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Relooking into the estranged father- son relationship in *Dance like a Man*

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Abstract

In today's evolving scenario, it has become much easier to be committed in an adopted relationship (that as individuals we choose as per our needs and convenience) rather than holding onto something which is biological. From ages the idea of an ideal family is implanted within us to ensure it does not disintegrate with time. Family gives a sense of belongingness, support and security regardless of age. If everything is positive about having a family, then why there are conflicts which leads to complete disharmony and estranged relationships. The play "*Dance like a Man*" by eminent writer Mahesh Dattani talks about the struggle, ambitions, sacrifices and conflicts of three generations and the hardships they face to cope up with all the intricacies. The present paper would explore and interpret the father son relationship from a balanced perspective and suggest a fair possibility of mending their broken relationship.

Key words: *Amritlal, Jairaj, Dance.*

Paper :

The relationships human beings are born with are special. There is a unique bond which they share and care to sustain throughout their life. The familial relationships plays a vital role in shaping one's thought process with regard to the understanding and importance of people in their lives. One of the most beautiful and complex is Father son relationship which is nurtured with love, responsibility, patience and silence. Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* is a two-act stage play and is unfolded in time past and time present. The play was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 22 September 1989 as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre. The story revolves around three generations, their personal ambition, sacrifice, struggle, compromises and internal conflicts. Dance is the major topic of discussion and is debatable between the major characters.

A brief outline of 'Dance like a Man':

"A man stifled by his ageing father's principles, must find a way to escape, in order to create an alternative world that will enable him to practice the one thing that he loves the most- dancing. The son makes a mockery of his father's revolutionary acts. Calling himself a reformer, a freedom fighter, he ridicules the reforms that freedom fighters fought for. However, his father has different plans for his son. Taking advantage of his son's financial dependency on him, the father altogether stops his sons' dancing classes. He wants his son to become an adult. In anger, the son leaves home, only to return, as he cannot support himself or his wife. This works marvelously for the father. He thinks of a new scheme. He smooth talks his daughter in-law to discourage her husband from his passion and to criticize, albeit subtly, his mediocrity. The wife (Ratna) is overly ambitious, and she will sacrifice her husband's career for her career to take off. What is extremely disturbing is that the man turns into a drunkard, and the parents lack of commitment towards their infant Shankar, results in his death. All her life, Ratna does not think her husband is man enough, chiefly for two reasons. He is not man enough to realize his dreams, and therefore he is responsible for his self- destruction. And secondly, he cannot support himself or her."

Interpretation and Analysis:

Among all the familial ties, the love hate relationship of father and son have always been quite intriguing and interesting. Most of Mahesh Dattani's play have Indian characters. Therefore, it is natural for them to have a strong inclination for family values, Indian tradition and culture. Looking at the present family structures in the present technology driven scenario, the intimacy between family members have been lost. The concept of spending 'quality time' has become just a topic to talk, discuss and understand its significance to sustain healthy relationships. The play '*Dance like a Man*' deals with the conflict between art and society. Generally, People do not accept any form of art as a secure Profession. When it comes to children, Parents are reluctant to support their kids if they have any inclination to have a career in dance or music. The fear of competition and failure does not allow them to permit their child to be an artist. In the Play, Young Jairaj (son) and Ratna (his wife) are passionate about dancing. Amritlal Parekh, representative of the society of the nineteen thirties and forties, a freedom fighter and a reformist, limits the freedom of his son and is unhappy at his son's choice to become a Bharatanatyam dancer. The dance which started as a hobby for Jairaj turned into an innate desire to be a Professional dancer. On his father's reluctance anguished Jairaj says "*You didn't fight to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us!*" (p. 416). Here the comparison of his father with britishers clearly indicates the anger and frustration of Jairaj, feeling suffocated under his dominant rule. Somewhere he felt chained and dancing on the tunes of Amritlal Parekh. On the surface level, it shows the stubborn behavior of his father, the one aspect being discussed many times in literary world. The other face of it, not yet explored is the fear of a single Parent, Amritlal, trying hard to give his son the best and also expecting a flourishing and secure future for his life. When he sees the possibility of all his dreams being shattered, he gets agitated and stops his son from pursuing dancing as a profession. This creates a rift between the two. Bharatanatyam, as a dance form was associated with temples and rituals. Devadasis were the professional dancers in temples. But later, due to miserable state of monetary requirements, it was exploited and used by

