

**Dancing against Gender: Art, Masculinity, and Identity in Mahesh Dattani's  
*Dance Like a Man***

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**Article Received:** 16/10/2025

**Article Accepted:** 28/11/2025

**Published Online:** 30/11/2025

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.11.303

**Abstract**

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* uses classical dance to examine gender, masculinity, artistic ambition, family conflict and the struggle for individual identity in modern Indian society. At the centre of the play is Jairaj, whose desire to become a Bharatanatyam dancer brings him into conflict with his father, Amritlal, who believes that professional dancing is inappropriate for a man. The conflict demonstrates that gender is sustained not merely through biological difference but through socially constructed expectations regarding behaviour, profession, independence and success. Ratna's ambition as a dancer further complicates the play because she simultaneously resists patriarchal restrictions and participates in the manipulation of Jairaj's career. Their daughter Lata represents a younger generation for whom dance can be pursued with comparatively less anxiety about gender. This paper argues that Dattani uses dance both as an artistic practice and as a metaphor through which conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity are questioned. The play ultimately asks whether individuals are genuinely free to pursue their identities when family and society continue to determine what a man or woman ought to be.

**Keywords:** gender, masculinity, dance, identity, patriarchy, ambition, Bharatanatyam, Mahesh Dattani

**Introduction**

Dance occupies the centre of Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*. It is much more than the profession or hobby of the characters. For Jairaj and Ratna, dance becomes connected with identity, ambition, independence and self-expression. Yet its meaning changes according to the character who interprets it. For Jairaj, dance represents personal freedom. His decision to pursue Bharatanatyam challenges his father's expectations about how a man should live. Amritlal is prepared to tolerate dance as a hobby, but he cannot easily

accept it as his son's profession. His objection therefore exposes the distinction society often makes between what a person is permitted to enjoy privately and what he is allowed to become publicly.

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri observes that Dattani's play approaches gender through the world of dance and identifies Amritlal's underlying anxiety as the fear that dancing will make Jairaj "womanly" or effeminate (68). The conflict is therefore not really about the artistic value of Bharatanatyam. It concerns the cultural meanings attached to the male body.

Jairaj's dancing becomes an assertion that art need not possess a gender. His body consequently becomes a site of conflict between individual choice and socially prescribed masculinity. The title *Dance Like a Man* contains the play's central irony. If dance is an art, what exactly does it mean to perform it "like a man"? The question exposes the socially constructed nature of masculinity. Jairaj's father is disturbed by the appearance and mannerisms associated with male classical dancers. Jairaj's desire to grow his hair like his guru particularly troubles Amritlal because such an appearance contradicts his understanding of masculine behaviour.

Amritlal's response reveals how society disciplines the body. Hair, gait, clothing, occupation and gesture become signs through which individuals are classified as properly masculine or feminine. The play thereby anticipates an important argument in gender theory. Judith Butler maintains that gender acquires its apparent naturalness through repeated social performances rather than simply emerging from biological sex (Butler 179). Jairaj becomes threatening to conventional masculinity because his performance refuses some of its expected signs. Yet Dattani complicates the issue further. Jairaj himself is not completely free from the desire to prove his masculinity. When he asks Ratna, "Will finding a musician make me a man?" (Dattani), his question exposes how deeply he has internalized the standards against which he is being judged. The tragedy is therefore psychological as well as social. Jairaj rejects society's definition of masculinity, yet he cannot entirely escape its influence.

### **Amritlal and the contradictions of patriarchy**

Amritlal is not simply a conventional authoritarian father. His character contains an important contradiction. He presents himself as socially progressive but remains conservative within his own family. His opposition to Jairaj's dancing reveals the limits of his progressivism. He may support reform in public life, but he cannot accept a son whose profession challenges conventional masculinity. At the same time, his anxiety has an economic dimension. He worries that Jairaj will not become financially independent through dance. Traditional patriarchy defines the man not merely through physical masculinity but through his role as provider. A man is expected to earn, support his family and exercise authority.

Amritlal therefore attacks Jairaj at precisely this vulnerable point. His argument implies that a man who cannot achieve economic independence cannot possess full masculine authority. The play consequently demonstrates that patriarchy also imposes burdens upon men. It certainly privileges masculinity over femininity, but it simultaneously punishes men who fail to perform socially approved forms of masculinity. Jairaj is marginalized not because he is a woman but because he is considered insufficiently masculine.

### **Ratna: ambition, resistance, and complicity**

Ratna is perhaps the most complicated character in the play. It would be easy to describe her simply as manipulative because her ambition contributes to Jairaj's professional frustration. Such a reading, however, misses the pressures that produce her behaviour. Ratna herself lives within a patriarchal society in which a woman's artistic independence cannot be taken for granted. Her marriage to Jairaj offers the possibility of continuing her dance because Jairaj does not oppose her artistic ambition. Dance therefore represents liberation for Ratna as well.

