

THEME OF PORTRAYAL OF ARTISTS' CONFLICT IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

Bhumika Agrawal, *B. Sc., B. Ed., M. A.*

Lecturer

Department of Humanities

Priyadarshini Institute of Engineering and Technology,
Nagpur, India

ABSTRACT

The following paper discusses the issue of portrayal of artists' conflict in the two plays of Mahesh Dattani, 'Dance Like a Man' and 'Morning Raga'. In the play 'Dance Like a Man', the clash of motives of dancer Jairaj with his dancer wife and father involve the issues of identity crises, the stigma of social inhibitions, the perpetual conflict of man's desires and forces of destiny. Jairaj, failed to realize his perfect stature as an individual and as a dancer. When Jairaj introspects his past, his conflict gets internalized. Even anxiety and insecurity co-exists in the expectations of Ratna. Ratna's projection of her suppressed desires on the career of her daughter is a manifestation of the fact that she still fails to compromise with her choices. Even Lata cannot keep herself away from the fear of artist's ego and conflict. The apprehension of Lata is an unconscious carriage of the problem of the burden of crises of her own artist parents. Thus throughout the play we find the clash of conflict in all the characters between themselves as individuals and as artists.

In 'Morning Raga' Dattani delicately presents the emotional crises of an artist in whose life music is a passion, a creative art and a question of his identity. The attempt to crush it under the pressure of social conventions generates uncompromising guilt. In Morning Raga, the idea of self-guilt has been projected through the anguish of Swarnalatha, an efficient carnatic singer and uncompromising passion through Abhinay, a western music artist. Swarnalatha as an artist passes through intense conflict born out of her passion for music and the restrictions imposed on her by her family members. Even at mental level, Swarnalatha suffers with double conflict- her passion for music and her sense of loss at the death of her friend and her son. Swarnalatha can overcome her conflict only through transmitting her art of carnatic music to Abhinay.

Keywords: Play, Mahesh Dattani

Drama in India has always been considered as one of the most popular and effective means of entertainment and educating the masses. India is one of the oldest countries where drama flourished and blossomed in its fullest form. It was Bharat Muni who sowed the seeds of Sanskrit Drama in India through his world acclaimed treatise 'Natyashastra'. After Bharat Muni, Mahakavi Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sri Harsha, Dandi further enriched the soil of theatrical art form. With the settlement of British colony in India, Indian writers got far better platform not only to understand the engineering and thematic aspect of Western Drama but also to popularize Indian Drama in English. Soon many theatre companies emerged in India giving birth to various play-groups and traveling shows. The three playwrights Sri Aurobindo, Ravindranath Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyay revolutionized Indian Drama in English through their timeless classical works. T.P.Kailasam, Pratap Sharma, Gurucharan Das, Asif Currimbhoy and many other English playwrights also gave their distinctive contribution in making Indian English Drama a proud genre of Indian Literature. The playwrights Mohan Rakesh (Hindi), Badal Sircar (Bengali), Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi) and Girish Karnad (Kannada) through the translation of their plays in English epitomized the Indian Drama thereby taking the genre of Indian English Theatre to its highest pedestal.

In spite of having such a rich tradition of Indian Theatre, the theatre in India has been experiencing setback since last two decades. The exodus from theatre to films and television is mainly responsible for this setback. As compared to theatre, television and films provide more money, glamour and market opportunities to artists. Due to all these reasons the domain of English Theatre is getting limited up to a certain class only. But Mahesh Dattani, a renowned English playwright and director is one such big name in Indian Drama in English who could successfully force the people to turn back to theatre. He is the first Indian playwright in English to be honoured with the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1998 for his creation 'Final Solution and other plays'. As a dramatist, Dattani has enjoyed great popularity in and outside India. Alyque Padamsee who proved to be instrumental in popularizing Dattani's plays says, "At last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity."

Dattani has written both comic and tragic plays. Dattani has covered varied themes in his plays reflecting double standard behavior of urban Indian bourgeois, irrational prejudices, gender discrimination, homosexuality, communalism, artists' conflicts and the fusion of past and present. Dattani's protagonists question the dominant values that construct social and gender identities.

