

## Gender, Identity, and Cultural Resistance: The Social Construct of Masculinity in Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

A. Suganya<sup>1</sup>, Dr. C. Arun<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram.

<sup>2</sup>The Research Supervisor, Department of English, Govt., Arts & Science College, Thiruvannamallur.

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### ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* explores the intricate relationship between gender, identity, and cultural resistance in the context of societal expectations. The play examines how the social construct of masculinity shapes the identity and choices of its male protagonist, Jairaj, who aspires to become a professional Bharatanatyam dancer. In a society in which traditional gender roles confine men to activities perceived as "masculine", Jairaj's passion for dance becomes a source of personal and social conflict. The play highlights how patriarchal values not only restrict women, but also impose rigid expectations on men, limiting their freedom to pursue artistic expression. Jairaj's struggle against societal judgment and familial pressure reflects cultural resistance inherent in defying gender norms. Dattani uses Bharatanatyam, a classical dance form traditionally associated with women, as a symbol of resistance to the social construction of masculinity. Jairaj's artistic ambitions have been dismissed and criticised, revealing deep-seated biases that link gender roles with cultural identity. Through Jairaj's personal journey, the play critiques the idea that men must conform to predefined roles to maintain societal respect, showing how both genders are oppressed by rigid social frameworks. By challenging these norms, Dattani's play underscores the need for individual freedom and redefinition of masculinity in contemporary society. *Dance Like a Man* provides a powerful commentary on the intersection of gender, culture, and identity, encouraging a more inclusive understanding of human expression beyond socially constructed boundaries.

**Keywords:** Gender Roles, Masculinity, Identity, Cultural Resistance, Patriarchy, Social Construct, Gender Norms

### INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani, one of India's foremost playwrights in English, is renowned for his penetrating explorations of social issues, particularly those involving gender, identity, and the often rigid structures of tradition and culture. His play *Dance Like a Man* (1989) delves deeply into the complexities surrounding masculinity and gender roles in the context of Indian society. In a world where social norms dictate that men must adhere to specific behaviours and occupations, the play's male protagonist, Jairaj, finds himself at odds with the cultural expectations placed upon him. This tension arises not only from his desire to pursue Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance form traditionally associated with women, but also from the broader societal constraints that restrict individual identity. Through *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani critiques the social construct of masculinity and challenges the cultural norms that dictate the roles that men and women are expected to play.

### The Social Construct of Masculinity

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani illustrates how gender roles are socially constructed, with an emphasis on the limitations placed on men. According to Butler's theory of gender performativity, gender is not a fixed

identity but rather something that is performed based on societal expectations (Butler, 1990). This theory resonates strongly with the play, as Jairaj's love for dance clashes with traditional views of what constitutes "masculine" behaviour. Bharatanatyam, viewed as a feminine art form, became a symbol of Jairaj's struggle to assert his identity against the confines of cultural norms.

Dattani uses the tension between Jairaj and his father, Amritlal, to expose the patriarchal foundations that define masculinity. Amritlal, representing the traditional view, cannot accept his son's involvement in dance, perceiving it as a threat to the family's honour and Jairaj's manhood. As critic Erin B. Mee notes, "Amritlal's vision of manhood is tied to power and control, while Jairaj's is linked to artistic expression and emotional depth" (Mee, 2008). This conflict reveals the narrow definition of masculinity in Indian society, where any deviation from prescribed norms is met by resistance and derision.

### **Gender Identity and Patriarchal Control**

Central to Dattani's play is the notion that both men and women suffer under the weight of patriarchal expectations, although in different ways. While patriarchy is often discussed in relation to the oppression of women, *Dance Like a Man* demonstrates how men are also victims of these rigid structures. Jairaj's father, Amritlal, embodies the patriarchal authority that seeks to control and define what is acceptable behavior for men. His rejection of Jairaj's dancing is not just a rejection of an art form but a rejection of Jairaj's right to define his own identity.

Critic M.K. Naik highlights this dynamic when he observes that Dattani "expertly portrays the psychological and emotional strain that results from societal expectations, especially in relation to gender" (Naik, 1993). Jairaj's inability to pursue dance without judgment reflects the limitations of male identity within a patriarchal framework. The play critiques the patriarchal assumption that men must be powerful, authoritative figures who engage in socially acceptable forms of work, thus marginalising activities like dance that are deemed feminine.

