattani's plays named *Dance like a Man* and *Final Solutions*. In these plays, communal and familial relationships appear complex and invite exploration. For his dramatic purpose, Dattani needs a family at a crucial juncture as a peaceful ambience in a family unit is hardly of any use for him. Dominant and manipulating father, smart and scheming young wife, and defiant son are some of the recurrent characters in his plays. Painful twists and turns in family relationships that pass as something normal in the world around us form the core of Dattani's dramatic world. Though Dattani deals with dysfunctional relationships, yet to show the abnormality of liaisons is not his purpose. He admits: “the function of drama, in my opinion, is not merely to reflect the malfunction of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly, but funny” (quoted in Roy, n. p.). Thus, by bringing uneasy relationships in the open, he appears to put question of which answers can be found out.

Dattani makes use of some recurrent motifs; and family as a battlefield is one of such motifs. All family life is complicated; family values are a sham made up of compromises, and middle-class morality is only a facade in his dramatic world. In *Dance like a Man* (1989) Dattani uses the family home as the setting. The home, its tangible, physical presence becomes crucial to the very existence of three generations of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their habitation. Characters in the play have been put in complex situations, and they search for their identities within the

oppressive system of custom, tradition and gender. Dattani's depiction of the relationship of Jairaj and Ratna, the two young Bharatnatyam dancers, as husband and wife in this play is interesting as well as realistic.

Jairaj and Ratna live within the domain of the patriarch Amritlal Parekh, Jairaj's father, who claims to be a freedom fighter and a reformist. The father's aversion to a great many things that concern activities of his son and daughter-in-law draws the boundary lines for their behaviour within the sphere of his authority. Dance for him is the "craft of prostitute to show off her wares" (CP 406), thus improper for his daughter-in-law and absolutely unimaginable for his son. He cannot tolerate the sounds of dancing bells, which ring through the practice sessions of his son and daughter-in-law. He is aghast at the long-haired guru with an effeminate walk and cannot, most of all, stomach the idea of his son, a man, becoming a professional dancer. To him "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (CP 427). Moreover, just like Hasmukh Mehta of the earlier play *Where There's a Will*, the so-called reformist Amritlal Parekh is domineering, and does not allow his son to believe that he has rights over his father's property: "don't think you have a right to all my wealth. I have far better things to do with it than hand it over to you" (CP 425), he makes it clear to Jairaj.

Too much of stringency on the part of the father leads to revolt, and Jairaj and Ratna leave his house in defiance and go to live in her uncle's house. But the uncle proves worse than the father as he makes an attempt to molest Ratna. Therefore, out of utter helplessness Jairaj and Ratna come back to Amritlal Parekh's house within two days. Now exploiting their helplessness, Jairaj's father makes them agree to all sorts of restrictions he puts on them. He tells his son not to grow his hair any longer and his daughter-in-law not to learn the art of dance from anyone else. He further informs Ratna that man's happiness lies "in being a man," (CP 425) and succeeds in convincing her that Jairaj is merely a drag on her. Manipulating the circumstances to his purpose Amritlal Parekh makes a secret pact with Ratna that she would be allowed to dance if she helps him in making Jairaj "an adult" (CP 427) who could be worthy of a woman. Ratna barter her freedom at the cost of her beloved husband's happiness. Jairaj's bliss of ignorance does not last long as he smells a rat and his knowledge of the pact that Ratna has made with his father creates disharmony between him and his wife that ends in extreme bitterness.

Surrounded by all sorts of adversities, the two dancers expose their irreconcilable nature. Neither their guardian Mr. Parekh supports them in the cultivation of the art of dance, nor do they encourage each other in the dance of life. Blames and counter blames bounce and re-bounce and poison the relationships. Ratna accuses Jairaj that her career is finished because he has always been "a spineless boy" who couldn't leave his father's house for more than forty-eight hours. Jairaj holds Ratna responsible for his ruin. He accuses Ratna of making a pact with his father, and thus depriving him of dance, his long-cherished ambition. He, who has now taken to drinking, exposes the sore heart to her as he tells her that she has taken away his self-esteem:

JAIRAJ. 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. And when you called me names in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even by private. And you call me disgusting. (CP 443)