society for entertainment and took the form of prostitution. Therefore, it was not considered as a respectable profession, for a man, in particular. Amritlal tells Jairaj not to grow long hair and asks Ratna not to learn dance from anybody else. He persuades Ratna to join him in controlling Jairaj and make him leave dance. Amritlal wants his son to learn the ways of the world and live life as he has lived. He wants him to be respected, admired and be an important member of the community. He was sure that dancing will never give him that respect and security. He tries to explain to Ratna, “*A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic.*” (p.427) Amritlal was not convinced about his son’s talent in becoming a dancer and that fear made him try everything to stop Jairaj in living his dreams. Things would have been different if Amritlal had a subtle way of approaching his son. Amritlal’s concern looks justifiable when he says to Ratna: “*Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.*” (p.427) He wanted his son to behave like a man, leave the femininity, what he thinks is the trait of a dancer. He might be wrong in segregating the Profession on the basis of Gender but he seems right in his efforts to give his son a stable career. Amritlal proved to be a caring and affectionate grandfather. Jairaj says: “*His grandfather checks his mattress every morning. He even turns him over and checks his backside. Then grandfather sticks his finger in his mouth and checks his gums.*” (p.441) No parent would want their children to live in their shadow but yes they do wish to see them settled. Amritlal Parekh could not digest the fact that his son wants gaudy costumes, grow long hair and practice dance all the time. Ratna, to fulfil her ambitions conspires with her father-in-law and supports him to spoil her husband’s dream. In Mahesh Dattani’s own words, “*I wrote this play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid-twenties... a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women*”. 2. The Play shows how a Man’s attempt to become a dancer would be tragedy for a man. Things were different around 75 years ago in pre Independence era. Amritlal claimed to be a liberal man, but not enough to accept dance as a respectable field. Jairaj feels neglected, dislocated and dismissed. He thought he is being used as a tool and as a stage prop. He could not come of that failure. In one such instance, where Ratna comes back from a Performance, she had an argument with Jairaj where she screams at him “*Talk about what? Talk about how you insult me in front of other people? How you make me feel ashamed of you? How... how disgusting you are? Oh, for God’s sake, Jairaj, do something useful before it’s too late!*” (p.442) It breaks him completely. Ratna also humiliates him by calling him a ‘spineless boy’ who would not leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours. Jairaj felt as a victim of social prejudice and parental authority. He is completely lost in the silence conflict between him and his father and an open war with his wife. He kept on blaming his father for his downfall and identity crises. Ratna works out her own method to give a shape to Jairaj’s manhood. Amritlal shapes him in whatever shapes he thinks, as a man should be. Jairaj’s outbursts were the expression of his consciousness. He might be helpless but not weak. The unspoken acceptance of father’s decision made life tragic for him. Why he did not try to have a conversation with his father to bridge that generation gap. Amritlal objects to his son’s desire to become a dancer and forces him to do a something that will make him a ‘man’ in true sense. He might have a different definition of manhood which did not go well with the son and was one of the reason for their estranged relationship. Why he failed to explain his feelings and avoided to have a dialogue to sort out differences with his son. Jairaj hopes his son will learn dance one day and will do what he could not. “*Then when Shankar grows up, I’ll teach him how to dance- the dance of Shiva. The dance of a man. And when he is ready, I’ll bring him to his grandfather and make him dance on his head-tandavanritya.*” (p. 441) Anger, frustration and aggression in the heart of son for his father is evident in these lines. The mute behavior of Jairaj in front of his Father suppressed his thought process which became vicious with time. But even this desire to teach his son –The Dance of Shiva remains unfulfilled because the child dies. Jairaj lived in that traumatic state all his life and never forgave his father for not allowing him to pursue his dreams. It is unfortunate that the missing link between the two was nowhere found and it died with time. Jairaj considers himself defeated and a disgrace to the family. He rarely opened up and was a silent victim throughout. The disgust and hatred for his father could be seen and felt. Poor and unhealthy communication with Amritlal deteriorated the situation and brought it to a numb state. No one took the initiative to talk and became sufferers in their own ways. Jairaj was unhappy all his life and Amritlal could not see his son settled as he wanted. A proper open discourse between the two would have made things better and who knows cultivated a better understanding. Life becomes less complicated if humans concentrate to talk about problems and then find the solution. Giving suggestions without even being empathetic would entangle and disturb the connection between the two individuals. People do give the anecdote from Ramayana about Rama being an ideal son, who did not question his father and gladly obeyed his command to go into forest for 14 years. Looking at another aspect of it, may be Rama took the opportunity of staying away from his father to avoid any chance of argument or conflict between the two. Nurturing meaningful relationships is a two way process that relies on an open communication and empathetic listening. Amritlal and Jairaj were distant and aloof in their own world. The beauty of a father –son relationship took the form of an ugly forced bondage. It is vital to establish a strong connection and trust factor with Parents for a smooth and transparent relationship. Humans are giving their time to virtual reality which comes at a zero cost and are losing out on priceless family ties. Let us agree to disagree, reflect, introspect, analyse and take the first step to build the broken relationships.

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