Dattani's portrayal of this struggle can also be seen as a larger critique of how patriarchal systems trap individuals into specific gender roles. Jairaj's mother, Ratna, who initially supports her son's passion for dance, ultimately succumbs to societal pressures, reflecting how deeply ingrained these gender expectations are. The social construct of masculinity not only affects men but also influences how women view men and their roles. Ratna's disillusionment with Jairaj's pursuit of dance serves as a tragic reminder of how cultural expectations can erode individual freedom.

### **Bharatanatyam as a Symbol of Cultural Resistance**

In *Dance Like a Man*, Bharatanatyam functions as more than just a dance form; it becomes a symbol of resistance against the cultural norms that seek to define gender roles. Dattani uses the art of dance as a metaphor for the struggle to maintain one's identity in the face of societal pressure. Jairaj's passion for Bharatanatyam is not only a personal choice but also a challenge to the traditional idea of what men are supposed to do.

Critic Bruce King notes, "Dattani's work often focuses on the conflict between individual desires and societal expectations, particularly in terms of gender. *Dance Like a Man* is a striking example of this, where the protagonist's love for dance becomes a battleground for his identity" (King, 2004). Bharatanatyam, traditionally performed by women, became the site of Jairaj's rebellion against the rigid constructs of masculinity imposed by his father and society at large. Dattani portrays dance as a medium through which Jairaj seeks to reclaim his identity, challenging the patriarchal authority that seeks to define.

Jairaj's struggles can be understood within the broader framework of cultural resistance. By choosing to pursue a form of art associated with femininity, he resists the cultural expectations placed upon him as a man. This act of resistance, however, is met with harsh criticism from both his father and society, highlighting how deeply ingrained the social construct of masculinity is within Indian culture. Jairaj's inability to fully realise his potential as a dancer serves as a tragic reminder of the powerful forces of patriarchy that limit individual freedom.

### **Feminist Perspectives on Male Oppression**

While *Dance Like a Man* is often read as a feminist critique of patriarchal oppression, it also offers a nuanced exploration of how men are victims of the system. The feminist theory of patriarchy, as articulated by Gerda Lerner, asserts that patriarchal systems not only oppress women, but also shape and limit male behaviour (Lerner, 1986). Dattani's play illustrates this point by showing how Jairaj, despite being a man, is forced to

conform to societal expectations that dictate what is appropriate for men to do.

Simone de Beauvoir's observation in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949) can be extended to the experience of men in Dattani's play. Just as women are socialised into specific gender roles, men are also taught to adhere to certain behaviours that define their masculinity. In Jairaj's case, his father's insistence that he abandons dance in favour of a more traditional masculine pursuit reflects the socialisation process that men undergo in patriarchal societies.

Critic Anita Myles points out that "Dattani's work offers a powerful critique of the ways in which patriarchal structures limit not only women's freedom but also men's ability to express themselves authentically" (Myles, 2006). This dual critique of patriarchy underscores the fact that both genders are subjected to societal pressures that dictate their roles and behaviours.

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* offers a complex and multi-faceted exploration of the social construction of masculinity within Indian society. Through Jairaj's character, Dattani challenges the rigid gender roles that define what it means to be a man, particularly in relation to artistic expression. By choosing Bharatanatyam, Jairaj resists the patriarchal expectations placed upon him, but his struggle ultimately reflects the broader limitations that society imposes on both men and women.

The play serves as a powerful critique of how gender identity is shaped by cultural norms, and highlights the need for greater freedom and flexibility in how individuals define themselves. Through *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani calls into question the very foundations of masculinity and offers a vision of a world where gender roles are not dictated by tradition, but by individual choice. The play invites readers to reflect on the ways in which society constructs and polices gender, urging a re-examination of what it means to be a man or woman in contemporary society.

