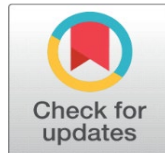


# AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND MARGINALITY IN DANCE LIKE A MAN OF MAHESH DATTANI

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## ABSTRACT

With its origins in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India, the ancient Indian classical dance style known as Bharatanatyam first emerged. There was a time when devadasis, who were prostitutes, were the ones who carried it out in royal courts. After some time has passed, the ruling elite in India starts to consider it more like a commodity, making a distinction between it and devadasis. Within patriarchal societies, the passion that a man has for artistic expression can cause a great deal of friction. Many people have doubts about his manhood and hold him in lesser regard than the idealized picture of what it means to be a man. As a result of women deviating from the conventional gender roles that are expected of them in society, patriarchy produces discord. Dance Like a Man is a drama written by Mahesh Dattani that addresses a variety of problems, including identity crises, prejudice, gender standards, and gender stereotypes. To tell the truth, there is a dearth of fruitful debate regarding the challenges that men confront as a consequence of prejudice based on their gender. An attempt is made to portray a male victim of sexism through the play's protagonist, Jairaj. The purpose of this research is to analyze the ways in which society reinforces gender stereotypes, whether there are problems with reversing gender roles, and whether there are doubts concerning masculinity.

The character of Jairaj is used in this play in an effort to paint a more accurate picture of a male victim of gender prejudice. In the current study, the issues that arise when attempting to reverse gender norms, the question of what it means to be masculine, and the role that society plays in perpetuating gender stereotypes are investigated.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Masculinity, Stereotyping and Gender Discrimination, Bravely.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indian dramatist, actor, and director Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore, India, in 1958. He is well-known for his work in these areas. Included among his most notable works are titles such as *Final Solutions*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Tara*, and many others. The majority of his writings are centered on topics such as patriarchy, identity crisis, feminism, sexuality, women's subordination, and a wide variety of other social stigmas. The Sahitya Akademi Award was bestowed upon Dattani in the year 1998 for his play *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays*. In the world of Indian theater, he is one of the most recognizable faces. As his means for conveying the contentious aspect of contemporary Indian culture, he uses Indian families as his subject matter.

A culture has traditionally divided and allocated each and every task to individuals based on their gender. This practice dates back to an earlier time period. By portraying women as feeble and unworthy of anything, this is done with the intention of ensuring that they submit to men in front of them. A shift in gender roles can be observed in today's society as a result of the realization that gender does not influence the decisions that an individual makes in their life. The play "Dance like a Man" by Mahesh Dattani paints a vivid depiction of the challenges that arise when attempting to reverse gender roles.

In the middle of a metropolis, the play takes place in a large house that serves as the location. Two Bharatanatyam dancers, Jairaj and Ratna, are the subjects of the majority of the drama, which focuses on their lives after they have married. The enthusiasm that Jairaj had for dancing when he was a teenager was first sanctioned by his father, Amritlal, who was of the opinion that it was nothing more than a passing fad that would cease at some point in the future. On the other hand, Jairaj considers dance to be a serious vocation, and despite the fact that he is aware of his father's discontent, he nevertheless continues to practice it. As far as Amritlal is concerned, dance is a feminine pastime, and he has a strong aversion to Jairaj's Guruji, who walks like a woman and has long hair like a woman. According to him, "normal men do not keep their hair so long" (Dattani 417). These are his words. Amritlal is a pseudo-liberal; on the one hand, he fights for freedom and even allows his son to marry a lady from a different culture, but on the other hand, he is unable to imagine his son performing in the Bharatanatyam dance. He is the embodiment of a civilization that is characterized by patriarchy and that fully supports the most repugnant concept of gender discrimination.

As a result of Amritlal's assertion that "A woman in man's world may be considered as being progressive," his conception of gender roles can be characterized as pseudo-progressive. But a guy living in a world dominated by women is pitiful" (Dattani 427). According to him, the key to a guy's happiness is always to be a man who exemplifies the essential qualities of masculinity that the world requires. The fundamental concept of gender roles that he adheres to is in direct opposition to the liberal label that he carries. Despite his best efforts, he is unable to comprehend the source of his family's joy. He lets his wife Ratna to perform dance and to learn dance from an elderly Bharatanatyam dancer who was previously a prostitute. Both of these things contribute to his disappointment with his kid. He carries his passion with Bharatanatyam within him, and he also allows his wife to learn dance from an old Bharatanatyam dancer. He desires for his son Jairaj to conform to the conventional definition of masculinity, which is a man who is responsible for his work and who maintains authority over his wife.

Strength, authoritativeness, emotionlessness, and practicality are the characteristics that are used to characterize a man's masculinity in a patriarchal society (Saraswat 153). Contrary to these characteristics, women are thought to be more feminine. A figure of ridicule in the society is created for the one who violates this practice. Dattani examines the challenge of being in opposition to the conventional conception of masculinity in his play titled "Dance Like a Man." As a result of the fact that Jairaj is not a "man," both his wife Ratna and his father have a negative opinion of him.

At the beginning of the first act, the reader is made aware that their daughter, Lata, is required to do dance, which has the potential to be detrimental to her career. However, their mridangist is suffering from a fracture in his arm. It is because of this that Jairaj and Ratna become agitated. It is suggested by Jairaj that they may make an effort to invite another mridangist named Seshadri to attend Lata's performance. On the other hand, Ratna refutes this assertion as Seshadri is rehearsing with Chandra Kala, who is Ratna's adversary. Ratna also reveals that Seshadri is involved in an illicit relationship with Chandra Kala. While this is going on, Jairaj makes an effort to comfort her by telling her that "there is plenty of time" (Dattani 401). Following this, Ratna becomes enraged and begins to argue with Jairaj, even going so far as to refer to him as a "spineless boy" (Dattani 402). According to her, "the day you came back to this house was the day you stopped being a man for me" (Dattani 402). Ratna is dissatisfied with their lives, and she expresses this displeasure throughout the entire story.

Dance has not provided her with nearly as much as she had anticipated. Jairaj is the one she holds responsible for this, and she is under the impression that his father's curse destroys them. The reason for Ratna's discontent is that Jairaj has not been able to provide her with the financial assistance that she needs in her life. He chooses to follow his passion rather than obey his father, yet he is unable to provide for Ratna and his family financially. As a result of Jairaj's questions to Ratna regarding all of her inquiries, the reader is prompted to consider the fundamental component of "being a man." In response, he inquires, "Would I have been a man then?" What would you say about giving my wife to her own uncle because he was providing us with food and shelter" In the Dattani 410. If a guy gives up his wife in order to provide for himself, the question that arises is whether or not he may be considered a "perfect man." He is, in a sense, posing the question of whether or not he will be considered a man if he is able to amass adequate cash for his wife by any means.

The fact that he is a "proper man" is something that his father considers to be a negative aspect of his character. Because of this, Amritlal becomes irritated whenever Jairaj practices in the hall with Ratna in front of their Guruji. When Ratna tells Amritlal that Jairaj is going to grow his hair in accordance with Guruji's recommendation, Amritlal becomes enraged and explains that if Jairaj grows his hair even an inch longer, he would get rid of him and shave his entire head. Men with long hair are not included in Amritlal's conception of what it means to be a "masculinity." Amritlal is left feeling dissatisfied and angry as a result of Jairaj's wish to pursue Kuchipudi, which is a unique type of dance that requires feminine clothing and costumes. As long as Jairaj and Ratna are in his care, he tells Jairaj that he will prevent Guruji from

visiting to his house on any occasion. Amritlal desires for Jairaj to mature into a mature adult. Because he views dancing as a feminine pastime, he is irritated by Jairaj's intense interest with taking part in dance.

Amritlal makes it abundantly apparent that he is content if Jairaj is able to earn money through dance, but if they continue to beg him for money, it is disheartening. This communication takes place after they have left Amritlal's residence and returned after two days, having accepted their defeat. Amritlal will allow them to stay at his house once more under particular circumstances, despite the fact that they had previously left the house with a solemn promise that they would never return. In order to help Jairaj develop into a man, Amritlal seeks Ratna's assistance. The statement that he makes is as follows: "Help me make him an adult...help me I will never prevent you from dancing" (Dattani 427). He want for his son to be a "proper man" in the same way that every other man is. A patriarchal culture is a mirror of the stress and resentment that Amritlal feels toward his son's career. This society evaluates a man's manhood based on his profession, attractiveness, capacity to generate money, and other factors.

In the guise of gender, a patriarchal society can be perceived to restrict a person's desire, as demonstrated by Jairaj's passion for dancing and his father's cruel attitude toward him. There is a correlation between the two. Ratna is undermining Jairaj's abilities as she collaborates with her father-in-law in an effort to make Jairaj worthy of her favor. By forcing him to dance his weakest elements, she effectively marginalizes him. As a result of Ratna's gradual and gradual destruction of Jairaj's self-esteem, by the time Ratna becomes pregnant, Jairaj is unable to perform on his own. In Dattani 443 he used the phrase "you took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadows" to describe his actions. Her father-in-law gave her the command to make him less significant on stage, and she follows it. Both Amritlal and Ratna try to keep Jairaj from doing what he wants to do in order to develop him into a "proper man" who is passionate about dancing. Because of his gender, they restrict his ability to make up his own mind. Ratna is the person he holds responsible for his predicament, which ultimately leads to him becoming an alcoholic. On the other hand, Ratna deftly first implicates Amritlal, and then Jairaj himself, as the one responsible for his own demise. During the course of the conversation, she accuses Jairaj of turning down an invitation to dance by himself because he is terrified of exposing his "mediocrity" (Dattani 445). In the beginning, Ratna explains that she allows her father-in-law to mold her son into whatever form he believes a man should be in, and she also indicates that she anticipates the outcome, but it goes unfulfilled. Ratna is a self-centered person since she discredits her passionate husband and kills her son Shankar for the sake of her own profession. She does this by giving Shankar a small bit of opium in exchange for guaranteeing him that he will not wake up until she returns from a performance, which ultimately results in her son's death.