Ratna counter attacks and scolds Jairaj for his drunkenness. She holds his drunkenness, his mediocre skills as a dancer, and his father's aversion to the art of dance responsible for his downfall. But Jairaj further alleges Ratna that she is not only responsible for his failure as a dancer but for destroying his family also. She has always been after name and fame and has never discharged her duty as a mother and a wife. In order to prove herself to be dancer, she has used him as a tool, as a stage prop, as a choreographer to her dance items, and has never considered him a co-dancer, he accuses. Furthermore, she has crushed his desire to make his son Shankar a dancer of whose death she is guilty. She as well as the *ayah*, in an attempt to keep the child away from weeping for his mother, administered an overdose of opium, which killed the child. This incident widens the chasm between the two, which never is bridged. The albatross of her son's death hangs in Ratna's neck for the rest of her life, and whenever she forgets, Jairaj reminds her of it. Again, Jairaj is not satisfied with the way Ratna thrusts dance as a career upon their daughter Lata. Later, when Lata becomes a success in the field of dance and her mother wants to paste Lata's photographs in her own album, Jairaj accuses Ratna of being jealous of her own daughter. Thus, Jairaj and Ratna quarrel on petty issues even.

Indeed, the very foundation of Ratna-Jairaj relationship has been shaky as the two do not trust each other. The only thing that the two share is dance. Jairaj believes that Ratna dances because she wants to show her physical beauty; Ratna doubts his faithfulness to her, and she watches in whose room he has "sneaked into" at 3 a.m. in the hotel at Moscow (CP 399). In fact, the disagreement and distrust between Jairaj and Ratna gets exposed in their very first meeting with the audience in Act I. The distrust continues till the end of the play and one partner never proposes to the other, as the lovers in Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" do: "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!" (Arnold 484)

The ghosts of the past, and the dark secrets of human consciousness that torment the present, come to visit *Dance like a Man*, like they do in other plays such as *Where There is a Will*, *Final Solutions*, *Tara* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The ghost of past never lets peace prevail in the household of Jairaj and Ratna. The past incidents such as the behaviour of Ratna's uncle, when he attempted to molest her, and the death of their son Shankar prove too much for them for the rest of their life. These two incidents shatter their mutual trust. Jairaj never forgives Ratna for the secret pact that she made with his father. Ratna's impulsive nature, her habit of taking credit for every success and blaming Jairaj for every failure, her non-seriousness in bringing up Shankar, and the sense of importance that she attaches to her own career, combined with Jairaj's jealousy and escape in the bottle of wine, mixed with his father's dominance destroy their mutual relationships. Towards the end of the play Jairaj admits:

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“We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God.” (CP 447)

A critic B. Yadava Raju rightly observes that “The unison and ‘*jathi*’ that are required in any successful dance item, are lacking in their day-to-day life” (76). In this play, Dattani seems to suggest that one should be allowed to have freedom of choosing one’s occupation. Hobbies and interests of individuals should not be trampled under the prejudices of orthodoxy.

The streak of dysfunctional family continues in Dattani’s third play *Final Solutions* (1992). The play is “outwardly focused on Hindu Muslim incompatibility but inwardly full of mutual disagreements amongst the family members” (Das 168). Using family as a microcosm of Indian society, Dattani not only traces the Hindu-Muslim conflict but also probes into the conflicts within the family through three generations of a Hindu Gandhi family around which the play revolves. Three generations of the family repeatedly witness fragile relationships - Hardika, the grandmother is treated very badly in her husband’s house by the varied members of the family, her son Ramnik Gandhi does not share smooth relations with his wife and daughter, and her granddaughter Smita feels stifled in the family owing to the narrow minded approach of the elders in the house. The pulls and counter-pulls of the family are exposed when two Muslim boys, Babban and Javed, seek shelter in their house on being chased by a baying Hindu mob.

In this play, the incidents of present are enacted on the stage while the past is recollected through memories, sequences and diaries. The past appears to have an indelible impression on the present. “The entire action of the play is seen through” (CP 165) the eyes of Daksha (another name of Hardika). She moves in past and present and lets us see the tangles in communal as well as familial relationships. When a young girl of fourteen, she is Daksha who represents past, while after forty years she becomes an old woman, Hardika, who stands for present times. She records in her diary that her mother-in-law Gaju was an exceptionally traditional woman and her husband always felt some sort of pressure in her presence. Thus, unhealthy relations in a family are underlined:

DAKSHA. Gaju . . . one has to move with times. Gaju won’t budge. Wagh is just the opposite. Wagh is my name for my father-in-law. . . . In front of Gaju, he is like a big pussy cat. And he never bathes. He only makes himself wet with half a bucket of water. And he snores. The first night I heard him snore, I thought there was a tiger in our courtyard. (CP 175)