## Discussion

### Gender Identity and Masculinity in *Dance Like a Man*

In *Dance Like a Man*, Mahesh Dattani crafts a compelling narrative about the interplay between gender identity and masculinity, particularly focusing on the internal and external conflicts faced by Jairaj, the male protagonist. Jairaj's struggle centres on his passion for Bharatanatyam, a dance form traditionally associated with femininity, and how this passion clashes with the societal and familial expectations imposed on him as a man. His father, Amritlal, embodies patriarchal pressure that demands strict adherence to conventional male roles, leading to a complex father-son relationship that frames much of the play's conflict. Dattani uses this struggle to critique the rigid constructs of masculinity and the limitations they impose on men, particularly in a conservative Indian society.

Jairaj's pursuit of Bharatanatyam emblematic of his resistance to traditional gender roles. For him, the art of dance is not just a form of expression, but a critical part of his identity. However, his passion for Bharatanatyam is viewed as a challenge to his masculinity. In a society where dance is considered a feminine occupation, Jairaj's decision to become a dancer is viewed as a threat to the social order. This internal conflict is central to his character, as he grapples with his own desire to follow his passion while simultaneously struggling with the societal expectations of what it means to be a "man." Jairaj's journey mirrors the real-life struggle of many men who are confined by traditional gender norms, and Dattani highlights the emotional and psychological tolls of such constraints. As Erin Mee points out, "Jairaj's identity as a dancer becomes a site of negotiation between his individual desires and societal pressures" (Mee 67).

Amritlal, Jairaj's father, embodies the patriarchal values that enforce rigid gender roles. As a strict and authoritarian figure, Amritlal expects Jairaj to conform to the traditional ideals of masculinity: strength, dominance, and economic productivity. He views Bharatanatyam as an inappropriate pursuit for man, associating it with weakness and effeminacy. For Amritlal, dance was a threat to the social fabric and Jairaj's manhood. Dattani uses Amritlal's character to critique how patriarchal societies often equate masculinity with rigid notions of control and power. Amritlal's disdain for Jairaj's passion reveals how deeply ingrained these expectations are, and how they perpetuate harmful stereotypes about gender and masculinity. In the play, Amritlal tells Jairaj, "I have no objection to your dancing as long as it is a hobby. But to make a career of it?" (Dattani 45), revealing his belief that a man's worth lies in his ability to earn a living in a socially acceptable manner, not in artistic or emotional fulfillment.

The conflict between Jairaj and his father represents broader societal tension between individual identity

and collective expectations. Amritlal's disapproval of Jairaj's choice to dance reflects not only his personal disappointment but also the societal pressure that defines gender roles in Indian society. Bharatanatyam, traditionally viewed as a feminine art form, became the battleground for Jairaj's identity. He must navigate the expectations of his father and society while attempting to assert his autonomy as an artist. However, Jairaj's struggle with masculinity is not just about defying societal norms, but also about reconciling his identity as a man within the constraints of his culture. As critic Bruce King notes, "Jairaj's character highlights the fragility of masculinity in the face of cultural expectations, and Dattani uses this conflict to explore the destructive effects of patriarchal systems on both men and women" (King 98).

Bharatanatyam itself, as a dance form, carries significant cultural weight. Traditionally associated with temple dancers and feminine grace, it stands in stark contrast to the qualities expected of men in patriarchal Indian societies. Jairaj's desire to become a Bharatanatyam dancer is not just a personal passion, but an act of cultural resistance. By choosing a profession associated with women, Jairaj challenges the established gendered division of labour, where men are expected to take up roles that signify strength, power, and authority, while women are relegated to positions of subservience and grace. Jairaj's pursuit of dance symbolises his rebellion against the rigid binaries of gender that dictate how men and women should behave in society. As M.K. Naik observes, "In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani challenges the traditional notions of gender and occupation by portraying a male dancer who defies the culturally prescribed boundaries of masculinity" (Naik 123).

However, Jairaj's rebellion does not have any consequences. His relationship with Amritlal deteriorates as the older man grows increasingly disillusioned, with his son's refusal to conform. The tension between Jairaj and Amritlal is central to the play's exploration of its masculinity. Amritlal represents the patriarchal values that dictate a man's role in society, values that Jairaj finds suffocating. The generational clash between the two men highlights how gender roles are perpetuated across time, with fathers often enforcing the same restrictive codes on their sons that they themselves were subjected to. Amritlal's attempts to control Jairaj's life by trying to dictate his career choices and dissuade him from dancing illustrate the oppressive nature of patriarchal expectations. As Jairaj says, "He could never understand that dance meant everything to me. It was not about being a man or a woman. It was about being an artist" (Dattani 76). This quote encapsulates Jairaj's desire to transcend gender limitations and embrace a more fluid and open conception of identity.

