Gender Dynamics in Dattani’s plays *Dance like a Man*, *Tara* and *Seven Steps around the Fire*

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Gender is the “costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance” (Lerner 238). Men and women are so different in our society because society assigned certain strict roles for them to experience life differently. Even when a child is born we train him/her to behave like men and women. These norms are so powerful and if anyone breaks these assigned roles they have to be considered by others as abnormal. Alice Eagly’s social role theory suggests that the sexual division of labor and societal expectations based on stereotypes affect men and women in other ways. Men and women in our society are judged by how well they conform to traditional stereotypes.

Gender roles are socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behavior and emotions of men and women (Anselmi and Law). In his theory of masculine gender role strain, Joseph pleck asserted that men are pressured to fulfill a standard of masculinity. Thus if men do not fulfill the standard have to suffer from low self worth. In a patriarchal society women hardly have a voice to speech. Household jobs are assigned to women and hard labor for men. Likewise women go and learn dance, while men learning and taking the job of a dancer is looked down by society as something that is forbidden for a male. This is the exact picture of a stereotyped man.

Dattani’s play *Dance Like a Man* carries the theme of ‘stereotyping man’ in our society. *Dance like a Man* is a story of Jairaj and his passion for classical dance. Oscillating between past and present, Dattani presents before us a vivid portrayal of gender roles that we practice in Indian houses. The theme of gender runs in a pathetic way in which the whole identity of the character Jairaj seems to be in a crisis. He feels like his wife has ruined him and has taken away his self esteem.

You took it when you insisted on top billing all our programmers. 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 infront of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. (*Dance Like a Man* 70)

The humiliation that a man has to face when he takes up dance is detailed in Jairaj’s words. The social convention regarding gender act like a sword over Lata and Jairaj’s life.

Ratna wants her husband to be a man. Even though, she is a dancer she fails to recognize the identity of her husband. Instead of considering the person as such, she wants her husband to work and behave like a ‘man’. She says, “You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house…” (*DLM* 21).

Even Jairaj’s father Amritlal failed to recognize his son’s interest in dance, for him dance is a degraded kind of art performed by *devadasis*. He is discouraged by many desperate comments, “Where will you go being a dancer? Nowhere! What will you gets 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?’… (DLM 14). When Jairaj questions him, Amrital replies, “I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on own lawn if you are interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an … obsession” (DLM 36). These words of Amrital throws light at the stereotyped role of a man, his hobby is expected to be cricket, instead of that here Jairaj takes up dance as his passion. Amrital could not accept his son’s obsession. He stands like an autocrat, a true representative of patriarchy. He does not even like the long hair of guruji because he believes that ‘normal’ men does not keep their hair long. He tries to inflict upon Ratna the feeling that her husband lacks masculinity. He says, “Help me to help him grow up…Help me…”(DLM 51).

Jairaj is totally dominated by his father and even by his wife. This makes him doubt about his existence as a man. He asks Ratna, “Will finding a musician make me a man?” (DLM 21). The whole play is about gender construct and the tension and conflict that create upon a man’s life. Since Jairaj was a man, his flair for dance is suppressed, he wants to dance but his wife wants Jairaj to be the provider. At the end of the play Dattani, details the truth that divinity of human is neither man nor women. “We were only human”. The protagonist Jairaj is ostracized from his home for he chooses to dance, though dancing is a way of expressing his identity, his personality. The social bias against the art of dance among men is highlighted in the play.

In the play Tara, Dattani questions patriarchal society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways. As Pateman says, “the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection” (207). Similarly the patriarchy that Tara’s parents practice in their family results in the marginalization and the final pathetic death of the female character Tara. Her freedom to enjoy a colorful life is under the strict claws of her ‘gender biased’ parents. Erin Mee writes in “A Note of the Play”, “Tara centres on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favor the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). Tara, a feisty girl who isn’t given the opportunities given to her brother (although she may be smarter) eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name to Dan, attempts to repress the guilt he feels over his sister’s death by living without a personal history…”(CP 319).

In one of the conversations between Tara’s father Patel and her brother Chandan, Dattani probes into the patriarchal mindset of Tara’s grandfather.

PATEL. He (grand father) left you a lot of money.
CHANDAN. And Tara?
PATEL. Nothing
CHANDAN. Why?
PATEL. It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it. (Collected Plays 360)

Despite her intelligence, Tara has been rejected by the male community because of her gender and physical deformity. Her father thinks only about the education and future of her brother. Patel and Bharati are educated parents but their education becomes futile for their eyes are clouded to see both their son and daughter as equal.
Tara’s grandfather wanted his heir to have natural legs and his selfishness results in the deformity and death of Tara. Tara was denied the chance of having natural legs only because of being a girl. Even the mother-daughter relationship is directed to the strict norms of patriarchy. Gendered roles are accepted by the society as natural and when Patel finds Chandan helping his mother in knitting he can’t digest it.

PATEL. Let Tara do it.
CHANDAN. It’s okay.
PATEL. Give it to her.
CHANDAN. Why?
PATEL. Chandan, leave that damn thing alone.
PATEL(to Bharati). How dare you do this to him?...you can think of turning him into a sissy teaching him to hit!(CP 351)

Unlike her parents, Tara can see the reality that ‘men and women are equal’—a reality that no one in her family could recognize. She says to Chandan “You. Me. There’s no difference…Why should there be?” (CP 361).

