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Problematising Gender, Identity, and Normativity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* problematises the idea of the traditional gender binary and rigidity of identity in post-colonial urban middle-class families. The play questions the social construct of gender by examining the coercive role of patriarchy and social expectations that assign "performativity" (Butler) by sustaining gender binaries. The progressive theatre of Dattani uncovers the invisible psychological trauma, hypocrisies and taboos hidden beneath the cultured façade of this class. It highlights how Jairaj, the male protagonist and a passionate lover of Bharatanatyam, faces marginalisation and restrictions within family power dynamics. The paper demonstrates that patriarchy victimises not only females but males also by controlling their passions, behaviours, desires, and confines them to strict conventional masculinity. The paper shows how Jairaj's father controls his son's desire and autonomy by destroying his career as a professional dancer. This dance form is supposed to be associated with the Devadasi, a temple courtesan, thereby, Amritlal's attitude towards the dance reflects deep-seated patriarchal prejudices that viewed classical dance as an unmanly, effeminate pursuit unsuitable for a man of status. The paper employs theoretical frameworks of gender theory to analyse the debilitating normative constructs.

Keywords*:* Gender, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Identity, Hierarchy, Social Expectations

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Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the celebrated playwrights in post-colonial Indian playwriting. His plays engage with contemporary socio-political issues, affecting urban middle-class families. His dramaturgy adopts the techniques of realism by portraying the lived experiences of real people. Other contemporary dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad incorporate the tropes of mythology to portray the political and social concerns of the time, but Dattani draws upon the Ibsenian realism, which is suitable for manifesting the complex power dynamics of family that restricts the autonomy of individuals, leaving them in confrontation. "His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the oppressive weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire." (Mee 4). His realistic theatre serves as a mirror held up to the hypocrisy, prejudices, and silent sufferings of diverse sexualities and identities in primarily Hindu urban middle-class households.

The industrialisation and urbanisation mobilised people from rural and semi-urban areas to big cities in search of jobs and businesses. The process of migration and subsequent family planning transformed the structure of families in urban India with the emergence of nuclear families. "The siblings with their spouses and children live in separate houses, but close enough to each other in a cooperative spirit. While the joint family with a traditional value system is most common in rural India, all the three major family types coexist in urban India today, and family relations are determined not only by the family type with a particular value system, but by the plurality of value systems within the same type. Role expectations have undergone significant changes more or less in all types of the urban Hindu family" (Sengupta 150). The class in question admits their children to the English-medium schools and colleges that appear to challenge fossilised thought systems and offer modern values, opportunities, and new unconventional career paths. Children's exposure to these progressive value systems transformed their relationship with their parents as they discuss matters related to their immediate world without hesitation, behaving in more friendly manner. But it was not free from "inner contradictions and new tensions at home." With an outward modern appearance, these families continue to maintain an aura of dignity and respectability by controlling everything that appears to be deviating from the codes and norms of society followed by their counterparts in the rural or semi-urban areas.

Ironically, the liberal ideas about the choice of profession for both genders are governed and dictated by social expectations. Any nonconformity to the existing order is considered an aberration and is unwelcome. These unwritten and convenient norms operate in society in an intangible and subtle way, causing conflict and psychological damage to the generation that is born and brought up in a relatively "so-called" progressive social milieu.

The play demonstrates that the ideals and goals of the older generation come into conflict with those of the next generation, whose sensibility is shaped in the said environment of the nuclear family. With advances in science and technology, globalisation, and economic liberalisation, the world witnesses an immense shift in the choices of professions and services. The commercialisation of films, theatre, dance, music, art, and craft has extended opportunities to the urban middle-class youth to pursue these arts professionally and showcase their talents to the world, but the protagonist becomes a victim of the tension between modernity and conventionality.

Dance Like a Man depicts three generations of a family to explore generational conflicts. Jairaj is the son of a military veteran, Amritlal Parekh, who is a strict disciplinarian and an embodiment of the joint family value system where patriarchy holds sway dictating social behaviour and family order. Jairaj is allowed to learn Bharatanatyam along with his studies for the holistic development of his personality. When it comes to the inter-caste marriage of Jairaj, Amritlal gives his consent, showing his liberal attitude as a social reformer. But when Jairaj expresses his desire to take up Bharatanatyam professionally, he is resisted vehemently. Amritlal considers the Bharatanatyam dance unsuitable for his son because of its historical association with prostitutes and the women of lower status. Moreover, the dance symbolises femininity, therefore, children of respected families are not supposed to make it their profession. While denying permission to dance and says, "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 361). Its performance demands long hair, graceful and soft movements of the entire body, evoking sensuality. The play shows that this fluidity of masculine identity in the male dancer is problematic for Amritlal, as it subverts the conventional idea of masculinity. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri aptly evaluates:

> "The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him 'womanly' – an effeminate man – the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned." (Chaudhuri 68)

Jairaj's marriage to Ratna, who is also a professional Bharatanatyam dancer, is marked by underlying ambitions and frictions. Her marriage is not purely out of love, but also has vested interests, as the family of Jairaj appears to be liberal and open-minded, where she could fulfil her dream of pursuing a career as a dancer even after marriage. She is a modern woman with a strong sense of her own individuality and autonomy. Her character is crucial, as her ambition becomes a tool for Amritlal to control his son, and she stoops to whatever offers are suitable for her dream fulfilment. The play underlines that modern education and the structure of the nuclear family teach individuals about their self-fulfilment.

His manipulation of her could not succeed and turned out to be devastating for the family. Their daughter Lata, a third-generation passionate Bharatanatyam dancer, becomes the hope of her parents' unfulfilled dreams. The play foregrounds the marital dynamics of Jairaj and Ratna, which typify conflict, where professional ambition and unfulfilled aspirations transform the domestic sphere into a battleground of mutual dislike and ego clashes. All the characters in the play are individuals with their own worlds of dreams and desires.

The play critiques the heteronormative expectations imposed upon men within the post-colonial bourgeois patriarchal framework. To understand this framework in the play, the dynamics of class, caste, and patriarchy need to be examined. Jairaj and Ratna passionately immerse themselves in Bharatanatyam, but Jairaj's is imposed with restrictions by his father on the ground that historically the dance evolved from the Devadasi tradition. A Devadasi, a woman from the socio-economically vulnerable castes in the social hierarchy, would perform this dance and serve the temple priests in the state of Tamil Nadu. This association of the art form with lower-caste women negates its acceptance among upper-caste men, even though dance has achieved a distinct prestige over time and has a prospective career in it. The role of patriarchy in maintaining the hegemony of caste and class is reflected in the play, where individual choices are regulated through the reinforcement of the existing social order. The operation of patriarchy can be understood through the following excerpt:

> "At its simplest, the term means 'the absolute rule of the father or the eldest male member over his family'. This meaning of the term has been extended to describe the nature of this rule. Patriarchy is thus the rule of the father not only over all women in the family, but also over younger and socially or economically subordinate males." (Geetha 5)

The paper suggests that the patriarchy's functionality despite the difference of time and space remains manipulative. "With the spread of education and greater exposure to modern values, the position of woman in such families has improved. She now enjoys a more equal relationship with her husband, she has greater say in family matters, and she may also have a life of her own outside the home" (Sengupta 150), but freedom of taking up profession and career remains restrictive. The play problematises the "conventional social framework" which controls artist's passion under "close fisted gender roles" (Agarwal 24). The impalpable set of patriarchal rules continues to dominate their lives. The indoctrination of these codes through socialisation are naturalised and normalised, and without the moment of realisation the victims of this system never recognise their oppression. According to R.W. Connell:

> "Sexist stereotypes are still with us, showing impressive toughness and resilience. Social process has its own power to constrain, its own resistance

to dissolution. And yet it is entirely human. The oppression of women and gays is a matter of human agency, not of nature." (Connell ii)

The father's upper-caste and urban middle-class status, combined with his military background, reinforces a hegemonic and chauvinistic form of patriarchy, through which he exercises his influence to maintain fallacious dignity and respectability. The opening part of the play shows Lata waiting for her parent Jairaj and Ratna, to get her lover, Viswas, acquainted with them for her marriage. Lata's humorous discussion about post-conjugal autonomy and freedom of continuing dance performance throws light upon the expectations of the youngsters of the next generation. Viswas symbolises the reproduction of the patriarchal anxiety, as he belongs to a family of businessman who makes tremendous wealth through sweet shops and properties, but hold less liberal attitude to any unconventional path. His attitude toward dance is casual and dismissiveLata's innocent description of her house, where her late grandfather, Amritlal, a social reformer during the freedom struggle movement, used to hold secret meetings with revolutionaries to free the country from the British, proves to be paradoxical.

All the memories of her grandfather, such as his shawl, telephone, and chair etc. are supposed to serve as a symbol of her family's glorious and dignified past. Moreover, for her, the house not only appears to be a place of political or social significance, but also seems to be a protector of art and culture, as there is another room in the house where her parents would practise Bharatanatyam when they were young. Lata's mistaken belief about the house and the grandfather is fundamentally ironic and reflects that her generation, unlike her parents' generation, enjoys greater freedom and autonomy. She feels vibrations and thrills in the dance room as she is a gifted dancer, altogether she is encouraged by her mother, who wishes to see her (Lata) as a famous and established dancer. But Viswas's business background makes him indifferent to the orientation of Lata's family, whom he considers "strange people." (Dattani 380). His unconditional acquiescence to Lata's demands strongly suggests that the family of Viswas is affluent but socially conservative and not openly receptive to the performing arts, as was the case with Mr. Amritlal. Viswas is projected as a diluted facsimile of Amritlal, but to lesser degree. He belongs to the petty bourgeoisie, showing disregard for the importance of Lata's artistic endeavours. His conventional approach becomes manifest at a time when Lata wins accolades followed by media coverage; Viswas's display of happiness and pride for Lata's stellar performance is not genuine. His appreciation of Lata is just to please them.

The review's mention that "Lata's tearful expression and heaving bosom conveyed all that was humanly possible" makes Viswas feel uncomfortable, and his objection to the language of the review underlines the patriarchal attitude of Viswas. This reaction of Viswas

unsettles Jairaj, who taught this expression thirty years ago to Lata's mother. The views of Jairaj and Viswas have a confrontational undertone, but Viswas surrenders to her family and expresses his agreement with all the opinions of Jairaj's family. In this way, the incompatibility between Lata's artistic lineage and Viswas conservatism seems to be less overtly confrontational.

Jairaj and Ratna's preoccupation with the preparation for Lata's performance prevents them from seeing the presence of Viswas in their house as problematic, because they grant their daughter the liberty and autonomy that they themselves fought to achieve. Their liberal and progressive disposition enables them to converse with Viswas informally, without any conventional familial interrogation. They only want Viswas to allow Lata to continue dancing even after marriage and not impose his worldview on her. Viswas's description of the house as told by Lata, particularly when Jairaj is drinking, is revealing, as Jairaj becomes infuriated, exposing the bitterness underlying the relationship between father and son. Jairaj's resentment towards his father is deeply rooted in his adulthood. The play lays bare the profoundly destructive legacy of a father, whose rigid expectations and oppressive governance contributed to the destruction of his son's aspirations and personal well-being. The following excerpt puts the tensed relationship into perspective:

> "VISWAS. Lata told me you respected him a lot.
> JAIRAJ. Did she say that?
> VISWAS. Yes. That's why you have kept this portion unaltered, almost like a shrine in memory of him.
> JAIRAJ. Rubbish. This was my world. I have kept it the same because it's mine. This is where I spent my childhood. I removed his memories. The gardens. He had plenty of spare time. He used to do a lot of gardening. A rose garden. Creepers climbing the walls. When he died, I had everything removed. Pulled it all out from the roots. When Ratna and I made some money from our dance school and performances abroad, we extended the front of the house. We had a lot of visitors, you see. We did make a name abroad and that made us local celebrities." (Dattani 354)

Dattani foregrounds the tension between father's traditional social expectations and son's individual artistic expression. Through Jairaj "the dramatist brilliantly deconstructs the defining roles of masculinity and projects the limitations of its performance." (Chhavi and Bhushan, 3). Amritlal's conventional understanding of the Devadasis as merely prostitutes who sell their bodies is flawed and exposes his prejudiced view of an artistic form that requires immense dedication, discipline, and integrity to master. Amritlal's inability to distinguish between the artist and the historical realities in which the dance form evolved

shows that his bias emanates from his son's association with the dance. His boasting about reforms, including rehabilitating these artists and providing them with houses and work, is merely an eyewash. His efforts to dismantle the entire system of this community are driven by his desire to protect the honour of his family. Jairaj's pursuit of dance as a profession is perceived as a stigma against caste-appropriate behaviour. The following passage from *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Learner says:

> "The roles and behaviour deemed appropriate to the sexes were expressed in values, customs, laws, and social roles. They also, and very importantly, were expressed in leading metaphors, which became part of the cultural construct and explanatory system." (Learner 212)

According to Jairaj, the reductionist approach in the name of reforms and assistance will further deteriorate the condition of the Devadasi's in society. "The women so dedicated to the deity were ultimately reduced to prostitutes, albeit with a religious sanction." (Sengupta 152). After years of training under the Guruji, Jairaj develops a deep respect and love for Bharatanatyam. His understanding of the dance is spiritual rather than just a series of physical movements and a display of emotions. He advises his father to send all such artists to the temple and try to reward them for preserving the classical art. His views are progressive, as his suggestions to his father indicate his reverence for and desire to protect the artists. The reform should not be to destroy the art and the artist, but to correct the perceptions and conditions that exploit them. He confronts his father:

> "JAIRAJ. Send them back to their temples! Give them awards for preserving their art.
> AMRITLAL. My son, you are the ignorant one. Most of them have given up their 'art' as you call it and have taken to selling their bodies.
> JAIRAJ. I hold you responsible for that.
> AMRITLAL. You have gone mad.
> JAIRAJ. Give them their homes and give them their profession.
> AMRITLAL. I will not have our temples turned into brothels!
> JAIRAJ. And I will not have my art run down by a handful of stubborn narrow-minded individuals with fancy pretentious ideals." (Dattani 363)