In addition to the conflict with his father, Jairaj's struggle is compounded by societal perceptions of male dancers. In a culture that views dance as a feminine pursuit, men who engage in it are often viewed as less masculine or even effeminate. This stigma deeply affects Jairaj, as he must constantly justify his passion for others and defend his identity as a dancer. Dattani uses Jairaj's experience to critique the societal pressures that police gender boundaries and enforce a narrow definition of what it means to be a man. The character's vulnerability and sense of alienation speak to the broader issue of how men are victimised by patriarchal systems that privilege them. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "Patriarchal society not only oppresses women but also restricts men by forcing them to conform to restrictive gender roles" (Gilbert and Gubar 137).

Ultimately, Jairaj's struggle with masculinity in *Dance Like a Man* reveals the complex ways in which gender identity is shaped by societal norms and expectations. Dattani critiques the patriarchal system for its rigid enforcement of gender roles, showing how it limits the freedom and creativity of individuals like Jairaj. The play underscores the destructive effects of these societal constructs on both men and women, as Jairaj's identity as an artist is constantly threatened by patriarchal forces that seek to define him by his gender. Through the character of Jairaj, Dattani advocates a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender, one that allows individuals to pursue their passions and express their identities without fear of judgment or repression.

### **Cultural Resistance through Dance**

In *Dance Like a Man*, Mahesh Dattani uses Bharatanatyam not just as an art form, but as a powerful symbol of cultural and gender resistance. Jairaj's passion for Bharatanatyam represents his defiance of the rigid gender norms imposed by a patriarchal society. Bharatanatyam, traditionally considered a feminine form of expression, allows Jairaj to challenge the social constructs that define what is considered acceptable to a man. His father, Amritlal, embodies the voice of societal expectations and dismisses Bharatanatyam as inappropriate for men, reinforcing the idea that dance is for women. Dattani illustrates Jairaj's struggle to reconcile his identity as a male dancer with the cultural values that condemn his choices. "I wanted to dance, but my father thought

that would make me less of a man”, Jairaj reflects, exposing the deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs that limit individual expression and impose gendered roles (Dattani 42).

Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony offers a valuable lens to understand Jairaj’s resistance. Gramsci defines cultural hegemony as the dominance of a particular worldview or ideology that becomes the norm, influencing people’s values and behaviours without questioning them. In *Dance Like Man*, Amritlal represents the hegemonic forces that govern what is socially and culturally acceptable to men. By attempting to suppress Jairaj’s passion for dance, Amritlal upholds the dominant idea that masculinity is defined by strength, control, and financial power. Being perceived as feminine, dance challenges these norms and threatens established patriarchal power structures. As Bruce King explains, “Dattani critiques the forces that keep men and women confined within predefined social roles, especially those of patriarchy, which stifle creative expression” (King 87). Jairaj’s refusal to conform is thus an act of defiance against cultural hegemony, as his pursuit of Bharatanatyam symbolises his fight for personal freedom in the face of societal limitations.

Moreover, dance serves as a form of identity assertion for the Jairaj. This represents his personal resistance to the expectations of masculinity imposed by his father and society. Bharatanatyam becomes his way of reclaiming his individuality and affirms his identity outside the boundaries of the patriarchy. However, this form of self-expression is met with disapproval, not just by his father but also by the broader community, who views his devotion to dance as a sign of weakness. This internal conflict illustrates the tension between personal desires and societal pressure. As Erin B. Mee notes, “Dance in *Dance Like a Man* becomes a site of resistance, where Jairaj’s struggle is not only with his father but with the larger social forces that try to define him” (Mee 102). Despite this pushback, Jairaj continues to view dance as an integral part of who he is, even if it means challenging the cultural norms that confine him.

