

# Displacing Gender: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man

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## **Abstract**

*“Gender” and “sex” always have been two terms in constant dispute. “Femininity” and “masculinity” and two different gender identities shaped by socio cultural processes. For ages literature and arts have been constructing various stereotypical ideologies upon masculine and feminine concepts. Mahesh Dattani is one among the prominent visual artists who possessed ‘gender’ as the principal concern in his plays like Tara, Dance Like a Man, Final Solutions etc. He provided an effective dramatic voice for the marginalized victims through his fragmented settings and other postmodern theatrical attempts. In his play Dance Like a Man Dattani questions the hitherto erected socio-cultural constructions of gender. Dattani devises the traditional dance as a medium to portray the gender conflicts and allied issue in his society through three generations.*

**Key Words:** *gender, socio-cultural constructions, dance, masculinity, femininity, displacing gender*

## **I. Introduction**

“Gender” and “sex” always have been two terms in constant dispute upon their definitions, and in many place they are used interchangeably. In a popular acceptance, sex is considered as a biological notion and gender is a socio-cultural construction. In the words of Judith Butler, gender does not express some inner truth, but it is rather the production of “stylish repetition of actions”; gender is a performance in society. Gender attitudes and behaviours change as cultural norms and values change across time, with education, culture, religion, ethnicities, infrastructure and so on. “Femininity” and “masculinity” and two different gender identities shaped by socio cultural processes. For ages literature and arts have been constructing various stereotypical ideologies for what it should mean to be a male or a female. Men are always portrayed as a source of support and a guardian to female race. John Beynon in *Understanding Masculinities* observes:

The [still] widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as ‘Just like a man!’ or ‘Just like a woman!’ and in the kinds of features found in popular magazines along the lines of ‘How manly is your man?’, with a list of attributes to be rated or boxes to be ticked. Masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as

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polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast, are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional. (56)

Mahesh Dattani is one among the prominent visual artists who possessed 'gender' as the principal concern in his plays like *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Final Solutions* etc. He provided an effective dramatic voice for the marginalized victims through his fragmented settings and other postmodern theatrical attempts. Dattani is considered as one among the prominent pioneers of Modern Indian Theatre, especially Indian English Theatre. His plays dealt with the most compelling issues rooted in the present scenario with a rainbow of characters who are striving to expand their 'space'. The major issues focused in his plays are often unconventional, radical contemporary and free from taboos, and especially on the line of Ibsen and Shaw. Centring on gender concerns, Dattani explores the dichotomy between male and female roles within the archetype of family managed by patriarchs which is set in the context of a typical Indian society.

*Dance Like a Man* is a well-acclaimed and one of the best plays of Dattani that reinforced him to be one among the finest and most prominent playwrights in Indian English theatre. His topics are normally never spoken and avoided ones in a common platform. In this play he delicately dealt the notion of 'gender' through one of his principal passions – dance. He centres his play on the traditional dance which later develops into a medium of conflict. *Dance Like a Man* is about the three generations, their personal carvings, ambitions, sacrifices, struggles, compromises and conflicts. Jairaj and his wife Ratna are looking forward to develop a career as dancers. For them dance is not a mere form of art, but soul itself. Amritlal, his father, is a stereotypical male character which uprooted ideologies of so-called 'manliness' and 'masculinity'. He tries his best to detach his son from his chosen profession. For him this Bharatanatyam is "the craft of a prostitute... hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man". (406) When his attempts were in vain, he made a deal with Ratna that if she stops Jairaj from dancing he will let her to go to the prostitute's house to learn dance and pursue the career she dreams. Thus Ratna becomes a celebrated dancer and Jairaj found solace in alcohol. Later she moulds her daughter Lata into an acclaimed dancer and she constantly contacted the well-known reviewers and reporters for rare reviews for Lata's performances.

Amritlal in the play is a perfect embodiment of stereotypical male figure who is commanding, aggressive and has voice over others. He is the guardian for both Jairaj and Ratna. His commanding power is very much clear when he restricts Ratna to go to the harlot's house; "Your husband happens to be my son. And you are both under my care. It's my permission that you should ask for." (420) His thoughts and directives made him the agent of reinforcing the hitherto followed social constructions.

Amritlal: Do you know where a man's happiness lies?

