

OF BORDERS AND BODIES: A DISSECTION OF GENDER ROLES

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ABSTRACT-- *“There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” Judith Butler* The delicate borders between sexuality and gender roles were always a conundrum. The obvious social constructs that limit a man and a woman into consignments were always the manipulation of the society. The society assigns certain attributes to a male and those who deviate from the pattern is de-masculinised. Same is the case of women. An individual is always conditioned by these gender social constructs. This paper explores these gender social borders through the play *Dance like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani using Social Role theory. It examines the hypocrisy within the precincts of the family, woman acting as betrayer of her own sex to facilitate male pre-eminence in Indian family, social prejudice against non-conforming professions like dance, trinity of patriarchy, capitalism, and how political power join forces together against the existence of a girl and the clash between tradition and modernism

Keywords-- Sexuality, Identity, Social Constructs, Gender, Culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender is the way by which men and women are expected to behave according to the society. Their identities, responsibilities are already socially constructed for them way before their birth. It clashes with differences between males and females and their physical and psychological dissimilarities. Cultures and communities play a pivotal role in the difference in Gender roles. They vary according to culture, community and o time. These gender roles become a constraint as it determines the way an individual act and perform. An individual does not have a freedom to act. He conditioned to act in a specified way from a young age. This leads to confusion as society tries to match up physical, biological and psychological constructs based on gender and sex. This also leads to a complex problem in properly identifying and categorizing the difference between gender and sex.

Patriarchy can be considered as a taboo in Indian society that is difficult to avoid when we take into account the structure of gender roles. According to Sociologists, Indian family is always under the control of a Patriarch who is always a male. Women are always given a status below men. They are in most cases considered an object to satisfy their desires and to rear children. Patriarch's power in a family will be always unquestionable and others are supposed to obey without objection. Patriarch who is the head of the family will make the rules and decisions and other members hardly get any freedom especially women. Major decisions such as education, marriage, property of every member in the family is taken by him. And all these decisions will be taken through a male perspective as women are considered invisible.

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Social Role Theory developed during the 1980s is a gender related theory that examines sexual role orientation. Social Role Theory examines sexual role orientation by going through the forces exerted by structural pressures such as family, organizations, and communities on male and a female. Rather than viewing it through a cultural approach it uses a structural approach in examining sex differences. The major concept here is that every individual has a social role based on their gender. These roles are a stereotypic construction of some people who considers themselves above all. In other words, these roles are the collective expectations of how an individual should behave according to his gender.

As gender roles are instilled in an individual from birth, they act according to it unsurprisingly without complaint as they do not realize that they are playing out a role already scripted for them rather than a one created by them. They fulfill the requirements of the roles assigned to them based on their gender and sex. They perfect the skills required based on their gender. As a male and female have different requirements to fulfill in a family. And the one to always end with the loose end will be the women as she have no right to raise her opinions or objections. She will always be expected to obey everything without objection. On the other hand, a male have the right to raise his opinions or objections as he is biologically, psychologically and socially considered a dominant.

Another major factor considering gender and social roles is that they can be included in disability studies. The major reason for this is because disability is related with abled and disabled. An abled is considered as a normal or perfection and a disabled is someone lacking this perfection. When considering this definition if we take into account the comparison between a male and a female, the male is considered as an embodiment of perfection. Hence he is dominant while female is considered as fragile and weak when compared to the perfection that is male. Hence she is considered as lacking and submissive and is a disable. Same is the case for transgender, gays, lesbians and bisexuals. They are classified in disabled category because they lack what an able has.

II. METHOD

The major obstacle in advancement and development of a women as well the LGBT community is patriarchy and the age old norms. Despite proclaiming that everything is on the verge of change, the rule of domination remains the same i.e., men are in control. The nature of this control may differ but rules are the same and the result is also the same. Men are not ready to relinquish their absolute power. So in order to bring a change it is absolutely necessary to study the workings of the system that always keeps the men in power and the women a subordinate. This hinders the way to the development of women. In the modern world everyone is measured according to their merit. But women still faces hindrances because of patriarchy. Patriarchal institutions lower the standard of women and gives absolute priority to men. Women who show their intelligence and skill above men are vehemently suppressed by deeply inherited norms that still prevail in society as well by patriarchal oppressions.