Bharatanatyam in *Dance Like a Man* symbolizes more than just a dance form—it represents a mode of resistance against cultural hegemony and gender norms. Jairaj’s defiance of his father’s patriarchal values and his assertion of identity through dance reflect the complexities of cultural and gender struggles in Indian society. Dattani skillfully uses dance as a metaphor for the broader conflict between individuality and societal conformity, making *Dance Like a Man* a nuanced exploration of resistance, identity, and power of art.

### **The Role of Women in Supporting and Perpetuating Patriarchy**

In Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man*, Ratna plays a complex role, one that reflects both her personal ambitions and complicity in perpetuating patriarchal norms. While Ratna initially supported Jairaj’s passion for Bharatanatyam, her motives were not entirely altruistic. Ratna herself is a dancer, and her ambition pushes her to leverage Jairaj’s love for dance to advance her own career. She convinces Jairaj to continue dancing, but her support is rooted in self-interest. As Jairaj observes, “You used me... to gain what you wanted” (Dattani 54). Ratna’s support of dance is not so much an embrace of gender equality, but a means of preserving her own aspirations. While she helps Jairaj in his artistic pursuits, she simultaneously aligns herself with patriarchal structures, ultimately reinforcing the system that limits their freedom.

Ratna’s dual role as both supporter and detractor of Jairaj’s aspirations demonstrates how women, too, can reinforce patriarchal norms, even as they are oppressed by them. Ratna aligns with her father-in-law, Amritlal, in dismissing Jairaj’s dance as a threat to masculinity. She conforms to patriarchal expectations by valuing social status and success over personal fulfillment. Critics like Erin Mee note how Dattani’s female characters, including Ratna, “exhibit a kind of internalized patriarchy, where their actions, though seemingly independent, ultimately serve the same oppressive systems” (Mee 98). Ratna’s actions reveal how women, often out of survival or ambition, can enforce the very gender roles that limit their autonomy and that of the men around them.

The influence of patriarchy on women is further illustrated by Ratna’s inability to fully break free of its constructs. Although she rebels against traditional roles by pursuing a career in dance, she simultaneously adopts patriarchal values to protect her own interests. Ratna uses her control over Jairaj to maintain her position of power in their relationship, leveraging traditional gender roles to her advantage. In doing so, she inadvertently contributes to the cycle of gender oppression, reinforcing the system that subjugates her. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, “women’s roles in a patriarchal society are often dictated by their complicity in enforcing the very norms that oppress them” (Gilbert and Gubar 45). Ratna’s complicity

highlights the insidious ways in which patriarchal values permeate even the actions of those who seek to resist them.

Ratna's character illustrates how women, despite being victims of patriarchy, are conditioned to enforce these norms, thereby perpetuating the cycle of oppression. Ratna's desire for success and recognition ultimately leads her to align with patriarchal forces, even at the cost of her relationship with Jairaj. Her role as both a supporter and enforcer of patriarchal values shows the complexity of gender dynamics in **Dance Like Man**. Dattani's portrayal of Ratna demonstrates that patriarchy is not simply a system imposed by men, but one that women, often unwittingly, help sustain.

### Conclusion

In **Dance Like a Man**, Mahesh Dattani intricately weaves the themes of gender, identity, and cultural resistance to critique the rigid constructs of masculinity that govern societal expectations. Through the character of Jairaj, Dattani explores the internal conflict faced by men who wish to pursue passions deemed unmasculine such as Bharatanatyam. Jairaj's struggle highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchal norms and the emotional toll they exact on individuals, particularly men, who find themselves caught between personal aspirations and societal pressure. The play serves as a powerful commentary on how masculinity is socially constructed, enforcing conformity, and limiting the scope of individual expressions. Moreover, Dattani's exploration of female characters, particularly Ratna, reveals the complex dynamics of gender roles and ways in which women, despite their own subjugation, can perpetuate patriarchal norms. Ratna's character embodies the contradictions of ambition and compliance, showcasing how societal conditioning influences both men and women in their respective roles. Ultimately, **Dance Like a Man** transcends its specific cultural context to address the universal themes of identity and resistance. It challenges audiences to reconsider the rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity, advocating a more nuanced understanding of gender that allows for greater freedom of expression. In doing so, Dattani not only critiques the status quo but also encourages the reimagining of cultural narratives that embrace individuality over conformity.

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