In *Dance Like a Man* (1989) the marginalised and subaltern female body of the seventy-five-year old Chennai amma belongs to the "[n]on hegemonic groups or classes." (Gramsci xiv) In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942) penned down thoughts on the subaltern marginalised position of women and to Spivak subaltern women are oppressed twice in colonial/postcolonial circumstances: "...the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the female as female is more deeply in shadow." (271) Collectively with the postcolonial feminist thinkers Chandra Talpade Mohanty, (1955) Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, (1950) Nawal El Saadawi (1931) and Kumari Jayawardena (1931), the critical insights of Spivak have disagreed with the *hypothesis* that all women are having homogenised experiences, and to Spivak *heterogeneousness* in the politics of race, rank, religious conviction, nationality and tradition need also to be taken into our contemplation as well. (Morton 71-72) Amritlal is cognisant of his discriminatory and hegemonic position deriving sadistic self-satisfaction in marginalising the subaltern working class woman like Chennai amma. It could be argued that Mahesh Dattani in his artistic odyssey of *atmasameeksha* (self-exploration) and identity portrays a class struggle where tyrannical and phallocentric Amritlal is a representative of "haves" category while Chennai amma is a subaltern woman and represents "have nots" (Marx in Wen 74) category. In view of this Gyanendra Pandey (1949) in his *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001) and Kancha Ilaiah (1952) in his *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) have critically observed that India is perpetually a higher caste Hindu India where our mainstream grand narratives get sadistic pleasure in its rejection and exclusion of the muted and almost forgotten voices of Dalits, Adivasis, and minorities. Chennai amma's fading, subaltern and inferior female body vividly demonstrates the *lacunae* of the Mother India mythology as a bourgeois ideological construct. (Morton 40) According to Amritlal, Ratna's dance performances at the oriental courtyard of Chennai amma is dilapidating his higher social status and it is not known to him how to express one's gratitude towards artists who are universal in nature and they cannot be restricted by the age-old *myopic* boundaries of caste, creed, and religious dogma. Amritlal waged warfare against the British Empire and when Mother India was freed from the bondage of slavery after independence Amritlal became a social reformer, he tried to play a very crucial role in eliminating dowry system and untouchability. He was a pioneer in widow remarriage and eradication of various social maladies as well. He had built ashrams for the lower caste and subaltern temple dancers, he

also played a prominent role in spreading the light of education among women but it becomes quite paradoxical to understand when this same Amritlal bans his daughter-in-law Ratna from visiting to Chennai amma's courtyard out of his *psychopathological* detestation for this browbeaten, marginalised subaltern working class woman in all probability. This heinous discrimination proves him to be not a forward-thinking activist but a Neo-colonial and a fake imposter/parasite. It could be argued that his agenda was not to fight for independence but to make himself a storehouse of power.

In the play, Jairaj's passion for dance is reflected in a number of characters' conversations. Despite the fact that he is a disillusioned and unsuccessful dancer, he has the desire to teach his son Shankar the dance of Shiva, which he refers to as "the dance of a man" (Dattani 441). As a kind of retribution against his father for destroying his job and passion, he even desires for his son to perform the ritual known as "tandava nritya" (Dattani 442) on Amritlal's head. It is because of the patriarchal society's gender discrimination that Jairaj is unable to follow his own sense of direction. Jairaj dresses up as his wife in order to give the impression that he is a woman and perform dance when an army needs a woman to perform dance and Ratna is afraid to dance in front of them. From this, the reader is able to see that a culture would always desire women to perform in the role of dancers. His performance, however, is highly regarded by the military, and they even enjoy it more when they learn that it is a man. In this performance, Jairaj is demonstrating his capabilities and his competence. The reader is given the impression that he is on par with or even superior to female dancers by his implicit statements. His father and wife, however, prevent him from achieving success as a dancer because of the constraints that society places on him.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Dance Like a Man is the perfect confluence of a man's desire to rebel against the current gender stereotypes and his failure to do so. It is a beautiful combination of desire and failure. In a world that is supposedly populated by "perfect people," Jairaj is the personification of the concept of "imperfect masculinity." The gender roles are determined by the patriarchal society, and we are compelled to operate within those boundaries. With the help of the character Jairaj, who has aspirations of becoming a successful Bharatanatyam dancer, Dattani challenges the notion that gender roles are predetermined. Moreover, he raises the question of what constitutes a "perfect man" in a culture that is dominated by patriarchy. Additionally, the piece delves into the pitiful predicament of a talented dancer who is forced to repress his desires as a result of the extreme gender norms that exist in society. As a result of his inability to successfully rebel against the patriarchal society and its conception of gender roles, Jairaj, the protagonist of Dattani, is both disillusioned and disappointed. On the other hand, the play offers a more comprehensive debate on the subject of gender discrimination, not in the conventional manner of examining solely difficulties pertaining to women, but rather the challenges faced by men who are interested in participating in the process of reversing gender norms.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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