Yet her desire for artistic success gradually becomes entangled with ambition. When Amritlal realizes that Ratna wants to continue dancing, he can use that desire to influence her. Ratna consequently participates in a structure that restricts Jairaj while preserving possibilities for herself. Her behaviour illustrates an important feature of power: people who are oppressed within one structure can participate in the oppression of others. Ratna is restricted as a woman, but this does not prevent her from exercising psychological power over Jairaj.

She eventually attacks his dependence upon his father, calling him a "spineless boy" who could not remain away from his father's house (Dattani). The insult is significant because Ratna judges Jairaj according to the very masculine standards against which he has been struggling. She expects him to demonstrate independence, decisiveness and economic self-sufficiency. Thus, even while resisting gender restrictions upon herself, Ratna reproduces conventional expectations of masculinity.

### **Ambition, compromise, and the failure of art**

The source of tragedy in *Dance Like a Man* is not dance itself but what the characters demand from it. For Jairaj, dance begins as self-expression and resistance. For Ratna, it increasingly becomes connected with recognition and professional success. For Amritlal, it represents a threat to masculine respectability. The same artistic form therefore acquires radically different meanings. Jairaj rebels against his father because he wants to determine his own life. Yet his rebellion gradually gives way to compromise. He leaves his father's house but eventually returns. His dependence weakens his confidence and contributes to his growing frustration.

Ratna follows a different trajectory. She learns to negotiate with the structures surrounding her. Her willingness to compromise gives her a form of power that Jairaj lacks, but it comes at an emotional cost. Their marriage consequently becomes a space in which frustrated ambitions are transferred from one person to another. Art, which should have offered freedom, becomes entangled with competition, resentment and unfulfilled desire.

Dattani therefore refuses to romanticize artistic passion. Passion can liberate individuals, but when artistic achievement becomes the sole measure of personal worth, it can also become destructive. Ratna's painful admission—"We were never anything great, never will be, and nor will our daughter be anything but an average human being" (Dattani)—reveals the disappointment beneath her ambition. The fear of being ordinary has transformed art from a source of pleasure into a measure of success and failure.

### **Lata and a different relationship with dance**

Lata provides an important contrast to her parents. She belongs to another generation and inherits their artistic world without completely inheriting their conflicts. As a child, she watches her parents practising and experiences dance as "magic" (Dattani). Her attraction to it is therefore genuine. Yet she does not allow dance to consume her identity in the manner it has consumed Ratna and Jairaj. Her relationship with Vishwas is equally significant. Lata does not perceive marriage and dance as mutually exclusive choices. She wants both artistic fulfilment and personal companionship. Lata consequently suggests a possibility that her parents could not achieve: balance. This does not mean that the social problems raised by the older generation have disappeared. Rather, the struggles of Jairaj and Ratna have created conditions under which the next generation can approach dance with somewhat less anxiety. Dattani thus places three generations together to show that social change is gradual. One generation struggles against prohibition, another negotiates with it, and a later generation may begin to treat as ordinary what once appeared transgressive.

Because *Dance Like a Man* is a play about dance, gender is explored through the body rather than through abstract argument alone. The dancing body challenges fixed categories. Movements described as graceful or feminine can be performed by a male body; strength and control can coexist with delicacy. Bharatanatyam therefore becomes an ideal artistic form through which Dattani can question rigid gender binaries. The stage itself strengthens this argument. The audience does not merely hear characters debating masculinity; it encounters bodies, costumes, gestures and movement. Theatre makes visible the social process through which bodies acquire gendered meanings. The title consequently remains deliberately provocative. There is no inherently male way to dance and no inherently female way to dance. What society calls masculine or feminine is partly the result of cultural interpretation. Jairaj's struggle is therefore ultimately for the right to inhabit his own body without allowing society to determine what that body is permitted to express.

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**Conclusion**

*Dance Like a Man* uses the apparently private story of a family of dancers to examine a much larger cultural question: Who decides what a man should be? Jairaj's struggle demonstrates how masculinity can become a restrictive social performance. Amritlal represents a patriarchal order that associates manhood with economic independence, authority and conventionally masculine behaviour. Ratna complicates the gender structure because she is simultaneously constrained by patriarchy and capable of using its assumptions against Jairaj. Lata, in contrast, suggests the possibility of approaching art without allowing it to become either a gendered prohibition or a destructive obsession.

Dance connects all these conflicts. For Jairaj, it is freedom and defiance; for Ratna, ambition and recognition; for Amritlal, anxiety about masculinity and social respectability; and for Lata, artistic fulfilment. Dattani therefore does not simply defend the right of men to become dancers. His argument is more fundamental. He questions the social categories through which professions, bodies, gestures and ambitions are divided into masculine and feminine domains.

The tragedy of Jairaj lies not in his desire to dance but in a society and family structure that continually demand that his artistic identity be measured against an externally imposed idea of manhood. Even those closest to him participate in that measurement. The play ultimately invites us to reverse the question contained in its title. Instead of asking whether Jairaj can dance like a man, we should ask why dance—or any form of artistic expression—must be required to prove masculinity at all. In raising this question, *Dance Like a Man* transforms classical dance into a powerful metaphor for the human struggle to live beyond socially prescribed identities.

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