A true picture of patriarchal society is perfectly portrayed in Tara where the important family decisions are taken by the male members. Tara explains to Roopa about the conversation between father and son as “The man in the house were deciding on whether they were going to hunt while the women looked after the caves.” These words of Tara serves like a proof for the male-female boundaries that society strictly imposed upon them.

In another instance Roopa, Tara’s neighbor in Bombay, explains to Tara how the Patels would drown their new born girl child in milk.
Roopa. (to Tara) Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies—you know dowry and things like that—they used to drown them in milk. So when people asked them how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk. (CP 349)

Likewise, Tara is killed by the social system where man is the centre, the rule.

Seven Steps around the Fire touches the heart of third gender. The eunuchs are treated as outcasts and are forced to beg on street corner or rely on prostitution for their survival. In the play Dattani tries to explore the misery of these marginalized sections of the society. Jeremy Mortimer writes:
For the story he (Dattani)chooses to tell is no ordinary story. The murder victim kamala, a beautiful hijra, had it turns out, been secretly married to Subbu, the son of a wealthy government minister. The minister had the young hijra burned to death and hastily arranged for the son to marry an acceptable girl. But the wedding-attended of course by the hijras who sing and dance at the weddings and births-Subbu produces a gun and kills himself. The truth behind the suicide is hushed up, but Uma has been keeping full notes for her thesis on the hijra community. (CP 3)

Uma, the protagonist of the play Seven Steps around the Fire writes about hijras: “Not for them the seven rounds witnessed by the fire god, eternally binding man and woman in matrimony, or the blessings of may you be the mother of hundred sons”(CP 11).The title of the play Seven Steps Around the Fire gains significance here. The whole play is centered around the murder of Kamala, a eunuch. When we go through the entire play we
get the feeling that this is not a murder of a human being because for the heterosexual community, the murder of Kamala has been not an issue at all. The silencing of the minority class by the homophobic society society is what Dattani tries to explore through this play. In the play silencing works at both emotional and physical level. By emotional what it means is that the silencing of their desire-their desire to become a mother, a father, a brother, a sister or even a daughter. Their desire to be loved by others, their desire to love others all are at stake. “I didn’t kill her, she was my sister” (CP 210). Anarkali’s words, the main accused in Kamala’s murder challenge the whole society by pointing that the third gender too can have sisters. The helplessness and their awareness of the isolation that society inflicted upon them made Anarkali to speak to Uma in a heart rending tone “If you were a hijra, I would have made you as my sister” (CP 242).

Eunuchs are physically ostracized from the society. They are marginalized even in crime. Uma explains: “They knew. Anarkali, Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamala. They have no voice. The case was hushed up and was not even reported in the newspapers”(CP 42).

In the words of Spivak, marginality can be acknowledged in terms of silence and speech. Thus the marginalized groups are devoid of mental strength of self affirmation. They are forced to lead a life of subalterns. The silencing of their identity is the core issue that Dattani puts before us. Munuswamy, the constable asserts. “Sh! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up, if I doesn’t”(CP 233). Munuswamy, by calling hijra as “it”, neglects their self and existence.

The story of love affair between Kamala and Subbu show the impossibility of the marriage between a eunuch and a man in Indian society “Marry! Who would want to marry…?Tchee! What kind of people are there in this world”(CP 263)-This is how our society responds. We live in a society where we are repeatedly told that there is only one kind of acceptable desire heterosexual, within marriage. The fundamental principle that underlines here is that those in power create such norms, rules and structures that enforce their perspective of what is visible, acceptable and forbids all that comes outside such rules. The play throws light at the helplessness of the eunuchs. These invisible minorities questions the stability of the fixed identities.Dattani succeeds in reading the minds of the third gendered community-their quest for love and to live. The play is about the identity crisis of these people their longing for social acceptance. Seven Steps around the Fire questions our social constitutions, gender bias and prejudices regarding hijras. Through this play Dattani opens our eyes to look into the stark realities of contemporary Indian society where all gender divisions are visible.

By analyzing all the three plays we can come to the conclusion that gender is an aspect of our everyday lives as well as social, cultural and economic category that rewrites the meaning of human sex, the fact of being masculine, feminine or neuter. Dance like a Man, Tara and Seven Steps Around the Fire deals with issues like gender identity, gender bias and third gender respectively. Dattani’s plays serve like an eye opener. His voice compels us to think afresh about the voiceless issues that he put infront of us. He uses language as a powerful tool and makes us to understand how gender and gender roles work in our society. In the play Dance like a man, Dattani uses dance as a medium to show how our society constructs a man’s identity. Tara is about the marginalized face of women under patriarchy. By writing a play like Seven Steps Around the Fire, Dattani touches upon so far ‘untouched’ area in gender studies. From his plays it
is clear that the norms of control lie at the very core of practicing gender. These norms are real and experienced. Gender therefore allows articulation of power within relationships. Dattani’s plays detail the truth that gender is a product of human agency. It is constructed and made by human beings.

Works Cited: