

## Going Beyond the Gender Binary: A Reading through Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

Anuradha Dasani & Rimika Singhvi

### Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the undercurrent of gender binary in Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*. The play, which revolves around the unconventional choice of profession by the protagonist - Jairaj - provides a nuanced representation of gender roles by placing a man - the conventional "Self" - at the receiving end of gender-based discrimination. The Paper looks at how the family, as the primary medium of socialization, is seen as a microcosm of the society at large, perpetuating the society's rigidly-held beliefs and becoming a significant determinant of a person's identity and self-worth. Primarily employing Gerda Lerener's definition of gender and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the Paper puts forth how the boundaries of gender are thinly placed and fragile, open to negotiations and compromises, and questions how 'natural' these socially ascribed roles are. The Paper also explores how in spite of Jairaj's efforts at resistance (which have been analyzed through Michel Foucault's *The Subject and Power*), he too, by the latter half of the play, begins to subscribe to many of the very norms that he had spent his life trying to overthrow. Finally, the Paper examines the complexities of the 'human' and the importance of empathy and affect in being able to achieve a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the human condition.

**Keywords:** Gender; Gender performativity; Identity; Resistance; Self-other overlap.

Mahesh Dattani is an Indian dramatist, director and actor who has made a significant contribution to the field of Indian drama and is recognized particularly for having captured the quintessential 'India' in his works and for having dealt with such subjects that are usually not talked about owing to the society's tendency to sweep problematic subjects under the carpet. His speciality, then, is the social problem play, written in a vein similar to that of John Galsworthy and Henrik Ibsen. This allows him to pinpoint the problem-areas of the society at large through characters who

are individualized, but also act as a stand-ins for a specific character type. While his plays deal with many such issues that the society would prefer to turn a blind eye to, his plays go beyond mere polemics and eventually also become a meditation on human nature.

*Dance Like a Man*, which is considered one of Dattani's masterpieces, traces a story spread across three generations in a typical middle-class Indian household. The play's protagonist, Jairaj's choice of dance as a profession, a profession which is not considered ideal for a man, forms the central conflict of the play. The consequences of the protagonist's unconventional choice of vocation, and the greater comment on the society that the dramatist wishes to make through it, carries the plot forward. On the play, Dattani commented, "I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatnatyam 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..." (Prasad 74). Subversion of gender stereotypes is the central theme of the play. The protagonist's failure in his chosen profession is a direct result of the profession falling within the feminine domain. What makes his choice all the more shameful for his father is that the dance form that he chooses (*Bharatnatyam*) was originally meant to be performed by the Devdasi community, a caste that was considered socially inferior in the Hindu social hierarchy.

Jairaj's father, Amritlal, a freedom fighter and a shrewd businessman is the autocratic head of the family. Although he had died long before the play begins, his presence looms large over the play as the dramatist constantly employs the literary technique of analepsis and evokes him in the memories of the other characters. In fact, throughout the course of the play, the present constantly interacts with the past. His presence is keenly felt even after his death, just as that of Hasmukh Mehta in *Where There's a Will*, another of Dattani's plays. Amritlal is a picture of dualities- he is liberal in certain aspects such as in allowing his son to learn *Bharatnatyam*, albeit as a pastime, or in allowing his son to marry a woman who is not of their own community, but at the same time, he refuses to support Jairaj's desire to make dance a full-time profession. Likewise, he strongly adheres to the caste-ridden norms of the society which refuse to accord a respectable position to *devdasis*. He commands a lot of respect in the society owing to his upward social mobility and his contribution to the Indian struggle for freedom. In having embodied the values and beliefs that the society holds sacred, he also becomes a symbolic figure, who stands for the unwritten norms of his community.

Amritlal had permitted Jairaj to pursue dance as a hobby in his childhood simply because he considered it his petulant whim. Being the sole heir to

his family, Amritlal wanted Jairaj to follow in his footsteps. Little did he know that Jairaj's love for dance would eventually make him choose it as a profession:

JAIRAJ: You promised you would allow me to continue with my hobbies.