Ratna: No

Amritlal: In being a man. (425)

He cannot tolerate the sound of dancing bells. The news that Jairaj is going to grow his hair for a dance form was received by him with utmost shock. All he was saying was "normal men don't keep their hair so long" (417). He ostracised Jairaj to an abnormal person who does everything contrast to the framed constructs. He is a freedom fighter and considered a man with much progressive attitudes. But his liberal mind has not grown as much as to welcome his son in the art meant for women, especially prostitutes. For him, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (427)

The *guruji* in the play has been depicted as a womanish fellow whose walking seems “disgusting” to Amritlal. All he fears is whether his son too will become someone like his guru. Here Dattani presents a common thought of understanding that, if a man becomes a dancer he loses all the manliness in him and he starts behaving like a woman. He uses dance as a tool to whip these taboos and stigma prevail in the contemporary society. Jairaj was never been a patriarch like his father Amritlal. He was completely against all notions of masculinity or ‘being a man’. Amritlal’s fear of homosexuality and his son becoming an effeminate individual were constantly reverberated in his dialogues. He was always susceptible to Ratna’s decisions. Though he was a good dancer, for Ratna he was not “brilliant”. Jairaj is portrayed as a subject to be ruled either by his father Artilal or his wife Ratna. Whenever he tries to question Ratna, she shuts his mouth through shrewd and crude words, which a wife or a female character hardly pronounces. “You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours.” (402)

Ratna, wife of Jairaj, is more strong and manly character. Unlike Jairaj, she has her own decisions and stood firm to it. She does everything and anything to achieve her goal. When Amritlal stops her from her dance classes at the whore she tenaciously encounter her father-in-law saying, “If you don’t allow me to visit her, then...then I’ll have to ask her to come here.” (420). She is not a typical wife who looks after the likes and dislikes of her husband and in-laws. She is a South Indian who marries Jairaj a Gujarati. For he this marriage was a means of achieving her goal to be a well acclaimed dancer. When she says that she married Jairaj because he is a dancer, Amritlal correct her that she married not just because his son is a dancer, but he will let her dance as much as she want. When Jairaj danced for his passion, for Ratna dance is her life. She vivaciously dance with an ambition. And she moulded her daughter Lata too in her path. Ratna is too much obsessed with dance. She is never fed up with acknowledgements and praises. For her even Lata’s achievements too were he own. Jairaj: I’m sorry Ratna. I don’t want to see you pasting those reviews in our album – pretending they are yours. (437)

Ratna never complimented Jairaj or even considered him as man in front of her authoritative voice. When she unimpressively calls him a man, he ironically mocks at her which shows he never expected such compliments from her.

Ratna: That is because you are a... man!

Jairaj” Thank you. You haven’t been so complimentary on previous occasions. (437)

She is the voice of the house, from culinary to her daughter’s future. Being a South Indian she always cooked what she loved like *dosa* and *idli*. Viswas, would-be of Lata, was surprised to see a Gujarati house without tea and only coffee. Ratna was as powerful to alter the basic cultural framework of the house. Her imperious nature is recurrently shown through the words like “my”, “mine”, “I” instead or “our” and “Ours” which Jairaj always forced to correct. The audience feels that she had crossed all her limits as a female and a mother when Jairaj claims her to be the reason for their son’s death. The nanny had given him too much quantity of sleeping pills so that she could peacefully sleep and thus he dies. At times its obvious that Ratna seems to be the culprit for her son’s death as she runs behind fame she neglected her son. No doubt she also has to bear guilt for the unsuccessful career Jairaj had to encounter with.

The third generation, represented by Lata and Viswas is more in an intermediate stage who could accept the changes. But here too Lata is a bit domineering than Viswas due to her mother’s brought up. In Indian tradition, it is groom’s family come and meets the girl first to fix the marriage. In the beginning, Viswas waits for

Lata's parents to get permission for their marriage. This shows a strong deviation from the basic fabricated frame. Through Lata, Dattani demolishes even the subtle stereotypes of being a woman, the nurturing thought of being a mother.

Lata: Do you want children?

Viswas: Yes.

Lata: Lots and lots of them?

Viswas: Yes.

Lata: Then go and marry someone else. (390)

Mahesh Dattani deliberately used dance as the main framework of the play. As per Indian tradition lord Shiva is considered as the lord of dance. When the patriarchal society claims that dance and certain arts and works are merely meant for women, Dattani utters through his mouthpiece Jairaj, "Siva-the lord of dace...the dance of Shiva – the dance of a man" (441) Here he calls the god who is considered as the epitome of masculinity and manliness in Indian tradition to the centre of the conflict. Here Dattani questions the hitherto erected socio-cultural constructions through his displacing of gender. Dattani devises the traditional dance as a medium to portray the gender conflicts and allied issue in his society. All what is discussed in the play can be concluded as how and still gender stereotypes persist and work in the Indian society.

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