Patriarchy is the domination of male in all spheres including public and private spheres. Power relationship between men and women are well defined by feminists using the term 'patriarchy'. Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* explores these clash values. In *Tara*, the main character, Tara, is an example of a new woman who fights against male oppression. She fought against the old age constraints of gender and the social prejudices prevalent in the society. She was a disabled woman who was ready to spread her wings and fight against the norms to show to the entire world that she is not that women who is disabled by the society but rather she is an able individual with her own

opinions, perspectives beyond the construction of gender. She fought the world with her amputated leg and shown the world that her wings are strong enough to fight the entire world.

A woman is always suppressed by the society whereas a man gets a better treatment despite his merits. Thus the origin of the misconception that requires to be unraveled that the men are beyond the limits of gender stereotyping and patriarchal oppression. It is believed that they always get a higher position in the gender and social construction. Patriarchy condition men and women to think behave and dream differently based on the concepts of masculinity and femininity that are ingrained in their psyche on birth. They are taught to think in a feminine and masculine way based on gender from birth.

Patriarchal system expects the men to behave in a particular way that satisfies the qualities of masculinity whereas women are supposed to act in a way that satisfies the feminine qualities. And this accepted masculine quality for men include all the dominant traits such as strength, bravery, fearlessness, dominance, competitiveness etc. whereas 'feminine' qualities are the submissive traits such as caring, nurturing, love, timidity, obedience etc. Dattani's *Dance like a Man* and *Tara* deals with these major issues of gender and social construction. Dattani in *Dance like a Man* stresses on the gender oppression of a male rather than a female. Gender oppression of a male is not well explored area when compared to female subjugation. Dattani shows this through the portrayal of Jairaj, main character that pursues a career in classical dance despite the objection of his father. On the other hand *Tara* is a portrayal of women's fight against male oppression and patriarchal subjugation of women. Women are deemed only good for child bearing and looking after family and household chores. They are considered as beings devoid of intellect.

In the play *Dance like a Man*, the father Amritlal acts as a patriarchal figure who tries to show his domination through suppressing other. And this mostly affects his son Jairaj upon whom he tries impose masculinity. He comments, "a woman in a man's world can be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (DLM 50). Dancing is profession considered to be under the construction of feminine qualities and hence is not suitable for men. And thus Amritlal considers a man who shows preference in dance as lacking manliness. In "*Understanding Masculinities*" John Beynon observes:

III. RESULTS

The [still] widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as 'Just like a man!' or 'Just like a woman!'...

Masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast, are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional. (56)

Dattani in many of his plays dealt with gender identity and this play too deals with the same in an Indian middle class background. The play is about an individual who tries to deviate and trespass the accepted gender roles. Jairaj the main protagonist trespasses into the classical dance form Kuchipudi dance that is considered as the

domain of women. Despite the objections of his father he strives to achieve his dream and thus is branded de-masculinised for deviating from norms.

Thus the de-masculinised Jairaj stands an odd entity when considering the heteronormative Amritlal parekh. Amritlal wants his son to take upon manly career and he would have been rather proud if his son chose anything that comes under the norms of masculinity. He wants his son to choose a career that provides social status and income. He resists his son from deviating the norms of society. He hates his son's Guruji and is rather baffled by his long hair and attire. He hates such gender bender and prohibits his son from following along. He wants his son to act as a normal man rather than an 'abnormal'. Here is where the Dattani raises the question of what exactly are the rules of being a man. If adherence to patriarchal and gender constraints are the norms then Jairaj's conversation with his daughter does not come under gender performativity. Jairaj says,

... there's nothing crude about it. I danced the same item for the army. A friend of ours arranged a programme and the money was good. Your mother was too scared and they only wanted a woman. So I wore your mother's costume, a wig and... whatever else was necessary to make me look like a woman, and danced. They loved it. They loved it even more when they found out that I was a man. (DLM 60)

Phallogentrism is described in terms of power in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Amritlal parekh who is an embodiment of Phallogentrism is afraid that his son will lose power in a Phallogentric world. Dance is not a high income providing profession and is considered feminine. Amritlal parekh is afraid that his son will lose his way in the feminine world of women where there is no place for a man. He does not see any gain in such a profession other than losing dignity and social status. Jairaj is an example of a man who believes himself to be under social oppressions and constructions. Amritlal is a father who refuses to leave his son fingers despite the son being grown. He is not ready to understand and accepts the oddity that is his son.