AMRITLAL: That was when you were a boy and dance was just a hobby. Grow up Jairaj

JAIRAJ: I don't want to grow up! You can't stop me from doing what I want. AMRITLAL: As long as you are under my care. (Datani 45)

Jairaj's financial dependence on Amritlal in the play's bourgeois setting stems from the fact that his profession is not well-paying and Amritlal uses this as a leverage to bend the situation in his favour. In fact, Ratna, Jairaj's wife, who is a dancer herself, ends up joining hands with her father-in-law in stifling Jairaj's growth as a dancer. When given the option of choosing between financial security as well as her own career as opposed to that of Jairaj's, she chooses the former and Jairaj becomes the sacrificial lamb in this game of power. Amritlal very cleverly manoeuvres the whole situation but miserably fails in his attempt because instead of becoming a "Man", his son ends up a frustrated alcoholic.

Since family as a social unit becomes a microcosm of the society at large, the dramatist invests it with the power to control the Jairaj's success as a dancer and his status as a "Man". Through dwelling on the repercussions of Jairaj not receiving the approval of the patriarchal figure (Amritlal), the dramatist is able to show how society, along with its representative figures of power, exercise control over not only one's social, but psychological development as well. Lack of societal approval dwarfs Jairaj's natural development as a dancer and prevents him from reaching his fullest potential as an artist, apart from disrupting his ability to think independently or establish a positive self-identity.

Michel Foucault, in his seminal work, *The Subject and Power* defines "resistance" as efforts that are "transversal" and "immediate" and specifically focus on "local instances of power". (780-81) Since conventional behavioural norms are largely accepted because they have been performed repeatedly, their authority can be challenged only by disrupting the regularity of these norms. Such acts of resistance are usually aimed at the immediate sources of hegemonic power. In Jairaj's case, this source of power is Amritlal and it is only in defying his authority that he can undermine the authority that the society at large exercises on him as an individual.

Despite Amritlal's misgivings, Jairaj relentlessly pursues his passion and thus manages to upset those gender norms that the society he lives in, so vehemently guards. Jairaj's actions therefore, anticipate a challenge for not only the parental authority of Amritlal but also to the society's unwritten gender roles.

Gerda Lerner, in her work *The Creation of Patriarchy*, defines gender as a "costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance". (238) This implies that gender, as a social construct, as opposed to sex, which is a biological one, is fluid as a conceptualisation because it is something that one puts on, like a "mask". In order to ensure a gender identity that is stable, the society assigns men and women with roles which are considered specific to a particular gender, and deviant in another. These norms do not come naturally to individuals as does their physiognomy but such norms are so deeply instilled in the minds of the members of the society, that people begin to think of them as being as natural as their biology, not realizing that they are mere social attributes. Even the slightest deviation from such unwritten rules is met with much censure and acrimony. When Jairaj requests his father to construct a dance studio, for him, Amritlal wistfully says that his son should have asked for a cricket field instead for that would have been a more "natural" wish for a young boy:

AMRITLAL: I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were 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. (Dattani 36)

Jairaj, in not being able to match up to these standards of the society, is made to feel that he is lacking, resulting in feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. An even bigger emotional blow comes in the form of Ratna's betrayal of him; she too, begins to see him as being less of a 'man'. His sense of pain and anguish is revealed when he tells Ratna:

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

RATNA: When did I ever take it?

JAIRAJ: Bit by bit. Insisting on top billing in all our programmes. Making me dance my weakest items.

Therefore, what Jairaj desires most is self esteem and a positive self-identity. The incongruence between what Jairaj values in himself, and what the society values in men in general, gives rise to a discrepancy between Jairaj's real self and the ideal self that the society seems to look for in him.

The society sees his career, his having married a *devdasi*, his association with his guru as well as his desire to grow his hair long as threats to his masculinity. But Jairaj, who initially does not abide by such gender identity markers, eventually ends up evaluating himself along these lines because the society, through its various representatives, repeatedly tries to perpetuate such beliefs. Paradoxically, Ratna, who was a co-conspirator in destroying Jairaj's career along with her father-in-law, blames Jairaj for not being a "Man". She echoes the society's doubts about Jairaj's masculinity at multiple instances in the play. She equates manhood with such qualities as being self-sufficient and tough, and Ratna finds Jairaj wanting in both.

That boundaries of gender are fragile and finely placed, is evidenced by the fact that they often spill over one another. What is considered appropriate or acceptable for a particular gender may be seen as being practiced by another. Margaret Fuller, one of the early stalwarts of the Feminist Movement, questioned the idea of having definite categories of gender and argued that there cannot be "a completely 'masculine' male, just as there is no truly 'feminine' female, each contains a bit of the other". (Nayar 86) Fuller's views also echo the ancient Indian conceptualisation of *Lord Shiva* as the *Ardhanarishvara* (an androgynous form) which stands for the dualism in gender. But society refuses to acknowledge this fact and rigidly holds on to what it considers gender-appropriate manner of behaviour. This, in turn, gives an opportunity to people like Amritlal, who vociferously subscribe to such ideologies, to question the 'normalcy' of what may be called gender-deviant behaviour. Jairaj's *guru* in the play, fashions long hair for it is believed that it enhances the dancer's "*abhinaya*", but to Amritlal, his effeminate ways and manners are condemnable, so much so that he questions the *guru's* "sanity". To not adhere to gender norms is thus equated with being mentally unstable and little freedom is accorded to the members of a society to 'choose' their gender.

Contemporary feminist theories have re-looked at the notions of gender and identity and have laid emphasis on the 'performative' nature of gender. Judith Butler, whose theory of gender reflects a postmodern view of the concept, has argued that gender is largely performative. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues that gender is a 'social' construct. In fact, most of the Feminist cultural theories call for a "social-constructionist" view of gender (Nayar 89). In other words, while sex is biological, gender is social. Butler bases her theory of gender performativity on this view and explicates how one's gender identity is not fixed but fluid. What is perpetuated by the society as gender norms are actually repetitive 'performances' of a particular

type of behaviour which results in it becoming specific to that gender. In the "Preface" to her aforementioned work, she writes: "As a strategy to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories, I describe and propose a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame." (Butler x) A direct implication of her theory therefore is that gender roles are open to negotiations and change. She contests the existence of a "universal gender" and suggests that the prevalent demarcations of gender are the result of a man or a woman's repetitive playing out of certain roles. Thus, it is through social mechanisms that specific actions or mannerisms acquired the status of being 'masculine' or 'feminine'. As the title of Butler's work suggests, these norms of behaviour can only be subverted through 'troubling' those gender norms that have been considered absolute and non-negotiable for long.

The protagonist of the concerned play, in choosing a profession that is typical to women, is then essentially 'troubling' the gender norms that the society that he lives in, so emphatically believes in. That he has been successful in doing what he aspired for is ironically testified by Amritlal's statement that: "A woman's world is considered progressive, but a man's world is considered pathetic." (Dattani 50) Jairaj's character depicts how being 'masculine' if one is biologically a man is not 'natural' but appears so only because most men adhere to certain salient behaviour patterns. Moreover, in the play, Jairaj is not only character who subverts gender norms, his wife Ratna does the same, for she has successfully made a place for herself not only in the feminine domain of dancing but also in the male-dominated area of Management by proving herself adept at handling her daughter Lata's career. But the focus is largely centered on Jairaj's gender identity which is positioned in such a manner that it is viewed differently by each character. For Amritlal, any man who cannot accede to socially established laws of masculine behaviour, is not a "Man". Likewise, he becomes a weak man in Ratna's eyes the day he decides to be taken again in his father's fold and chooses against standing up to Ratna's maternal uncle. Such criticism, in turn, makes Jairaj question his own identity in the social context.

