

Queer Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man*

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Queer theory is a field of Gender studies that emerged in the early 1990s out of the field of gay and lesbian studies and feminist studies. It is built both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay and lesbian's studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. But unlike gay/lesbian studies which focus its inquiries into "natural" and "unnatural" behavior with respect to homosexual behavior, queer theory encompasses any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories.

Queer resistance is about questioning the fundamental assumptions of our society. It may take different forms: an alternative reading of a mainstream Bollywood film, publicly holding the hand of someone you love, coming out to friends and family, living one's chosen sex/gender, embracing one's body and one's pleasure often in defiance of the ideas of how 'manly' men and 'feminine' women should live, protesting against instances of exclusion and violence or simply existing in a daily -lived resistance that protests the hypocrisy of silence around the desires and needs of a community.

Mahesh is exploring through his play two key aspects; the general inhibitions to a man taking dance as a career and the subordination of women in a patriarchal society. Jairaj and Ratna live within such a structure where Amritlal, Jairaj's father has antipathy to his son

adopting dance as a profession and Ratna visiting the old devdasi who teaches her the intricacies of Bharatnatyam. Queer theory deconstructs these hegemonic categories which reduce identities to heteronormativity –gender roles conformed to cultural norms of all – male/all-female and heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation and which in turn keep the patriarchal matrixes of society in place.

When one is male dancer there is the classic 'man in a woman's world' syndrome to fight. The irony is that the originator of the dance is Lord Shiva (Nataraja- The King of Dance). This irony along with the cultural milieu is beautifully explored in *Dance Like a Man*. In the opening scene of the play Viswas makes fun of Jairaj putting on a mock father voice: *VISWAS. Where will you go being a dancer? Nowhere! What will you get being a dancer? Nothing! People will point at you on the streets and laugh and ask, 'Who is he?' 'He is a dancer.' 'What does he do?' 'He is a dancer.' 'Yes, but what does he do?' (Devanesen 397)*

Jairaj's passion for dance became more and more social stigmatic for his father. He tells Ratna that the happiness of man lies in being a man:

"A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in woman's world is pathetic." (Devanesen 427).

Hence, he exhorts Ratna to make her husband worthy of her. He also admonishes Jairaj not to invite his Guruji at their house because he strongly dislikes (feminine) ways and manners of Guruji: his long hair and his way of walking. The stereotypes of gender roles are pitted against the idea of the artist in search of creativity within the restricted constriction of the world that he is forced to inhabit. Jairaj with his obsession for dance is all set to demolish these stereotypes (Kuthari 67). Along with Ratna, he leaves the house of Amritlal Parekh as the protest against the traditional rules and regulations and resolves to never set a foot in the house again.

Despite being a social reformer, Amrit Lal doesn't like his daughter-in-law Ratna's association with a 'devdasi' and learning the art form at her house as he fears of being spoiled his family reputation. For him 'Devdasi', the dancer of the temple is no less than a prostitute and allowing them to practice their art is an indirect encouragement for open prostitution. But both Jairaj and Ratna have high regard and respect for them and their art. When Amrit Lal says that he will not allow the temples to turn into brothels, Jairaj retorts: "*And I will not have my art run down by a handful of stubborn narrow-minded individuals with fancy pretentious ideals.*" (Devanesen 416) Ratna is also determined to learn the art of abhinaya from Chenni amma, who is oldest living exponent of the Mysore school and is the only link they have with the school. Moreover she is of seventy-five and dying.

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Hence, it was important for both Chenni amma and Ratna to impart and to receive knowledge of art. Ratna asserts: "You can't stop me from learning an art!" (Devanesen 421) and calls her dancing as divine activity- "Yes dancing the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati." (Devanesen 420)

Family name and social recognition are the chief concerns for Amrit Lal Parekh, but for Jairaj they are the obstacles in carving his self-identity. Though he yields but doesn't kill his own desire. There is an overwhelming passion and ambition for dance in Jairaj and Ratna throughout the play though they didn't achieve the laurels as dancers probably because of the compromise with the whims and fancies of Amrit Lal Parekh. Colonial sensibility and social commitment doesn't give way to their self-desire and dreams. It is observed:

It is state of the elevation of human consciousness that wraps the distinction of male and female into a state of 'wholeness', corresponding with the rhythm of life. In his self-discovery, Jairaj discovers the divine essence of human self that is neither male nor female. (Agrawal, Beena 104)

Queer analysis of the play reveals that one has to fight back to the social prejudice and traditions otherwise one will undergo perpetual suffering and subjugation.

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