The next generation is the other way around. Here the husband Hari dominates his wife Daksha. Rather than being a friend and a lover, he is a “lord” and “master” (CP 175) to Daksha. He bothers least about the wishes of his wife and treats her like a caged bird. His parents, with his help, deprive her of her cherished ambition of becoming a singer like Noor Jehan. Choked with emotion, she writes in her diary:

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DAKSHA. All my dreams have been shattered . . . I can never be a singer, like Noor Jehan. Hari's family is against my singing film songs. His parents heard me humming a love song to Hari last night. And this morning they told him to tell me . . . (*Suddenly strikes her forehead.*). (CP 166)

Married at an early age of fourteen, Daksha never finds solace in her own home and experiences nothing but suppression. She recalls how her husband called her names, beat her mercilessly and confined her like "a dog that had gone mad" (CP 223) when he was told that she went to meet her Muslim friend Zarine in her house and ate some food there:

DAKSHA. (*as if to Hari*). No. What are you saying, Hari? It is not true! It is just not true! Kanta is lying. She lied to you! I did not touch their food! (*Recoils as if she has been hit.*) Ah! Don't hit me! (*Angrily*) Don't do that! I swear I didn't eat anything! Aah! Stop that! Stop it! All right. I won't go there again. Please, leave me alone. (*Crying.*) Please! Stop! (*Lies on the floor, sobbing.*). (CP 222)

This incident of violence speaks volumes about the kind of relationships Hari has with his wife Daksha. After this incident Daksha lost the kind of belongingness to her husband, which earlier she had. That is why she describes her husband as a man with "the brains of a silly goat" (CP 174). Thus, distrust and violence become the cause of brittle relationships between husband Hari and wife Daksha.

The next generation, Ramnik Gandhi, and his wife Aruna also differ in their tastes and temperaments. Ramnik is a liberal, open-minded non-ritualistic Hindu while his wife is full of communal prejudices. Ramnik is haunted by the guilt of past and wants to improve relations with Muslims while Aruna hates the Muslim community. She wants their daughter Smita to learn from her grandmother Hardika "the truth" that Muslim "people are all demons" (CP 173). Two individuals, husband and wife, with different principles, naturally come against each other. The humanist husband tries to fill the chasm that exists between Hindus and Muslims while the wife, a religious extremist, believes in spending time in "pooja-paath" and nurturing hate for other religions. She becomes irritated due to the overburden of her religious rituals and complains of uneasiness. Now her husband asks her:

RAMNIK. Nobody is asking you to pray all day.

ARUNA. Who do you think is protecting this house?

RAMNIK. Who do you think is creating all this trouble? (CP 173)

This short dialogue indicates how the attempt at separating two communities actually separates two life partners. In addition to her over religiosity, she is highly prejudiced against the Muslims. When the two Muslim youths, Javed and Babban, save themselves from the ferocious Hindu mob by hiding in the Gandhis' house, Ramnik goes all out to protect them but Aruna wants to

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throw them out to the blood-thirsty mob. It is only on Ramnik Gandhi's request that Aruna serves water to the boys but the way she does it makes her prejudices obvious:

ARUNA (*sarcastically*). Would you like some more?

JAVED. Not for me. Thank you.

*Aruna holds the glasses with her thumbs and index fingers, on the sides which have not been touched by their lips. She takes them away and keeps them separate from other glasses. (CP 185)*

This kind of attitude is another form of violence. Jasbir Jain notes: "Physical violence is not the only form of violence. This kind of distancing, humiliation and indignity does not do the inter-community relations any good . . ." (189). This kind of behaviour on Aruna's part adversely affects her relationships not with Muslims only, but within her own family also. Now, when Aruna's prejudice against the Muslims stand confirmed, her husband and daughter develop dislike for her.

The reality of relationships among the members of Gandhi family is exposed on the crucial night when Javed and Babban take refuge in their house. It is on this night that Smita gets assured that her mother, under the garb of religiosity, hates other communities. Aruna makes a lot of hue and cry when Javed offers to help Smita in filling the drinking water. She directs Smita that the water should not be touched by a Muslim: "We bathe our gods with it, Smita. It has to be pure. It must not be contaminated" (CP 209). Smita feels a deep sense of pain to see that Javed and Babban are being treated like untouchables in her home and her patience runs out. She eventually gives expression to her pent-up feelings, which are against her mother:

SMITA. Don't! Please, mummy, don't try so hard! You are breaking me. Ever since I was small, you have been at me to go to the temple, make garlands, listen to you reading from the Gita. I love you, mummy, that's why I did that. I listened to you and I obeyed you. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. Maybe I should have told you earlier, but I'm telling you now, I can't bear it! Please don't burden me anymore! I can't take it! (CP 213)