The "fancy pretentious ideals of stubborn narrow-minded individuals" are resisted by the enraged son as he seeks to counter the irrational and debilitating patriarchal ideology which enforces norms to debar what is unsuitable and deviant. The idea of respectability rests on exclusivity, and the "pretentious ideals" are mutual agreements among the dominant patriarchs. Since they control resources and power, they therefore automatically engender the favourable conditions to sustain the ideology. Jairaj's criticism of his father's deceptive

objectives brings him into direct conflict with his father. He vehemently raises his voice, "Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn't fight to gain independence; you fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us!" (Dattani 362). From the gender perspective, *Dance Like a Man* offers a canvas of the complex dynamics of gender, as Ratna, an ambitious but mediocre performer, becomes a tool in the hands of Amritlal. His permission for the inter-caste marriage of Jairaj to Ratna is considered a progressive move, but the rest of their choices are restricted as they do not meet the expectations of a respectable family. Ratna's meeting with an old Devadasi to learn the technicality of the dance is opposed, as it is considered below the dignity of the family. Perception, rather than intent, is given more emphasis. Amritlal's assessment of the situation is practical, as he discerns Ratna's motive behind her marriage with Jairaj. Jairaj's performance is outstanding compared to Ratna's. Amritlal's persuasion of Jairaj to stop dancing proves rebellious and hostile; therefore, his baiting of Ratna by touching her nerve promises the fulfilment of his patriarchal objectives. His promise to permit Ratna to pursue dance professionally on the condition that she prevents Jairaj from performing portrays the damagingly manipulative nature of patriarchal conditioning. According to the plan, she begins insulting Jairaj in the presence of others, resultantly lowering his confidence. The best artist of exceptional calibre is subjected to humiliation, culminating in profound isolation and dejection. In her book *Gendering Caste* Uma Chakravarty writes:

> "women's cooperation in the system was secured by various means: ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally the use of force when required" (Chakravarty 64)

Dattani illustrates that the imposition of social expectations causes fractured domestic and interpersonal relationships. Jairaj turns into a drunkard and becomes emotionally and psychologically unfit when Ratna mistreats him in front of others. As per the directions of her father-in-law, she makes him feel humiliated publicly and abuses him. He finds Ratna responsible for his tragic downfall and tells her, "You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow" (Dattani 443). This act of manipulation of Jairaj radiates into a feeling of deep resentment towards his father and Ratna. Instead of growing up as a desired male, he degenerates into a drunkard. "My father is always asking me to grow up. Well, this is a perverse way of thrusting me into adulthood" (Dattani 384). He mockingly utters that he will teach his son, Shankar, tandava and "when he grows up, I'll teach him how to dance—the dance of Shiva. The dance of a man. And when he is ready, I'll bring him to his

grandfather and make him dance on his head—the tandava nritya" (Dattani 384). The reference to Tandava is a sign of anger and an attack upon his father's idea of dance as feminine. Tandava symbolises the destruction of the strangulating heteronormativity that negates the formation of other identities. The withdrawal of Jairaj takes a toll on the family, as the ayah in whose care the baby, Shankar, is left dies due to an overdose of opium. Jairaj's inebriated state and Ratna's pursuit of dance take the life of the baby. The play shows that all this could have not happened had Parekh allowed his son to pursue dance. The house, which symbolised order of the past, is eventually demolished, as it is no longer needed. Jairaj says "They made tough buildings in the old days. And tough people. But even tough people like my father get knocked down." (Dattani 388)

Conclusion:

Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* problematises the deep-seated normativity within urban middle-class families, governing individual freedom and autonomy. Jairaj's life and choices are dictated by patriarchy and social expectations, resulting in psychological distress and a tense relationship. His desire to become a dancer is crushed by his manipulative father, who co-opts Ratna to execute his plan of controlling Jairaj so that he could abandon dance and conform to a conventional lifestyle. The paper finds that the clash between cultural baggage and individual freedom poses an immense challenge to the generation brought up in the metropolis. The play shows that the normality of Amritlal is profoundly abnormal, since his obsession to see his son to lead the life of a socially accepted man deepens the antagonism in their relationship leading to enormous strains. Furthermore, Ratna's actions at the behest of her father-in-law push Jairaj into ruin. The "hypermasculinity" of Parekh in the liberal milieu of the urban space proves fatal, as in place of becoming a normal man, he becomes abusive and alcoholic. Ultimately, the imposition of rigid cultural values destroys an outstanding artistic talent that, with proper support and encouragement, could have flourished and won laurels.

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