



## Newly ‘constructed masculinity’ in Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man*

Diganta Deka

Department of English, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Received: 17 Aug 2022; Received in revised form: 06 Sep 2022; Accepted: 11 Sep 2022; Available online: 16 Sep 2022  
©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— *The term ‘gender’ is used to describe the distinction between the socialized features of femininity and masculinity as well as the biological sex. It is a social construct that defines behaviors like masculine and feminine behavior. Gender plays a hugely important part in society. Specifically, a situation in which men frequently oppress women and where women are assigned responsibilities that make it clear that they are less capable of acquiring and using arbitrary authority than men are. The term ‘patriarchy’ often refers to the system in which this power appears and is exercised. Additionally, men tend to appreciate the power factor and insist on participating in activities that are primarily focused on them. So, a man’s identity defines his sexuality and area of work. Men also want to participate in activities that are largely about them and tend to appreciate the power component. A man’s identity thus determines his sexual orientation and line of work. In his play Dance Like A Man, Mahesh Dattani takes on these issues head-on as a dramatist. He challenges the socialization of gender roles and the hierarchy of the sexes. The present paper attempts to explore the discourse masculinity, patriarchal hegemony and gender construction within the margin of family unit characterized by generation gaps as depicted in the play.*

**Keywords**— *Gender Construction, Patriarchy, Hegemony, Masculinity.*

It is impossible to adequately explain the nature of human identity in our modern lives using just one discursive domain. Identity has been viewed by gender studies as a matter of agency within the heterosexual binary. However, the ongoing expansion of gender roles outside the bounds of dualism calls into question the veracity of normative constructions. By establishing the idea of gender performativity, which aims to explain the tentative character of gender signification and leaves room for the re-signification of gendered bodies, Judith Butler has challenged the complacency of gender studies. Gender, according to Butler, is performative and the idea that gender is performative explains how a series of activities lead to the development of gender identity. In her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* Butler notes:

“Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler).

She effectively criticizes the ontological essentialism of binary gender concepts like man and woman and views the body as a sociological signifier determined by tradition. She wrote “gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler). Being a socially conscious dramatist, Mahesh Dattani is concerned with how gender roles are evolving in contemporary India. In Indian society, where individuals are still viewed in the context of restrictive societal mores despite dramatic changes to the economy and society, he reinterprets and challenges traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. His characters are based on the more affluent and urbanized segments of society. They appear to be the most forward-thinking and educated group under whose direction India hopes to overcome the Third World’s disadvantage. Dattani, however, methodically exposes the contradictions present in such a society through a

representation of prejudice, stereotyping, and dogma in the guise of culture and tradition. He uses sexuality and gender as the foundation for a polemic against marginalization and oppression. He sees a person's sexuality as fluid rather than natural or necessary. To maintain the hegemonic power relations, repressive society demands that everyone adopt gendered identities and repeatedly replicate these identities. Identity constructions serve to articulate the heterosexuality binary matrix and to oppose other manifestations of it. He reflects that "seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in way". (Butler)

To begin with, the phrase "Dance like a Man" functions as a performative utterance that simultaneously asserts that there are different dance genres and techniques for men and women. Thus, 'dance' as the main theme, appears as the catalyst for the conflict between the characters. As the story unfolds, it moves forward to take center stage, leaving the supporting cast behind. Eventually, 'dance' begins to develop a personality that governs the characters in the narrative. Ratna and Jairaj want to pursue their love of dance and make it a career choice; for them, Bharatnatyam is more than just an art form; it is who they are and what makes them who they are. A creative person who wants to express themselves through their art is thwarted in their efforts by traditional gender roles, which also force them to conform to the boundaries of this repressive social structure. Here, it is a 'male' who is oppressed by patriarchy rather than just a woman. In the narrative, Jairaj is more severely impacted by gender prejudice and stereotypes. It is significant because formerly in Indian society, dance was not seen as a respectable vocation, either collectively or individually for males. In this context, 'dance' refers to societal obligations that must be 'performed'. Therefore, a close examination of the title reveals the performative nature of the expression, which, with the aid of linguistic conventions, acknowledges a fundamental form of 'Man' that, must be repeated in speech, gestures, and actions, or rather in such positive performances, in order to maintain the gendering status quo. Thus, dance functions as a jussive verb that expresses an order or demand in both of its senses: "artistic performance and conventional norms." (Bharati)

Jairaj uses dancing as a means of expressing himself and his feelings in the performance. He uses dance as a means of rebellion against his father's attempts to control him and make him live up to his expectations. According to Amritlal, dancing for Jairaj began as a pastime or rather a fancy that he had, which he believed wouldn't last for very long. Jairaj however continues to practise Bharatnatyam

despite his father's opposition and is eager to study Kuchipudi, another kind of Indian classical dance that originated in the village of Kuchipudi in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. His wife Ratna encourages him by dancing with him and giving him the strength to oppose his father. Jairaj displays rebellious trait even years after Amritlal's passing when, despite an aging-related receding hairline, he continues to wear his hair long, contrary to what his father had always wanted. Amritlal, who is regarded as modern and emancipated by other people in society, fails to embody this mindset at home because he forbids his kid from dancing and insists that he conform to the gender role that society has assigned to him. The concepts of independence, progress, and freedom hold very different meanings for both parent and son. When Jairaj asks his father if he's never had any obsessions, Amritlal responds, revealing the difference in their perspectives: "If you mean my involvement in fighting for your freedom [...] yes, it was my obsession." (Dattani). Jairaj then exclaims: "You had yours. Now allow me to have mine!" (Dattani)

