



Redefining Masculinity and Cultural Resistance: A Critical Analysis of Gender Performativity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

Dr. Priyanka Kalra

Tantia University, Sri Ganganagar

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* (1989) serves as a poignant interrogation of rigid societal gender norms and patriarchal structures in contemporary Indian society. This research paper examines the play through the lens of gender performativity and hegemonic masculinity, exploring how traditional expectations suppress male artistic ambition and result in profound personal tragedy. By analyzing the struggles of two generations of dancers, the study highlights the ways in which masculinity is socially constructed and policed by both familial and societal institutions. Central to the narrative is the protagonist Jairaj, whose pursuit of Bharatanatyam—a dance form culturally coded as feminine—becomes a site of intense cultural resistance and psychological trauma. The paper further explores the complex role of women, exemplified by Ratna, who both suffer under and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. Ultimately, the study argues that Dattani's work advocates for a fluid understanding of identity where creativity and self-expression transcend socially constructed boundaries.

Paper Received date

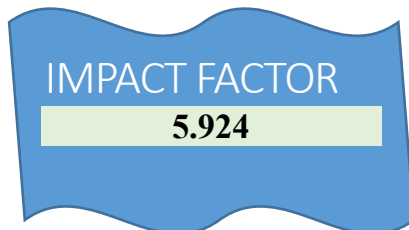
05/12/2025

Paper date Publishing Date

10/12/2025

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20206083>



Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is recognized as one of India's foremost contemporary playwrights, known for his bold engagement with "socially silenced issues" and marginalized identities. Emerging in an era where Indian English drama shifted from historical or mythological themes to contemporary social realities, Dattani's theater focuses on the deep-seated prejudices that condition human relationships. His play *Dance Like a Man* throws light upon the patriarchal and heterosexual post-independence setup of Indian society.

The play revolves around Jairaj and Ratna, a couple whose lives are defined by their passion for Bharatanatyam, and the subsequent generational conflict involving their daughter, Lata. Set against a backdrop of rigid tradition, the play explores how "male artistic ambition" is suppressed by a society that views dance as an unsuitable profession for "real men".



Through a narrative that shifts between the past and present via flashback techniques, Dattani exposes the destructive power of patriarchal hegemony, not only on women but significantly on men who fail to conform to traditional masculine ideals.

Theoretical Framework: Gender as Performance

To understand the central conflict of *Dance Like a Man*, one must employ the theory of **gender performativity**, largely articulated by Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender is not an essential or fixed identity but rather a "cultural effect" produced through the repetitive performance of normative acts. In the context of the play, masculinity is portrayed as a set of behaviors—strength, dominance, and economic productivity—that must be constantly "performed" to maintain social respect.

Jairaj's love for Bharatanatyam clashes with these traditional views. Because dance is culturally marked as a feminine enterprise in the Indian context, Jairaj's decision to pursue it as a career is viewed as a threat to the social order and his own manhood. As the title suggests, society demands that he "dance like a man," implying that even within the realm of art, he must adhere to strict rules to preserve his male identity. This creates a "battleground for his identity," where his natural passion is stigmatized as "pathetic" or "effeminate".

Amritlal Parekh: The Epitome of Patriarchal Authority

The primary antagonist of Jairaj's artistic freedom is his father, **Amritlal Parekh**. Amritlal represents the "autocratic patriarch" whose vision of manhood is inextricably tied to power, control, and the preservation of family honor. Though he is a freedom fighter and a social reformist, he remains "prudish and conservative" within his own home, framing strict regulations over his son's wishes.

Amritlal's opposition to Jairaj's dancing is rooted in the belief that dance is a "craft of prostitutes" (Devadasis) and has no place in a man's world. He famously tells Jairaj: "**A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic**". For Amritlal, a man's happiness lies solely in "being a man," which he equates with earning a living in a socially acceptable, lucrative profession.