Mahesh Dattani's two films 'Dance Like a Man' and 'Morning Raga' deal with the suffocation, conflict and frustration through which artists of two generations undergo during their professional career. These films deal with the pre-decided roles of male and female artists in Indian society. The films focus on the misconceptions and the social inhibitions against the classical art and its repercussions on the artists.

The play 'Dance Like a Man' was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 22nd September, 1989. The play was later turned into the film with the same title and was released in September, 2004. Dattani emphasizes in the play that if a man dares to replace his role; society doesn't spare the rebellion and considers him as an effeminate man worthy of nothing.

In the play, the dancer couple Jairaj and Ratna struggles a lot for making their career in classical dancing as they face opposition from head of the family, Jairaj's father, Amritlal Parekh. Amritlal Parekh poses to be a liberal-minded person but nurses a wrong notion that the art of classical dancing is reserved only for females. He is of the view, "A woman in man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (CP 427)

He doesn't want that Jairaj should adopt dancing as his profession. Hence he tells Jairaj,

"Where will you go being a dancer? No where! What will you get being a dancer? Nothing! People will point at you on the streets and laugh and ask." (CP 397)

Amritlal not only discourages Jairaj to learn this art form but also stops him to give dance performances by planning a conspiracy against him with the help of his daughter-in-law Ratna. He knows it well that if he has to stop his son from dancing, he must create a gulf between the couple. Hence he plays a foul politics against them. He blackmails his daughter-in-law, Ratna and tells her that if she follows his orders, she would be permitted to learn and develop her art.

The artist Ratna couldn't control her temptation of becoming a renowned dancer on the cost of Jairaj. She follows Amritlal's order and anyhow stops Jairaj from perfecting the art of dancing. The rift between the couple increases and ultimately both have to pay the cost of the conspiracy played by Amritlal.

In this play we observe the different psyche of the three artists who are all dancers. They become artists with the help of each other and suffer also due to each other. The male dancer, Jairaj suffers due to Ratna's over passion for dance and her urge of going ahead in her career by hook or crook. Though Ratna tries her best to be a successful dancer but she too suffers because of Jairaj's passiveness and her father-in-law's patriarchy. However their only daughter Lata becomes a renowned dancer but she also suffocates due to their parents' conflicts and their individual expectations from her to fulfill their unfulfilled dreams.

When the couple dancers couldn't step up in their professional career, they start blaming each other. Jairaj holds Ratna responsible for his failure as an artist and Ratna holds Jairaj responsible for her failure. Ratna in her counter attack to Jairaj clears that Jairaj himself is responsible for his failure and hence he should not blame her. "Yes, ask yourself your true worth and you will get your answer. Yes, I did cut you off but then you deserved it! So don't come to me saying I destroyed you. I didn't have to. You did it all by yourself." (CP 444-445)

In the play, Jairaj is caught between his ideals of life and social conventions against learning classical dancing by a man. His love for his art and the norms of society in which he lives are contradictory to each other. Because of swinging between his individual and societal needs, he develops negativity in his mind and considers himself a failed dancer. This pessimism kills him and his art and he faces the problems of artist's conflict. He attacks Ratna for ruining his career.

Jairaj: I want you to give me back my self-esteem!

Ratna: When did I ever take it?

Jairaj: Bit by bit. You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. (CP 443)

He feels so frustrated that for every trifle issue, he starts arguing with Ratna and finds faults in her every action. He even holds Ratna solely responsible for the loss of their first child. Jairaj proves to be a complete failure in his life as a dancer, as a son, as a husband and even as a father. The identity crisis of Jairaj becomes so intense that he himself feels that he is not a perfect human being. Jairaj's rude and teasing remarks to Ratna and his argument with her is nothing but his catharsis. To forget his sorrow, he starts drinking and becomes a boozier.

Like Jairaj, Ratna too suffers from the dilemma of artists' conflict. In fact she is a double sufferer than Jairaj. She possesses more talent and passion for dance than Jairaj, still she doesn't get her due. To become a successful dancer, Ratna even plays a foul play against her husband. In spite of adopting all the fair and unfair means, she loses everything. She loses her first child, Shankar and also her husband's love. The most important thing that Ratna loses is her art. In spite of being a gifted dancer, she has to remain satisfied as an amateur dancer. She nurses the pangs of her failure throughout her life but she doesn't give up like Jairaj.