These words expose the girl's antipathy towards her mother. Until now she never spoke against her mother. The girl has indeed been living in a forced harmony. She loves her mother but hates her too much involvement in the religious rituals and her abhorrence for other communities. On the other hand, Smita dislikes her father but never speaks a word against him. That is why when it comes to choose between father and mother, obviously her choice is the mother. The girl is undoubtedly uncomfortable with her mother's behaviour, but it is not true to say that Smita hates her father or mother to the extreme. However, she and her mother make Ramnik Gandhi feel isolated but surprisingly enough Smita never says a word against her father. It seems that Smita has been suppressed in her own family. She leads a life like that of "a mouse in the family of cats" (CP 218) and even she sarcastically thanks her mother for making her "feel like a rat in a hole" (CP 210).

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Smita feels stifled and when her mother asks her, “Does being a Hindu stifle you?” she says, “No, living with one does” (CP 211). Perhaps the lack of freedom that she experiences in her family also forces her to forget her love for the Muslim boy Babban.

The Muslim families in the play are no different from the Hindu families. Javed does not live with his parents but goes to meet his sister in her hostel and is concerned about her happiness. Therefore, it can be said that love-hate relationship is there among the members of Gandhi family as well as Javed’s family. But the question arises - what prevents people from forming durable relationships? Probing into the reasons behind such tangled familial relations in this play, a stage director Alyque Padamsee says:

This is . . . about transferred resentments. About looking for a scapegoat to hit out at when we feel let down, humiliated. Taking out your anger on your wife, children, or servants is an old Indian custom. . . . Ramnik, the father, transfers his resentment at his own father’s black deed . . . Smita, the daughter, hits out at her mother, Aruna, when she can’t cope with her hidden love for Babban, the outsider. (161)

The richness of Dattani’s art comes to the fore in his suggestion of relationships through symbols in the play *Final Solutions*. The darkness of night is symbolic of bitterness and revolt, while the morning light denotes acceptance and fairness in relationships that it brings with it. The light dispels darkness that eventually paves the way for a better understanding among people. Javed admits his faults; Hardika realises her mistake, and Ramnik accepts the blunders of his parents. The darkness in which the whole action of the play takes place gets replaced by the advent of dawn towards the end of the play.

Most of the relationships, communal or familial, Dattani deals with in this play are brittle. However, there is no dearth of angels who help in improving such relationships. Smitas, and Ramniks are there to create a better bond between human beings. Throughout the play, Ramnik Gandhi appears to be bent under the weight of the guilt of injustice of burning the shop of Muslim business rivals, done by his ancestors. Nevertheless, since he loves his mother, and knows that she has been a sufferer throughout, he never reveals this secret to her so that she can live in peace. He tries to undo the wrong done in past by protecting the two boys from the mob. Again, though most of father-son relationships are fragile in Dattani yet his plays are not without examples of healthy father-son relationships. Viswas, Lata’s fiancée, in *Dance like a Man*, has a good kind of understanding with his father. The boy cares for his father and looks after his business in his absence. And Viswas’s father also allows him freedom to marry Lata, the girl of his choice. Indeed, Dattani seems to have contrasted Jairaj-Ratna relationship with Viswas-Lata relationship. On the one hand, Lata is supported by her parents and goes to perform her dance with ease of mind and succeeds, on the other hand, Ratna and Jairaj had to face the opposition of Jairaj’s father, and they themselves made their career a big burden and failed in the end.

In the two plays of Dattani discussed above, almost all familial relationships are fragile. Parents against their own children, and husband against wife is almost a norm in the families depicted by Dattani. Yet here and there examples of smooth and healthy bonds can be discerned which seem to have been introduced purposely. The playwright does not show delicate familial relationships only, but he seems to hint at the reasons behind such relationships also. In *Dance like a Man*, factors like excess of patriarchal dominance, manipulation, greed for money, selfishness and lack of freedom and wisdom become the reasons for breach in relationships. Finally, the familial bonds in *Final Solutions* are weakened by evils like violence, communal hate, anger and transferred resentment, and the homes are left dysfunctional. Dattani believes that the younger generation has a better understanding of human relations than the older one. Moreover, older generation is orthodox in beliefs and creates rift between communities while the younger generation cements the cracks made by prejudices. Dattani raises issues of social and familial relevance and makes the audience think about their stance in relation to fellow humans.

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