Hilda David, in her essay "The Suppressed Male Dancer in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*" elucidates how "dance has been misunderstood to be a female form". (74-75) She substantiates this idea by recounting how dance forms like *Kuchipudi*, *Bharatnatyam* and *Kathakali* were originally performed by men because it called for strenuous training that required them to stay with their *gurus* for long stretches of time which was not pos-

sible for women for fear of being exploited. Furthermore, effeminacy was one of the traits that the male students had to cultivate in order to bring poise and grace to their movements. *Shiva's* form of the *Ardhanarishvara* served as a model that they looked up to and tried to emulate. It was only later that the stage began to be dominated by women dancers resulting in people (mistakenly) considering it a feminine occupation. David further traces male dancers in Hindu mythology by reminding readers of "*Shiva's tandava*" and "*Krishna's dancing on the serpent head*". (77) This shift from dance being viewed as a masculine profession to a feminine one is very telling for it foregrounds the fluid nature of gender and shows how social and cultural factors specific to a particular time influence gender-specific behaviour. What is also highlighted is the fact that in the play, the society, instead of viewing dance as merely an art form which allows one to express oneself, looks at it as a site for the patriarchal setup to exercise its authority and power and it is Jairaj who falls a victim to it.

Both Amritlal and Ratna serve as a foil to Jairaj. Amritlal does so because he perfectly subscribes to the society's idea of what a "man" ought to be. Strong-willed, assertive and dominating, he tries to exercise complete control over the lives of his family members and becomes the epitome of patriarchy in the play. What makes the play unique is that it is not a woman, but a man who falls prey to patriarchal oppression. The dramatist, in this play, also employs certain unconventional theatrical techniques. For example, three out of four major actors of the play perform another role apart from their own, transforming into another character by using certain props. Amritlal and the older Jairaj, Viswas, the prospective groom of Ratna's daughter and the young Jairaj, the younger Ratna and Ratna's daughter Lata, are all played by the same actor. Very subtly, the dramatist is able to throw light on the thematic concerns of the novel through such change and transformation. For instance, Amritlal's own frustration in not having been able to mould his son into the masculine mould during his formative years is echoed by his son's frustration later.

Ironically, however, in the latter part of the play, we see how Jairaj ends up complying with the very gender norms and patriarchal values that he had spent his life trying to subvert, when he blames his wife for having given precedence to her career and not having fulfilled her motherly duties properly. He considers her responsible for their son, Shankar's death and launches into a tirade against her, even questioning her womanhood. As Nayar has pointed out in his work *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, "Motherhood becomes a symbol of the 'true' female" (89). Ratna, in not having justified her socially-ascribed role of a mother, becomes less of a 'woman'. Giving birth to a child is a woman's biological function, but

the society also attributes the standard social practices of being 'motherly', nurturing and caring towards the child to the mother as though it were something they were endowed with. What the society naturalizes as feminine or maternal traits, therefore, are actually "social performances" (Nayar 90) of the role that a woman is expected to play. The conversation between the two characters is very telling:

RATNA: I know my duties and my capabilities and I have always taken pride in knowing where I stand.

JAIRAJ: Over there? In that loud costume? Screaming out to everyone 'Here I am'? Is that what you are?

RATNA: That's really fancy, coming from a drunkard like you

JAIRAJ: No matter how clever an actress you are, you can't convince me that you are playing the part of a devoted mother very well. You wouldn't even know where to start.

In revealing this conformist side to Jairaj's character, who otherwise appears ostensibly radical in his views on gender relations and roles, Dattani demonstrates how deep-seated the traditional binaries of gender are, and how, a man, who may seemingly be trying to turn the idea of gender roles on its head when it concerns him, may take up the role of the perpetrator of gender inequalities when he takes up a stand against a woman. He holds Ratna accountable for a crime he is himself guilty of: not adhering to gender norms. The readers can clearly assess that if Ratna does not fall under the stereotypical archetype of the 'self-sacrificing mother', Jairaj too does not justify his role of being the 'man of the house'. This shift in Jairaj's status from the victim to the perpetrator further underscores how redundant any rigid categorization (whether in terms of gender or any other) can be. A host of factors need to be accounted for before arriving at such inflexible classifications.