In order to compensate her loss, she devotes herself completely in making her daughter a successful dancer. Ratna wants to fulfill her dreams through Lata. Jairaj couldn't even tolerate the way Ratna helps Lata to fulfill her incomplete dreams. Jairaj thinks that Ratna at least can achieve in her life whatever she has lost through Lata but he can't do the same for compensating his loss.

Jairaj: Ratna. (Ratna stops.) At least you have a daughter to be jealous of. (CP 440)

Ratna imprints her dreams of being a successful dancer on Lata's mind. But Lata suffocates under the load of her parents' dreams and hence one day she tells her lover Vishwas,

"It's just ... I wish I didn't have to dance to please them. I want to dance to please me. All my life everything has been so ... so cultivated. Sometimes I wish I could just breathe."

This confessional note of Lata before Vishwas reflects that she is pulling the load of her parents' dreams just to make them happy.

It is a general observation in the society that the couples working in the same field or having common interest have conflicts amongst them in due course of life. The husband initially encourages the wife to continue her career and to set stronger goals in life but then the same husband feels jealous of wife's achievement and her increased popularity in the society. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, a renowned film director has covered this issue in his movie 'Abhimaan' casting real life couple Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bachchan. In the movie the director has portrayed the suffocation of the male singer who cannot tolerate that his singer wife is enjoying more popularity than him. The director ends the film on the happy note when the male singer overcomes his jealousy and accepts his distressed singer wife happily.

In the play '*Dance Like a Man*' too, the couple realizes their mistakes and they discover the missing spice in their wedlock. Their realization can be felt from Jairaj's confession when he says to Ratna,

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

The play ends by showing new Ratna and new Jairaj dancing in perfect unison not missing a step or beat and then embracing each other in an ecstatic way indicating the purity of dance art. Through the play Dattani clearly indicates that art is so pure that it can provide ecstatic happiness and peace to the artists provided the artists should devote themselves to the art with complete honesty.

MORNING RAGA:

The play 'Morning Raga' is a screen play of Mahesh Dattani which was released in India on 29th October, 2004. Like '*Dance Like a Man*' this movie also centers on the conflict and the struggle of artists of two generations. In this play also, we observe the social inhibitions and stigmas attached to classical singing. Like Amritlal Parekh of '*Dance Like a Man*', the protagonist's (Abhinay's) father of 'Morning Raga' nurses a wrong notion about

classical singing and hence he tells Swarnalatha,

“Please leave him alone. Music will take him nowhere.” (CP 381)

Music has no place in the life of Abhinay’s father whereas music is everything for Abhinay. Throughout the play we observe that Abhinay’s father doesn’t encourage or supports music in any way until he witnesses Abhinay’s performance with Swarnalatha towards the end of the play.

The play deals with those problems that an artist suffers due to his bitter past. The main character of the play, the carnatic singer Swarnalatha cannot forget the accident in which she loses her own son, Madhav and her singer friend Vaishnavi. Swarnalatha nurses the guilt that she is responsible for the mishap. In this accident she not only loses the two closest persons of her life, but she also loses her art as she quits singing after this accident. Her guilt consciousness supersedes her art. After the accident she lives a frozen life.

The other artists of the play are Abhinay and Pinkie who represent young generation. Abhinay wants to set up a music group to build up his career in music. Abhinay is in search of something that is making him restless. One day he suddenly receives a parcel from Swarnalatha containing the violin of his mother. Abhinay feels that his search has come to end. He decides to involve Swarnalatha and her music for his compositions. But he becomes disappointed when Swarnalatha denies singing for him. However Abhinay with the help of Pinkie tries to convince Swarnalatha to sing for him by reminding her of his mother.