Amritlal's control extends to the physical appearance of his son. He is disgusted by Jairaj's interest in growing his hair long, which Jairaj grows to enhance his *abhinaya* (expression) in dance. Amritlal views long hair as a signifier of femininity and a threat to a "holistic masculine identity". By using his financial power—money being equivalent to power in this bourgeois setting—Amritlal successfully thwarts Jairaj's career, reducing him to a state of dependency and "drunken impotency".

Jairaj: The Marginalized Male and the Victim of Stereotypes



Jairaj occupies a unique position in Indian literature as a **male victim of gender oppression**. His struggle highlights that patriarchy does not only marginalize women but also "stifles creative expression" in men who do not fit the "Alpha Male" archetype. Jairaj initially attempts to rebel, asserting that he will not have his art "run down by a handful of stubborn narrow-minded individuals". However, constant pressure from his father and the eventual betrayal by his wife cause his confidence to collapse.

Jairaj's identity as an artist is "shattered" because he is never permitted to dance freely; he is forced to negotiate his desires against societal pressures. His failure to become a successful dancer is not due to a lack of talent—he even performs as a woman for the army, earning great acclaim—but because he cannot survive economically or socially outside the patriarchal framework of his father's house. He eventually internalizes the stigma, viewing himself as "worthless" and blaming Ratna for his decline.

Ratna: Ambition, Complicity, and Internalized Patriarchy

Ratna, Jairaj's wife, is a "ruthlessly ambitious" character whose role is complex. While she is a talented dancer herself, she often prioritizes her own professional success over supporting her husband. Dattani uses Ratna to show how women can become "keys in the hands of patriarchy" to perpetuate its values.

In a crucial turning point, Ratna enters into a "secret deal" with Amritlal. Amritlal offers to allow Ratna to continue her dance career on the condition that she helps him "make a man" out of Jairaj. Ratna's complicity in sabotaging Jairaj's artistic growth reveals how women, often for survival or career advancement, can enforce the very gender roles that limit their own autonomy. She eventually dominates Jairaj, "overshadowing" him on stage and undermining his self-esteem.

However, Ratna also suffers. When their infant son, Shankar, dies due to an overdose of opium while Ratna is preoccupied with her career, Jairaj uses the tragedy to label her a "failed nurturer". At this point, Jairaj becomes the "voice of patriarchal society," stigmatizing Ratna for failing to live up to the traditional maternal role. This illustrates that in Dattani's world, no one is a pure victim or a pure oppressor; everyone navigates a "claustrophobic" system of mutual destruction.

Generational Conflict: Lata and Vishwas

The second generation, represented by **Lata and Vishwas**, shows both progress and the persistence of traditional attitudes. Lata is an accomplished dancer who succeeds where her father failed, partly because dance is socially acceptable for women. However, her success is "cultivated" by her mother, who tries to fulfill her own frustrated ambitions through her daughter. Lata expresses a sense of suffocation, wishing she could dance to please herself rather than her parents.



Vishwas, Lata's fiancé, represents "ordinary social attitudes" and expectations. While he is not as overtly autocratic as Amritlal, he expresses reservations about the "eroticism" of Lata's performances. He is viewed by Jairaj as the "true heir" to Amritlal's heritage because he focuses on making money through his family's sweet-making business rather than art. Through Vishwas, Dattani highlights how society continues to value "conformity over artistic passion".

Dramatic Innovations and Symbolism

Dattani employs several innovative techniques to underscore the play's themes:

- **Role-Switching:** The same actors often play characters from different generations (e.g., the actor playing Jairaj also plays Amritlal). This technique emphasizes that gender expectations and patriarchal roles "do not change easily over time" and are repeated across generations.
- **Symbolic Props:** Amritlal's **shawl** represents authority, control, and patriarchal power. When Vishwas wraps the shawl around himself, he immediately begins to sound like the authoritative Amritlal, demonstrating the "stylization" of masculine performance.
- **Split Scenes:** The use of divided stages and transitions between the garden (representing the past) and the living room (the present) allows Dattani to show how the "ghosts of the past" continue to haunt the present.