The play's title is very telling in that it conveys the theme of gendered identity. The very title *Dance Like a Man* indicates how a man is supposed to limit himself to those pursuits and occupations that are socially considered appropriate for a man and not pursue his career in a field that falls in the woman's domain. The whole notion of 'dancing' like a 'man' inherently suggests that dancing is not a masculine profession and a man, in choosing it, jeopardizes his masculinity. Owing to his choice of profession, his gender is subjected to questioning. The play is, therefore, a critique of the tendency of the Indian society to engage in gender stereotyping.



Simone de Beauvoir's statement about an individual not being "born" a woman but "becoming" one can be seen to apply equally to men as well. (Nayar 88) Jairaj, in choosing a profession that is considered 'anti-masculine' exerts his agency on his own body and identity. In doing so, he has privileged his individuality over the collective beliefs of the society. (Nayar 101) Such privileging of the individual over the society is one of the central tenets of liberal humanism which argues for individuals to take the reins of their life in their own hands, exercising their free will to achieve self-actualization. Finally, of immense importance is the fact that Dattani chooses dancing as a career for Jairaj and not other vocations that are considered typically 'feminine' because dance has its roots in the myths and legends of India. By directly associating his choice of an art form to such deities as *Shiva* and *Krishna*, Dattani is able to show how gender boundaries are tenuous and subject to change. But at the same time, the dramatist is also able to convey how the ideal state of being able to "dance - the dance of Shiva - The dance of a man" (Dattani 48) is an illusory dream for their (Ratna and Jairaj's) performance lacks the grace and "magic of God". (Dattani 74) The play therefore, closes with a humble acceptance of human inadequacy in the face of divine grace and power.

Finally, by a display of what has been referred to in theoretical frameworks as the 'Self-Other overlap' (through portraying the conventional 'self', a man, as the 'other'), the dramatist allows feelings of oneness and shared experience to permeate in the readers' minds. This helps us look at the complexities of the 'human' and emphasizes on the importance of empathy, compassion and affect in overcoming the rigid binary of the Self and Other. Such an understanding of the Other as not being very distinct from the Self and yet an individualized entity enables a more complex understanding of the Other. This calls for a change not only at the societal level, but at the level of the individual as well. The dramatist questions the validity of such flawed social parameters that deem Jairaj and Ratna failures in their roles of 'the man of the house' and the 'nurturer' respectively because they are based on the ideologies of a society with a heavy patriarchal bias. He argues in favour of a fundamental change that is both subjective and objective, from the heart as well as from the head, both as a matter of being and knowing. To put it differently, the home needs to be de-familiarized as the world and the world needs to be cultivated as the home in order to bring about a change at the micro as well as the macro level. Literature and humanities in general, thus, concerns itself with an ongoing negotiation with the truth of gender roles in a vehemently heterosexual society which helps us recognize the reality of others' perspectives as it is perpetually constructed and deconstructed, making the questions

more important than seeking a definitive answer in an inherently complex system.

### **Works Cited**

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990.

David, Hilda. "The Suppressed Male Dancer in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*" *The Theatre of Mahesh Dattani*, edited by Mohini Khot, Aadi Publications, 2015. pp. 74-79.

Foucault, Michel. *The Subject and Power*. Chicago Press, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982. pp. 780-81.

JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197>. Accessed 23 Sept 2020.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. OUP, 1986. p. 208.

Nayar, Pramod K. "Feminisms." *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, Pearson, 2010. pp. 86-101.

Prasad, Amarnath. *Four Indian Playwrights: A Critical Assessment*, Sarup Book Publishers, 2014. p. 74.