



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**TOTEM AS KARUNA RASA OF FREE SPIRIT IN MAHESH DATTANI'S****DANCE LIKE A MAN**

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Totem occupies a central position in varied cultures. With the change in social situations there has been a shift in the metaphoric representation of the Totem in the social and cultural space. The cause of the changing beliefs in the modern age can be studied through the metaphoric representation of the Totem in Mahesh Dattani's work *Dance Like a Man*.

Keywords: Totem, Mahesh Dattani, Karuna Rasa, Psychoanalysis, Culture.



Totem refers to the identity emblem of the primitive tribes of prehistoric era. In varied cultures Totem occupies a central position in the cultural celebration. This importance of Totem can be overviewed by its metaphoric implication.

The term “totem”, refers to vegetables or animals which are revered by individuals, particularly group of people as sacred. A totem can be an animal, a plant or any natural object believed to be ancestrally associated with a clan, of a family as tutelary spirit. In Asante societies, one cannot delineate reverence for nature as a repository of or habitat of unseen spirits which are worshipped as deities. When a deity or spirit is associated with a particular natural object or phenomenon, that object is treated with care and caution. It is not to be exploited anyhow, but rather, through some laid down procedures and rituals. (Adjei 16)

This supreme prestige of Totem is a metaphoric construct that is only provided to superior individuals and can be correlated with Indian tradition as well. In Indian tradition the metaphoric construct emerged in the mist of external chaos and disruption, that was resolved by the divine intervention of the Hindu God, Brahma. This new form of identification aimed at establishing a balance among the residents of earth with the scriptural doctrines that instilled the totemic influence on humanity. These beliefs ensured a balance and created a constructive distraction from the evil practises that would go against the principles of God and the intellectually superior morals. These include scholars like Bharata, who delivered this knowledge to spread among the society.

Stuart Hall in his work “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” describes the cultural identity as a continuous process. Even in art the evolution is visible as with the passage of the time the identity of the Totem reshaped with the shift towards individuals that dominated with physical as well as mental strength. This advanced improvisation of identity was mainly due to the sudden environmental changes that incurred due to the disruptive change in the environment during the period of struggle for

Independence. This shift of transition can be studied in Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like A Man*. The work shadows the influence of the new metaphoric totem under the influence of historical changes that emerge in the surrounding areas.

The work focalises the cultural demarcation of the gender’s male and female. This germination of new cultural belief is visible through the flashback technique in the first Act of the play. In this Act the focus is centred on the family of Amritlal in the year 1940. Where the activities within the four walls of the house highlight the emergence of a new cultural belief that is initiated by the provider of the family, Amritlal. He is the metaphorical totem that establishes and instils new ideological beliefs against the previously practised aesthetic dance *Bharatnatyam*.

Freud in his work *Totem and Taboo* states the ideological beliefs represented by the image of the totem. This shift is noticed in the strict control the father enforces on his son, Jairaj by obstructing him from practising the traditional art form. On the psychological domain Freud in his essay *Totem and Taboo* describes that the father in the tribe imposes restrictions on the desires of his tribesmen to claim control over his territory. As a consequence these restrictions create a discontent among the tribesmen. A deeper insights of this psychological distress or sorrow can be analysed with the help of Indian Aesthetic Approach of *Rasa Theory*.

In the play the dominant *Karuna Rasa (Pathetic)* is experienced by the deprived Jairaj. The initial traces of the dominant *Karuna (Pathetic) Rasa* are visible from the very onset of the play. As Jairaj in his matured phase lacks the emotional intensity that was evident in his youth to go against the father’s strong beliefs. His cold sentiments towards his father are visible when he asks his future son in law to remove the luxurious item (shawl) that belonged to his late father.

Jairaj: Please put the shawl back.

Vishwas: Yes, yes... (Folds it clumsily)... I’m sorry... it is a lovely shawl.



Ratna: Give it to me (stretches out her hand) (15 *Dance Like a Man*)

As a consequence he is constantly conscious of the influential impact of this Metaphoric Totem in his life. His father describes his act of dancing as a derogatory representation of addressing his personality. This deviation from the governed laws of the Totem are described as Taboo. The strong influence of the Totem initiates a gender role reversal in the family. Dattani as writer provides the special privilege to the woman in the domain of cultural practise.

Here Jairaj's wife Ratna is supported by the Totem Ideologies. This invariably allows her to attain control over the cultural sphere unlike her husband. The influence continues due to the continued ideological belief as a collective unconscious. As even in the new generation the progress in cultural arts is expected in women only. This is noticed by the unconscious efforts of both Jairaj and Ratna who are constantly encouraging their daughter Lata to excel in the cultural field of her choice.

On the other hand the men in the family are ignored on the emotional front. The impact of this ignorance can be studied with respect to two individuals. The first being the son of the family Jairaj, who is unable to excel in the cultural domain due to the constant hurdles imposed by the society and the family members. The emotional trauma of this neglect emerges when he indulges in his act of oral fixation in the form of consumption of liquor. Under the influence of the intoxicant his *Karuna(Pathetic) Rasa* gains expression in the form of an emotional outburst. Where he blames the society for not providing him encouragement in the form of financial returns.

This constrain forces him to return to the doorstep's of his father, when he sees his wife being victimised by her close relative. By doing so he is able to protect the chastity of his wife but has to surrender to the dictates of his father. . The totem influence of the society and the father reduces him to a failure as he is able to achieve nothing worthwhile through the pursuits of his artistic interest.

Even his wife, Ratna is instrumental in restricting his growth by conspiring with her father in law. This is when he promises to promote her artistic inclination. This is evident when he allows her to pursue the craft of her choice and achieve success in it. In return she abides and surrenders to the Totemic dictates of her father in law. Although the control also affects the growth of other men in the family. The lethal impact of this totem influence is noticed by the action of the mother, Ratna who even neglects her son. By resorting to administering opium to the infant so that he may not disturb the gifted privilege provided by the metaphoric Totem to enhance her craft. Such an action results in the death of the son due to administering of a double dose of the opium by the mother and the maid respectively.

RATNA: She too has given ... Shankar... ?

JAIRAJ(gets up) : What do you mean?

A low beat of *mridangam* is heard. Ratna looks at him terror-stricken. Jairaj advances towards her.

What did you say? She too has given Shankar? (Grabs Ratna.) What did you say? She too has given Shankar ? (lets go of her.) You?

RATNA: (screaming). No!

(*Dance Like a Man* 73)

The pain of loss of Jairaj's son is a constant experience of *Karuna (Pathetic) Rasa*. Eventually the daughter, Lata is able to realise her dreams due to the sacrifice and the initiatives of the mother. Even the son in law is seen in a very servile position as he promises to accept all the conditions of Lata for marriage, and not act as a hinderance in the path of her cultural pusuits. Thereby proving that the society promotes the finer arts in women while condemning the same in men. Such a belief is promoted by the strong Totemic influence in the society.

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