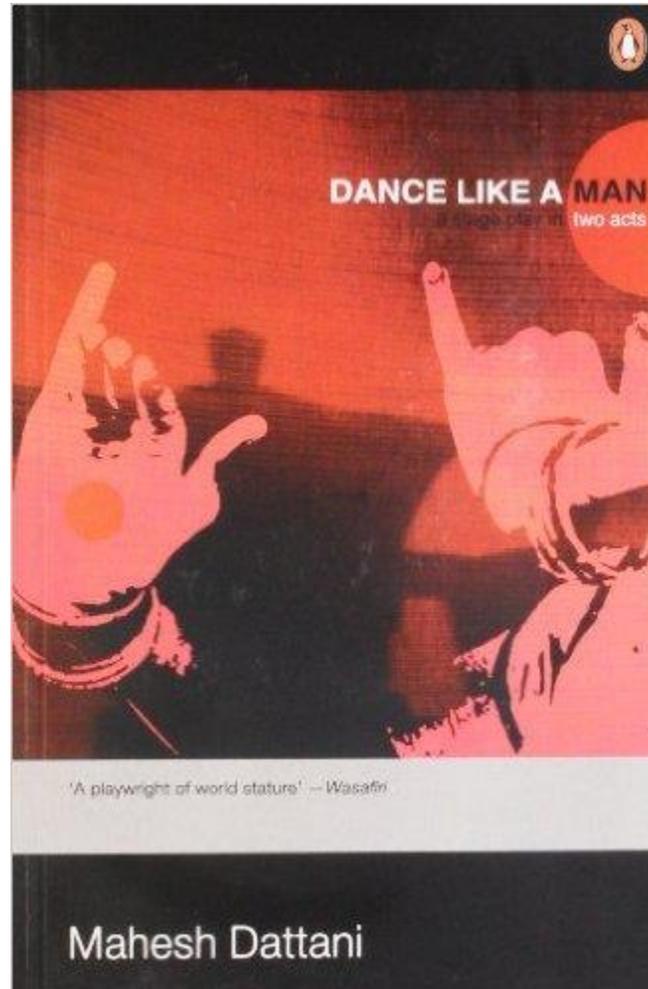


Cultural Fissures in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion And The Jewel* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like A Man*

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka is a renowned Nigerian dramatist, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. The traditions and customs of Yoruba are typically presented in *The Lion and The Jewel*. Some of the customs like, bride-price, polygamy, wife wooing girls for her husband,

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are highlighted and the writer challenged these outdated customs and traditions. The final triumph of African culture over modernity recognizes the postcolonial need for a discovery of the past glory and grandeur. Dattani's *Dance like a Man* shows noticeable cultural change and is passing through a transitional phase. The play forms a link among three generations. It focuses on the lives of Jairaj and Ratna, Lata and Viswas and Amritlal Parekh. The father represents Indian tradition and culture whereas the son adapts the western ways. He also highlights how the social restrictions and the consequential conflicts affect the familial relationship of father-son and husband-wife. Amritlal imposed his beliefs on the next generation. He gives priority to the culture. Indian culture is strongly rooted in its tradition and values, while the modernism is attempting to consolidate itself in Indian space.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka, *The Lion and The Jewel*, Yoruba, African culture, Indian traditions, Mahesh Dattani, *Dance like a Man*

Introduction

Commonwealth Literature is the store house of different cultures and perspectives. It is characterized by the principle of diversity in union. Whereas the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized happens to be the common denomination of this literature, it is marked by a great variety in its details. For example the love-hate relationship, east-west encounter, sympathy and antipathy, acculturation and enculturation, rejection of British mode of language and impregnation of it by the native vitality. The diversity of Commonwealth Literature is further developed by Contemporary African Literature. One of the predominant themes of Commonwealth Literature is the interaction between the forces of tradition and modernity. It is due to the intermingling of cultures and the effect of Colonization.

Soyinka

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka, the second child of Samuel Ayodele Soyinka and Grace Eniola Soyinka, was born on 13 July 1934 in IjebuIsara. Soyinka's father is an 'Ijebu' and his mother is an 'Egba', both sub-divisions of the Yoruba Ethnic group, traditionally, not allowed to

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inter-marry. The parental defiance of tradition seems to foreshadow Soyinka's future activities as a rebel. He is a Nigerian playwright and poet. He got the Noble Award for literature in 1986.