Conclusion: A Call for Artistic Freedom

Dance Like a Man is a "powerful commentary" on the intersection of gender, culture, and identity. By presenting a man as the victim of gendered expectations, Dattani challenges the traditional focus of gender studies and argues that **patriarchy harms everyone**. The play suggests that true art is "gender-neutral" and that creativity should be free from social labels.

The tragedy of Jairaj and Ratna serves as a warning against rigid social frameworks that suppress "talent and truth". Ultimately, Dattani advocates for a more "fluid and inclusive understanding of gender," one that allows individuals to follow their passions without the "fear or shame" imposed by a judgmental society. Through this play, Dattani invites his audience to reflect on the right to individual creativity and the courage required to embrace one's true self with dignity.

Bibliography

1. Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Book Enclave, 2008.
2. Aravindakshan, Dr. Aswathy. "Dance Like a Man: Challenging Gender Norms." *ashlit.in*, 6 Jan. 2026.



3. Bharati, Jaitra. "Performing Identity: Gendered Bodies in Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man." *New Academia*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 158-167.
4. Biswal, Pravasini. "Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's Play 'Dance Like a Man' and 'Tara' - A Critical Analysis." *IJELS*, vol. 4, no. 6, 2019, pp. 2038-2041.
5. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
6. Chaudhari, Minesh A. "Gender Mirroring in Mahesh Dattani's play Dance Like a Man." *IJRSML*, vol. 11, no. 5, May 2023, pp. 54-57.
7. Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. Foundation Books, 2005.
8. Das, Bhaswati. "Parental Desire and Expectations in Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man: A Study of Desire and Identity Formation." *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH*, vol. 13, no. 10, Oct. 2025, pp. 66-87.
9. Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance Like a Man*. Penguin Books, 2006.
10. Gunanidhi, Dr. P. N. "Marginalization of the female folk in Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man." *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2021, pp. 2839-2842.
11. Haq, Naeemul. "Gender Subjugation Revisited; a Study of Mahesh Dattani's Play Dance like a Man." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 2, no. 4, Oct. 2017, pp. 465-468.
12. Hussain Ansari, Mubarika. "Individual and Society in Mahesh Dattani's Play: 'Dance Like a Man'." *Think India Journal*, vol. 22, no. 9, 2019.
13. Jacob, Jerin. "Review Of Dance Like A Man: Society's Desire For Wholistic Masculinity." *Feminism in India*, 18 Apr. 2018.
14. Mee, Erin B. *The Theatre of Mahesh Dattani: Staging the Invisible*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
15. Prabha, K. "Challenging Patriarchal Structures: Feminist Themes in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani." *IJELRS*, vol. 2, no. 2, June 2025, pp. 95-101.
16. Rai, Bharathi S., and Vinil Rohan D'Souza. "Representation of Gendered Identities in Contemporary Indian English Drama: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Plays, Tara and Dance Like a Man." *AKSHARASURYA*, vol. 13, no. 1, Feb. 2026, pp. 72-82.
17. Ramu, Kalaiselvi, and Dr. H. Marie Evangeline. "Contextualizing Male and Female Torment and Trauma in Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man." *Journal of Advanced Zoology*, vol. 44, no. S-2, 2023, pp. 2753-2760.
18. Rathod, Shashikant Ukanda. "Feminine Concern, Indian Patriarchal Society and Human Relationship in Mahesh Dattani's Dance like a Man." *Knowledge Resonance*, 2021, pp. 375-376.
19. Suganya, A., and Dr. C. Arun. "Gender, Identity, and Cultural Resistance: The Social Construct of Masculinity in Dattani's Dance Like a Man." *Library Progress International*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2024, pp. 2192-2197.