In *Sexual Politics* Kate Millet argues that social power always lies in the hands of patriarchy. Amritlal can be taken as an example for how one can play an ideal politics and be power exertive over others. Ratna falls in Amritlal's plot without knowing it. And the alliance between Amritlal and Ratna becomes a threat to Jairaj as Ratna repeatedly argues that audience comes to watch a women dance rather than a man. Thus without knowing Ratna deviates from the ideal heterosexual program as she is dominating a man. She echoes the ideas of Amritlal without thought and her only aim is to get what she wants. And through this cunning plan they achieve their goals at the expense of Jairaj. She has the same stereotypical idea of gender as Amritlal and plays sexual politics to get what she wants. Thus the do's and don'ts become a bane for Jairaj and he becomes an ideal symbol of gender trouble. Both Ratna and Amritlal achieve what they at the expense of Jairaj's dream. Thus Jairaj becomes an ideal symbol of gender trouble. And his trouble lies in the fact that he is not performing the masculine role assigned to him. He is rather exposing his womanly traits rather than his manly side. He acts as a submissive with less intellect and his resistance is similar to that of a women. Women usually are afraid of domination and in the eyes of domination they show their submissive side. Thus Jairaj is not identified as a true man and even his body gestures are similar to that of a woman.

Jairaj struggles with his repressed identity and freedom. He wants to find happiness by breaking the gender constraints and norms. According to Dattani, individual versus society itself is the theme of his plays. He perceives the family structure as a macrocosm of microcosmic society, with unwritten laws of conduct. Jairaj follows his heart's desire to become a dancer, but this infuriates his father who nurtures a different set of opinions. The concept

of masculinity once again focuses on gender binaries in society as well as the struggle between what one wants to do and what one must do. A devastated Jairaj clarifies that he stopped being a man for Ratna as they couldn't survive on their own and elaborating that he was compelled to return to Amritlal only to protect her from being sexually exploited by her own uncle. The plight of the helpless is accentuated when the couple comes back. Jairaj's entry into the mansion seals his fate, closing all his doors for artistic emancipation. He is gradually deprived of his abilities. Failure in career, in marriage and failure as a son culminates in terrible hatred for the father and loathing for the wife.

Social prejudice compels him to prove his masculinity for his choice of Kuchipudi as a profession; on the other hand he is also a conventional husband accusing the lesser gender that is his wife for his failure. Because of his repeated failures and repressed desires, he finally seeks refuge in alcoholism. Amritlal is the oppressive master while Jairaj is the victim whose long cherished dreams are crushed by the former's colossal power. Jairaj represents another freedom, by embodying individual liberty he emerges more successful than Amritlal, living life on his own ideals.

Nonetheless Jairaj takes pride in whatever reminds him of the "glorious past" like the mansion or the shawl. Like his father he too shunned western outfits and

assimilated to tradition by wearing kurtas and shawls on most occasions. This process of negation and assimilation produces a hybridized or postcolonial context for Jairaj. He builds up his own identity by adopting Indian dress and rejecting gender roles in dancing. The 'shawl' is a significant metaphor of autocracy perpetrated by Amritlal Parekh and also stands for the repressed desires of Jairaj as a dancer and individual who seeks recognition. Every time Jairaj puts on the shawl his tussle with his father is enacted and thus the shawl symbolizes the menacing past. The antique mansion with its "old furniture" and the "dead phone" is stiff reminder of the authoritative past. The musical instruments and everything relating it such as dancing bells represents the long tradition and culture of the house. Guruji's long hair is a defiant protest against gender stereotypes, the "shopping complex" hints at the newer ways of life where commercialism and capitalism replaces the traditional order.

The social convention of gender stereotyping destroying the individual despite his gender is the pivotal theme of the play *Dance like a Man*. Trapped in a social matrix that allows little respite, the women seek alternative ways of expression. This is interesting and suggests that despite years of conditioning at the hands of patriarchal impulses, women still have the potential to resist such degenerate social forces. Ratna though a submissive still shows some resistance to domination. Dattani points out the historical bravery of women though short to the society. Their resistance to subjugation had paved way for a better future for the new generation of women. He points out the need for empowering women as well as viewing things from a female perspective than a male prerogative. According to him women are not dynamical props to subjugate by men.

Dattani views a woman from an unconventional point of view. He is not prejudiced about feminism and is not concerned about gender constraints. He sees them as individuals with their own ideals and perspectives and tries to understand a feminine psyche. His works are example of the workings of the society and how it suppresses a feminine psyche using patriarchal constraints. Indian society views a woman as an embodiment of sacrifice. She is expected to be submissive and obedient. She never has the right to express her views and always has to suffer under oppression. Her life is always unpleasant and is expected to spend whole her life doing household chores. From time immemorial she is governed by patriarchy.