The Lion and The Jewel

The play *The Lion and The Jewel* (1963) is a joyous comedy with the touch of serious social comment. It speaks of progress and the bride-price, the conflict between Western concepts of progress and traditional African custom. This play presents the clash between the Bale Baroka and The young school master Lakunle for the village belle, Sidi. Intrigue and fine speeches are combined with the dance, song and mime. The heroine is ready to accept some fangled ideas of the comic school teacher Lakunle. Sadiku the head wife of Baroka propounds on Baroka's love for Sidi. Sidi is completely trapped by the Bale at the end of the play.

Mahesh Dattani

Mahesh Dattani, born in Bangalore on 7 August 1958, studied in Baldwin's High School and St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science, Bangalore. He has worked as a copywriter in an advertising firm and subsequently with his father in his family business. His theatre group Playpen was formed in 1984, and he has directed several plays for them, ranging from classical Greek to contemporary works. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will*, and from 1995, he has been working full-time in the theatre. In 1998, he set-up his own theatre studio dedicated to training and showcasing new talents in acting, directing and stage writing, the first in the country to focus on new works specifically.

Mahesh Dattani has written many plays. They are *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solution* (1993), *On the Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Circles Round the Fire* (1998), *The Murder that Never was* (2000), *30 Days in September* (2001), *Brief Candle* (2009), *Where did I Leave my Purda* (2012), and *The Big Fat City* (2012).

Dance like a Man

Dattani's *Dance like a Man* (1989) is a powerful drama of post- independence society involving the aspirations of a middle class south Indian couple, who by their choice of profession

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as Bharatnatyam dances reflect the past and the present. This play focuses on the journey of one such man, Jairaj, who dreams of entering the world of dance as a dancer. His passion dancing is mainly considered to be a feminine art. It deals with the agony of the male protagonist who has to bear the burnt for being labeled 'different'- simply for choosing not to be stereotypical. This play is a brilliant study of human relations and weakness framed by the age old battle between tradition and youthful rebellion. *Dance Like a Man* has been hailed as one of the best works of the dramatic imagination in recent times.

Cultural Conflict

Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* is a comical play based on African society, written in 1959. It was presented in the Royal Court in 1996, it has been broadcast by the BBC, and it has been produced often by schools, colleges and university groups in the United States and English speaking Africa. The play portrays the conflict between modern European culture and African culture.

I do not hate progress, only its nature

Which makes all the roofs and faces look the same (LJ47)

Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* is viewed as a study in colonial conflict, more specifically, the conflict between modern European culture and African culture as well as the conflict between two value systems - European and African. The play has its setting in the village of Ilujinle in Yoruba West Africa. The play is divided into three episodes: morning, noon and night and is characterized by the cultural conflict, ribald comedy and love. A deft comedy which provides excellent theatre to the audience, it draws heavily on the theme of cultural clash. The main characters of this comedy can be classified into two groups: Baroka, Sadiku, and Sidi represent the traditional African values, whereas Lakunle stands for modern European, especially the British values of life.

The conflict of the two value- systems is triggered off by the germination of the amorous love between Sidi, a beautiful young girl of about sixteen years and Lakunle, a young schoolteacher in Ilujinle. Lakunle is infatuated with Sidi as the latter happens to be a pretty

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young girl in the African village. Lakunle watches Sidi from the window as his pupils continue chanting the arithmetic tables. He is twenty three and dressed in an old style English suit which is amusing:

Threadbare but not ragged, clean but not ironed, obviously a size or two too small. His tie is done in a very small knot, disappearing beneath a shiny black waistcoat. He wears twenty- three- inch- bottom trousers, and blanco- white tennis shoes. (LJ 1)

The comic description projects Lakunle as a buffoon whereas the village girl, Sidi wraps the familiar broad cloth that is folded just above her breasts, leaving the shoulders bare and has a pail of water on her head. He sees her outside the window and finds a chance to express his appreciation of her beauty and a special concern for her well-being. Lakunle uses the western way of wooing a girl. He uses the language that is not appreciated and understood by Sidi. For Sidi, his thoughts of progress, is turning the world outside.