Abhinay: Because it’s me who is asking. Vaishnavi’s son. My mother played for you. You can sing for me. Or don’t you want to return the favor because she is dead and it doesn’t matter anymore? (CP 380)

After running from pillar to post, at last Swarnalatha agrees not for singing but to teach carnatic singing to Priyanka and Abhinay. Swarnalatha teaches them the special raga which was Vaishnavi’s favorite raga. After listening to this raga, Abhinay experiences his mother’s presence in the room as the notes of the raga touch his heart and his soul. Hence he expresses his feelings when Swarnalatha teaches him the notes of Morning Raga,

Abhinay: That’s the raga I want. That’s what I was looking for, don’t you see! (To Pinkie.) My mother never played that for me! She only played for her. (CP 406)

In order to prepare Swarnalatha for his concert, Abhinay writes a letter to Swarnalatha to tell her that it is possible for her to meet her dead son. Swarnalatha gets overwhelmed through Abhinay’s letter. She makes up her mind to go to city and attend his concert. She accepts the reality and also Abhinay as her son in place of her dead son Madhav. Hence on the stage, she addresses Abhinay as her son before the audience,

“I will sing this song for my son who like my music, has returned after a very long journey. (Looking at Abhinay.) Abhinay, I sing this raga for you—my son.” (CP 416)

The music brings the union of Abhinay and Swarnalatha. It is the music that unites a son and a mother. It is the music that also brings Abhinay and Pinkie close to each other. The emptiness in the lives of these three artists gets fulfilled by their union with each other. The music to whom Swarnalatha used to hold responsible for departing her son from her, the same music reunites her with her son after twenty years in the form of Abhinay. Thus ‘Morning Raga’ brings new morning in the lives of the three artists shedding their dark nights.

CONCLUSION:

Both the films describe the struggle, the pain, the conflict, the hard work and the journey of success of three artists of two generations. Through both the films Dattani has reflected the narrow psyche of the old people and the society towards art. Though both the films are about artists of two generations but we don’t find generation gap in these artists, on the other hand both the generation compliment and support each other. In ‘Dance Like a Man’, Jairaj and Ratna help and guide their daughter Lata to be a successful dancer. Similarly Swarnalatha of ‘Morning Raga’ helps and transforms her art to Abhinay and Pinkie to be successful singers.

Dattani reveals that the older generation in spite of possessing better artistic skills couldn’t become renowned artists because of social and familial problems. This is the reason that the Jairaj, Ratna and Swarnalatha couldn’t become successful artists but the younger artists, Lata, Abhinay and Pinkie get support and cooperation from their parents and become successful. Thus the failed generation sacrifices their lives to help the next generation to fulfill their dreams. These artists make their parents happy and help them to fulfill their dreams through them. Lata through her dance performance fulfills the dreams of Ratna whereas Swarnalatha’s dreams are fulfilled by Abhinay and Pinkie by arranging a concert for her in the city.

In both the films, Dattani has shown that both the female artists lose their child at very early stage. But the ways and reactions of combating the loss of their children of both the females are contradictory. Ratna after the loss of Shankar fully devotes herself in preparing her daughter a better dancer. She compensates her loss through her daughter. On the contrary, Swarnalatha blames music for the loss of Madhav and keeps herself totally aloof from music. She quits whereas Ratna fights back. Ratna enjoys her art by transforming it to her daughter Lata whereas Swarnalatha mutely goes on nursing her pain. Ratna gives training to Lata for twenty years to make her a successful artist whereas Swarnalatha wastes her twenty years in her grief doing nothing for her art. She starts

training Abhinay after twenty years. Ratna emerges out as a strong fighter who keeps her dreams alive through Lata. But Swarnalatha proves to be a weak fighter who kills her dreams and then relives them after twenty years. In both the films Dattani has revealed the pangs and sufferings through which the artists have to undergo. The identity crises, the failure, the family and societal pressure, individual needs and so many allied factors make the lives of artists restless. The result is these artists try to compensate the hollowness of their lives in their own ways. Jairaj dissolves his sorrow in drinking, Ratna in Lata's training and Swarnalatha by remaining mute and remembering her past. Thus Dattani has truly reflected the pangs of the gifted but unsuccessful artists through both these movies. Dattani wants to convey the message that the social inhibitions and restrictions against learning the art form need to be removed to keep the classical art alive.

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