Dattani also shows how power corrupt and subjugate men in the society. Tara's grandfather is the best example for this. He convinces the doctor to give the third leg to Chandan exploiting his political and money power. Thus it questions the existence of a woman in the face of patriarchy, political and money power. The play shows the bitter realities of life and comments upon gender discrimination and social injustice towards a woman. Gender dichotomy masks its identity and threatens the existence of a girl child. So it's not a biological phenomenon that becomes a threat to the existence of a girl but disgusting mentality of a man to show preference for a boy child. This play points out his gruesome reality and how even after the phenomenal developments our state of mind and mentality remains the same.

This play also points out how familial relationships are affected by gender discrimination. Bharathi though a good mother was infected by this discrimination. Her pure maternal love for Tara was marginalized. Her maternal love was wrongly influenced and she was forced to sacrifice it under the combined forces of patriarchy and gender discrimination. The pure mother – daughter bond was tainted by patriarchal and gender constraints. Bharathi though she herself was a woman forget to fight for her own daughter. Tara not only lost her leg but also her right to become a mother which is the most important and sacred factor in a woman's life. Thus her identity as a woman was distorted by the workings of power and sexual discrimination.

Dattani thus brings out the evil workings of the society and how it subordinates all other relationships in the patriarchy. He shows how every bond in the society is manipulated by the ideas of culture, tradition and patriarchy. The obvious fact is that women are always marginalized despite the influence of moral values and ideas put forth by culture and tradition and questions the wholeness of a woman and her peripheries. The evil clutches of patriarchy and gender bias always constraints a woman's breathing space. Family is always considered as the first society and they forgot the contributions of a woman. A nation is built through equal contributions by genders. If a society is built upon social prejudices and falsehood, its foundation will always remain fragile. The stability of its existence will be always put under question mark. The society will not be able to survive and flourish.

Dattani in *Tara* always portrays how women are deprived of gaining economical stability and inheritance. Bharathi was the only child of her father thus she naturally inherited his wealth. But when it comes to her children Tara was excluded because of the existence of her brother Chandan who is a male. Indian society always shows preference for a male child and this is evident in all circumstances. Here it clearly shows how women are materially discriminated

Tara as a woman full of sparks and light though she is handicapped. She is intelligent, enthusiastic and her disability does not affect her aspirations and fighting spirit. She was always discouraged by her parents and she herself felt as a burden at times and refused to go to college. But she was not ready to give up her fight. She fought against the injustices of her parents and prepared a wall of defense to fight against the hurdles. She was always optimistic towards life and showed sympathy to the poor and downtrodden. Her quest for her identity was a lifelong fight and it is a pity that the discrimination towards her continued even after her death.

Dattani in *Tara* questions discrimination shown towards two children born from the same womb in the name of gender. For this he aptly chooses the theme of twins. He clearly portrays the invisible status of woman even in twenty first century. Though women show greater intellect and skill they are still marginalized even in the educated world. This shows that however scenarios may change in the future, there will not be change in gender discrimination unless the mentalities of people change. These days women show skill in every field and are

independent however they are still prone to abuse and discrimination. Though she is an individual she is expected to act as puppet to the whims and fancies of men. Her role as a mother, daughter and a woman is given prominence than her role as an individual with self identity.

Gender is always a binary concept that constraints an individual to either male or female. Sex role stereotyping and the expected performance of women and men falls under these binaries. Society has hard time accepting this fact which in turn makes an individual question his identity. Thus gender stereotyping and boundaries limit an individual from realizing who he or she really is.

IV. CONCLUSION

Gender stereotyping and boundaries thus becomes a part of disability studies as it deeply examines the lack of traits that are labeled as 'normal' by the constraints of gender. So the marginalized and the disabled where given a space in the disabled category. The 'other' in this case is a group who were forcefully removed from the able category because of age old written constraints and expectations of a society that refuses to change its ways.

Thus from these explorations we can conclude that the emergence of a new woman and new man in the Indian society is always an enigma. Society will never allow anyone to cross the boundaries. And those who try to overcome these boundaries will be marked as outcasts or the other. An individual's life is always subjected to gender constructions. He or she can never succeed beyond these. And if ever one struggles to make his way through one has to go through strong objections and pain to succeed. Thus, the normal case of only women getting suppressed under patriarchy becomes absurd. Both men and women are equally bound by socially constructed roles.

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