Sidi is very much irritated at his proposal. When an exasperated Sidi wants to pulp his brain, Lakunle comes out with another of his theories about a woman's brain being smaller than a man's and tells her that it has been proved by scientists. It is all there in the books that he reads. However Sidi is not convinced. She retorts,

The weaker sex, is it?
Is it a weaker breed who pounds the yam?
Or bends all day to plant the millet
With a child strapped to her back? (LJ6)

Lakunle tells her that they will soon have machines to do their pounding, which will grind their peppers without getting in their eyes. Lakunle has little knowledge or understanding about the labour of women that is expressed by Sidi. Lakunle's knowledge of culture is based on the literal, confused, and even uncritical adoption of ideas he has merely picked up from his

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reading. He believes whatever has been said in the books. Without interpreting the text, he involves in all sorts of arguments:

The scientists have proved it. It's in my books,
Women have a smaller brain than men
That's why they are called the weaker sex. (LJ 6)

Lakunle also explains why he wants to marry her. He tells her about Lagos, the city of magic in which he wants to live with her. But Sidi feels that Lakunle oppresses her by imposing his thoughts on her. He thinks of her as an intelligent girl who can understand him and therefore can help in his struggle for life:

(Takes her hand, instantly soulful)
Sidi, a man must prepare to fight alone.
But it keeps if he has a woman
To stand by him, a woman who. . .
Can understand . . . like you. (LJ7)

Lakunle believes in the western idea of love finally resulting in marriage. The core of the problem lies in this belief. Though he is an African by birth, he has Semi-Europeanized himself by his modern education and connection with the alien culture. He has absorbed the values of European culture but Sidi is a typical traditional girl to the crux. She strongly believes in the African values of life she is accustomed to, including the conventions of marriage. So, she does not believe in the European concept of love marriage. Lakunle starts spreading his modern European ways of life upon Sidi. He asks her not to be an "illiterate goat" or "ignorant" but asks her to be a chaste leaf which shines in the first touch of the sun:

Sidi, my love will open your mind
Like the chaste leaf in the morning, when
The sun first touches it. (LJ7)

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Lakunle compares the chaste leaf with Sidi and the Sun with progress. Lakunle wants her as a life companion and not as a wife to bring forth children. He refuses to pay the traditional bride-price but she demands her bride price. One custom prevalent in the primitive society which persists in the present is fixing the “bride- price”. In Yoruba, the marriage is usually an arranged one, decided by the family elders. The suitor is expected to pay the bride- price commensurate with the bride’s quality. The bride and her parents consider it as a matter of right to receive it. If a girl is married without bride-price, it is assumed that she is not a virgin and she is a cheap material thrown away by her parents without any price. Sidi demonstrate her worth by citing the tribal custom. Sidi is very stubborn in her demand for the bride- price:

I shall marry you today, next week
Or any day you name.
But my bride- price must first be paid
Aha, now you turn away.
But I tell you Lakunle, I must have
The full bride-price. Will you make me
A laughing stock? (LJ8)

Lakunle does not subscribe to the traditional African customs of marriage. Sidi calls Lakunle’s approach as a “cheating way, mean and miserly”. (LJ10) As a village school master he cannot afford to pay the traditional bride-pride. So he denounces it as a savage custom, barbaric, out-dated, rejected, denounced, accursed, excommunicated, archaic, degrading, humiliating, unspeakable, redundant, retrogressive, remarkable and unpalatable. He produces all the words from the “Shorter Companion Dictionary”. (LJ 8) He is waiting to receive a longer dictionary to show his shallow knowledge.

Lakunle refuses to pay the traditional bride- price. So, Sidi does not care for his love. She does not want to marry him for his objection to the traditional bride-price. Sidi feels if she marries him without the bride-price then, people in the Ilujinle village will scorn at her and say

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that she is not a virgin and fears that the traditional society will cast aspersion on her chastity. But, Lakunle feels that the traditional bride-price brings shame to their heritage before the world and thinks that it is a barbaric, outrageous custom.

Lakunle alleges how he will treat Sidi after marriage and professes that they will live like the Lagos couples. He kisses her as all educated men, particularly, Christians and western men kiss their wives. He thinks it is the way of civilized romance. Though he is a village school master he has a superficial knowledge of progress. As opposed to the traditional treatment of women, Lakunle wants her as an equal partner, life-companion, soul mate and friend in need. Being a strong rooted woman in the traditional values of life, Sidi believes that child-bearing is a sacred part of matrimony. Lakunle here contrasts himself by trying whole-heartedly to uphold modernity but ironically he expresses his native identity and demands. At the end of the play, he eagerly embraces the thought that he would not be asked the traditional bride-price, because she is no longer a virgin:

But I obey my books.
'Man takes the fallen woman by the hand'
And ever after they live happily.
Moreover, I will admit,
It solves the problem of her bride-price too. (LJ55)

African Polygamous Society

Soyinka portrays the African polygamous society. He structures the play *The Lion and the Jewel* on two tribal traditions. One of the customs is that of bride-price and the second is that the last wife of the ruler, known as Bale, will be respected as the senior wife of his successor, habitually his senior-most son, no matter, whether the successor is her son or somebody else. How astonishing it is to notice that if the successor is the dead Bale's son, as happened in the case of the present Bale, Baroka then the stepmother becomes his first wife. It is an unusual custom, which for Sadiku, the senior wife of Baroka's harem, is a matter of honour. Her traditional stubbornness hardly lets her realize the strange fact of becoming a wife to both the

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father and his son. The old father might possess no potency to indulge in sex with his youngest wife, as Sadiku reveals,

. . .Your place will always be in the Place; first as the latest bride, and afterwards, as the head of the new harem. It is a rich life, Sidi. I know. I have been in that position for forty-one years. (LJ20)

The surrender of Sidi to Baroka is the sign of the triumph of cultural African values over the western values. Sidi and Sadiku have great respect for procreation. Lakunle is not heart-broken for a long time. He also starts dancing with a girl at the wedding celebration. He is comic, but he is admirable. When he is supposed to take part in the dance, mime and song, he forgets the principles of Modern civilization and does so with great enthusiasm. Sidi gets the blessings of Sadiku for procreation. The conflict between African values and modern European values is eventually resolved in the favour of the former, Baroka. Despite his European ways of life, Lakunle is finally rejected by Sidi. She conforms to the laws of traditional values by marrying Baroka. Compared to the tricky ways to draw a woman to the nuptial bed, Lakunle's way of persuading a girl to marry him is not accepted by the village people. There is no one to appreciate it. Compared to Baroka's tricky ways to get Sidi's love for the Bale, Lakunle's concept of love lacks significance in the tradition-ridden society.

The final triumph of African culture over westernization is obviously an objective correlative of Wole Soyinka's philosophy, which recognizes the postcolonial need for a discovery of the past Glory and grandeur.

Cultural Ruptures

Post-colonialism has at its roots the falling apart of Western imperial authority, the questioning of assumptions respected in former times. However, at the same time, postcolonial texts are also a manifestation of local culture and history in their own right. In *Dance Like a Man*, Mahesh Dattani leads his audience to see the complications and contradictions of people's

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values and assumptions. The play is built upon its inherent sense of nostalgia and of the passing of an era in the lives of two dancers along with the issues of gender equations, involving changes in a world that is defined by tacit rules, particularly those of a man in a woman's world; of men who choose a line of study that is discordant with conventional expectations and of fathers who wish to make the best of a disappointing situation. There is also a woman who will not stop at anything to make her dream come true.

Mahesh Dattani frequently takes his subject from within the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire. His dramas are played out on multi-level layers where interior and exterior identities of human subjects, sometimes blend to defy and challenge specific cultural locations of India, typically seen through the collapse of families.

Ratna and Jairaj through the Eyes of Lata

The lives of the dancers Ratna and Jairaj unravel through the eyes of their daughter, Lata who is on the verge of an arangetram (formal dance performance after training). There are only a few days left when the mridangist (instrumentalist) breaks an arm. Ratna is stressed; Jairaj has resigned. He loves his daughter and is sure something can be worked out, but then Ratna cannot rest till an alternative is found. She visits another artist and requests her to send her mridangist. As this problem is being dealt with, the skeletons in the cupboard start falling out. All is not well in the big mansion where they live. The house had belonged to an authoritarian father, Amritlal Parekh, a man who ostensibly believed in social reform. Now at this time many strange things begin to happen there.

Lata goes through her own angst. She loves dance, but she wants to do that on her own terms. But at the same time she is aware of her parents' dreams, particularly her mother's aspirations for her. She cannot let them down. Then, she has her own plans for the future. There is also Viswas who loves her so much that he won't stop her from doing what she wants to do. But Viswas is a man of the commercial world. It's a puzzle as to how everything is going to fit.

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On the whole, the story and the time zones lend themselves to visual poetry, at times, even though the dialogue is painfully studied. The director uses the past and present in alternating sequences to tell the story and the visual imagery contrasts and merges with the narration.

Exhortation to Dance

The crux of the title is an exhortation to measure up to dance, the artistic vocation, and the ambiguities that flow from life's multiple directions, both in a complementary and supplementary way. In the traditional as well as the modern sense, their intrusion is spectral. The longing to realize all human potential through dance, is the thread that runs from beginning to end, and the intricate web that the ambiguities weave, and snap at it each moment, at so many places.

Dattani's writing should be seen as a "literary process" that indicates a metonymy of presence which places his plays amidst power relations of tradition within cultural frameworks. His plays can demonstrate through the text and the plot, a hybridized state that emerges by either domination or subversion of tradition. Thus *Dance Like a Man* should be seen as having elements of subversive energies within the text and plot structure.

Insightful Use of English

Dattani chooses to write in English, the language of the British colonizer, and is fully aware of the implications that it carries. The language of Viswas is below-standard English. He uses the local language when he attends calls. He uses the language of the illiterate Indian servant who speaks something like pidgin English that is really pathetic. Dattani clearly expresses the impact of post colonialism through the accent of the illiterate maid/butler English through Viswas:

“ I'm butler, saar. Saar and amma going out. I taking message

LATA: Viswas, who is that?

VISWAS: When they coming? They not telling. . . one nimit. I asking missy amma”. (DM 13)

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Viswas immediately stops talking in that accent while conversing about some serious matter over the phone. “you want to buy property...(suddenly dropping the accent). Wait a minute!” (DM 13) The word ‘nimit’ changes into ‘minute’. Viswas also mimics others well. He speaks with the voice of Amritlal Parekh to mock at the position of Jairaj who is a dancer:

VISWAS: ...So, you want to be a dancer.

Hah! Hah! Hah! Son, you will never amount to anything in life. (Dm 14)

Journey from the Familiar to the Alien

Postcolonial conditions not only represent hybridity but also involve a journey from the familiar to the alien. *Dance Like a Man* describes the colonial and nationalist biases against traditional dance forms that make the postcolonial patriarch Amritlal insist that his daughter-in-law Ratna stop taking dance lessons from a seventy-five-year-old dying devadasi who is the only living exponent of the Mysore school of dance. Consequently, Amritlal becomes responsible for the death of this tradition and for Ratna’s mediocrity as a dancer. Deprived of the best tutor she could have had, Ratna is never able to achieve the aesthetic blending of spirituality and eroticism characteristic of the tradition and becomes little more than an audience pleaser. Amritlal also rejects the Indian tradition of male dancers that Jairaj seeks to model after.

However Amritlal completely ignores this part of Indian history and bribes Ratna into helping destroy her husband’s dance career by promising her that she can perform certain censored dance productions for “respectable” middle-class audiences. Their pact results in tragic consequences for all and years later, when Jairaj and Ratna’s daughter Lata becomes a dancer, her parents relieve their lives through her. It is particularly significant that the characters double up in the play, with old Jairaj playing his father, Amritlal; young Jairaj also playing Vishwas, his daughter Lata’s fiancé; and young Ratna playing Lata. This doubling up suggests that although one half of the play takes place in Bangalore in the forties and the other half in Bangalore in the eighties, there are continuing obstacles that face those who would embrace the alternative world

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of dance. However, it also suggests that everyone, including a Gujarati businessman has the potential to achieve the alternative vision embedded in the dance form.

Use of Indian Classical Dance

Dance Like a Man focuses on Indian classical dance and embodies the significance given to other classical art forms found in much of Dattani's work. The focus on Bharatanatyam in *Dance Like a Man*, is in many ways inspired by "a few young dancers from 'respectable' families shocked the public by learning the dance from the devadasi. In those days dance is an art practiced by women and men are restricted to learn that art form. Jairaj's passion towards dance is highly focused. Dattani attempts at validating and giving voice to art forms through drama, is significant for several reasons. It reinforces the connection between the aesthetic, the sensuous, and the spiritual, which is typical of several indigenous art forms and it has been elided in post-colonial India. Throughout the play, Dattani shows how Bharatanatyam functions as an alternative space for Jairaj and Ratna, providing them the opportunity to embrace more emancipatory gender and sexual roles.

Focus on Religion

There are numerous references to the god Shiva who transcends prescribed gender roles. Bharatanatyam dancers are aware of the myth of Shiva as Ardhanarishwara who is half man - half woman, combines the dance of the eternal man and woman - the unity of Purush and Prakriti. Shiva has both the strength and compassion of the masculine and feminine principle. Ratna begins to learn the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati from Chennaiamma and so she and Jairaj name their son Shankar, one of the synonyms of Shiva. Further, Jairaj wants to teach Shankar that and a vanritya or Shiva's dance of destruction.

Ratna neither achieves the greatness she desires nor achieves happiness in her marriage. Ratna's deliberate ploys to overshadow Jairaj when they dance together turn him into drunkard and kill their son, thereby undermining patriarchal institutions of marriage and lineage. Their son Shankar is Amritlal's pride and joy since he represents the possibility of turning into a man that his father never became. However Jairaj has his own dreams for his son and says that he looks

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forward for the time when he will teach him the dance of Shiva and when he is ready, Jairaj makes him dance on his grandfather's head.

Shankar's death destroys the sanctity of the marriage and the possibility of a patriarchal lineage. Ratna is however, less a criminal than a victim of a patriarchal system she seeks to manipulate. Because of the restrictions placed on women in India, marriage is the only means by which Ratna can secure the freedom to practice the dance. Even her marriage does not protect her from his uncle who sees her as a woman of easy virtue as she is an entertainer. Lata's marriage to Viswas, the son of a multimillionaire "mithai-walla" who owns half the buildings on Commercial Street and who keeps himself prosperous with the black-market money, suggests the direction urban, middle-class India is going to follow. Lata-Viswas alliance suggests that the temporary aberration presented by Jairaj and Ratna is over and that the heteronormative status quo is being adopted once again.

Ready to Dance Together

At the end of the play, Jairaj's house is demolished and he and Ratna move to a posh flat to lead their remaining years. Lata calls her parents to say that her baby's first word sounds like "jalebi", suggesting that unlike her parents she has gracefully given in to the values of her husband's commercial world. Despite her promise, there is no indication at the end of the play that Lata will continue to practice the dance.

Jairaj and Ratna are ready to dance together. They have both moved beyond their earthly lives. Jairaj and Ratna come together in perfect harmony as they dance the dance of the divine God. Realization comes upon them, "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God". (DM 74) As they embrace and dance together they achieve the complete harmony of body and spirit, dancer and dance that is so much a part of the traditional dance form.

Focus on the Problems Faced by Indian Dancers

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It is a powerful vision, and yet the fact that it can only be achieved in death is perhaps an indication of how Dattani feels about the obstacles that continue to plague Indian dancers today. Jairaj and Ratna's final performance holds out the promise of the spiritual element (devadasi tradition unfortunately also embodied the abuse of those women by carnal men in authority, as easy prey while they danced in the temples of India) embodied in the devadasi tradition of Bharatanatyam, but does not neutralize or elide the challenges and problems of abuse endemic to this tradition. *Dance Like a Man* points the enterprising critic towards new ways of being postcolonial in the twenty-first century. Instead of discarding the past or presenting it as an artifact, they reinvent its different aspects to make meaning for our present and future.

Tradition and Modernity

Tradition refers to the customs, beliefs and cultural practices that are passed down from one generation to the next generation. It has its origin in the past. Modernity refers to the contemporary behaviour or new way of doing things. It is fresh and new. The rich tradition and culture of India's past can provide a bridge for the masses between the present and the future. In *Dance Like a Man* the cultural crevices occur when Amritlal Parekh tries to bring his son under the roof of culture and dislikes the modern ways of Jairaj. The society has its own norms and traditions. Amritlal is a social reformer, but he cannot allow his daughter-in-law learning the art from Chennaiamma's house. He allows his son to marry Ratna from a different caste, but he restricts him from becoming a dancer. Like Amritlal, Ratna too insists upon imposing her suppressed desires on Lata. Amritlal is very cautious to preserve his family name. He is very careful to keep his prestige in the traditional society. He plots against his son willfully and finally achieves his goal. His triumph shows modernity is defeated. Lata's child utters 'jilabi' at last. It indicates that she will rear him like her father and follows his heritage. She wishes to bring him up in the traditional way and not like her mother.

In both plays, *The Lion and Jewel* and *Dance Like a Man*, modernity is totally defeated. The two main characters Amritlal and Baroka are very careful in keeping their tradition alive and they try to preserve it. They cleverly plan and plot against their children and others exhibiting their plans only at the right moment. They preserve the nature, tradition, culture and their name

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in society. Though modernity tries to penetrate into the lives of people, their culture is their identity and it is unique, and that makes them feel proud.

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