On the other hand, 'dance' must be conserved for Ratna by being taught by a traditional Dev Dasi or temple dancer like Channi amma. Jairaj dances to find happiness and the joy of dancing along with his wife. Lata's parents' passion helped her develop as a good dancer, and now it is an integral part of who she is. The grandfather, Amritlal Parekh, supported Ratna's love of dance only to maintain his reputation as a liberal and progressive nationalist, but he expressed opposition to his son choosing to pursue dance as a career. Viswas is a diminished mirror of Amritlal's personality who, without control over Lata's life, is unable to voice his displeasure with her dancing. Such pairings of characters also serve as a theatrical device to reveal the disruptive nature of gender signifying in performance. In order to retrace Jairaj's childhood memories, Dattani casts the same actor who played Jairaj in the part of Amritlal Parekh. This exchange technique highlights each unique 'stylization' of the character that exemplifies gender roles in society. The actor just physically alters his part by enveloping Amritlal's shawl while adopting an authoritative stance which Judith Butler puts as "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts". (Butler)

Mahesh Dattani has critically evaluated both the individual and the societal mentality of those who are bound by patriarchal conventions in *Dance Like a Man*. It can be analyzed as a family drama that depicts a fierce conflict between individual identity and hegemonic identity through generation. In the words of Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri:

“Through the seamless movement in time and space, Dattani weaves in the intricate web of gender relationships and the givens of societal norm spanning three generations” (Chaudhuri).

The play does a fantastic job of presenting the stigma associated with the word effeminate. Jairaj's father, Amritlal Parekh, is an intelligent Hindu freedom warrior and shrewd Gujju (Gujarati) businessman. He believed that males were expected to engage in activities that demonstrated their physical prowess, thus he had no idea that men might pursue careers in dancing. His opposition to Jairaj's career choice of dance was mostly motivated by the internalized idea of rigid gender norms. Jairaj has chosen a profession that was historically reserved for women, thus to Amritlal, he is not a man. Since the day he went back to his father's care, Jairaj has ceased to be a man in Ratna's eyes. Because Jairaj's masculinity is under attack in the play's milieu, he must repeatedly 'act' his gender in order to create himself. Hence, it can be said that Jairaj's gender is performative and that his repetitive body movements and gestures constitute essential signifiers in this performance's script.

Amritlal believes that the ideal role envisioned for his gender is not represented by this performative art. He considered the performance to be well as long as it was confined to his daughter-in-law, but the instant he saw his dear son performing the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam, the ground shook beneath him. Even the sight of Jairaj's guru (teacher) with his long hair infuriated Amritlal:

“Amritlal: I have never seen a man with long hair.

Jairaj: All sadhus have long hair.

Amritlal: I don't mean them. I meant normal men.

[...]

Jairaj: Are you saying that he is not...

Amritlal: I have also noticed the way he walks.” (Dattani)

Amritlal's suspicions in *Dance Like a Man* subtly imply homosexuality. However, the play's primary means of presenting Jairaj's gender ambiguity is through the performance of his body. It's noteworthy to observe that Dattani makes a subtle suggestion about Jairaj's body's suitability for feminine roles.

Language conventions are used to produce gendered bodies, therefore it follows that these discourse flaws and slipups are also present. The goal of repeating gender functions is to approach their optimal form. However, because the gendered bodies cannot duplicate an ideal form, it becomes a failing attempt to do so. Butler notes:

“Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”(Butler)

In these definitions, Jairaj's gender is also a 'mundane', 'repetitive', and even 'ritualistic' act in a performance that repeatedly repeats itself through different body gestures and acts. Since Jairaj occasionally dresses as a different sex, renegotiating his traditional gender roles, it even nearly resembles Butler's concept of performativity in 'drag'. If we look more closely at Jairaj's explanation of his performance as a woman, he claims that donning Ratna's wig and outfit made him resemble her. In some ways, this can be deceptive because any attempt to conceptualize Jairaj's gender performativity must be accompanied by the understanding that it involves more than simply taking up a woman's outfit and choosing to be the woman he is not:

“There's nothing crude about it. I danced the same item. For the army [...] your mother was too scared and they only wanted a woman. So I wore your mother's costume, a wig and [...] whatever else was necessary to make me look like a woman, and danced. They loved it. They loved it even more when they found out I was a man.”(Dattani)

Hence, the conceptions of a permanent gender identity that a heteronormative culture tends to presuppose are challenged and subverted by Jairaj's performative gender, which is contingent rather than stable.

Even for Ratna, gender emerges as a performance of a different kind since Amritlal paradoxically endorses his daughter-in-law's choice in dance, in part because it fits the traditional performative structure of the Indian woman in her given gender role. Again, his approval is not just a quick nod of the head. Assuming the role of the Indian patriarch, he rules Ratna's movements and exerts enough control over them to win her support for his plans. When he finds out that Ratna visits the devadasi Chenni Amma and performs in her courtyard, he steps in right away to stop Ratna and stop any further lessons that, in Amritlal's perspective, would have damaged the prestige of his family:

“Amritlal: And practice in her courtyard for all passers-by to see.

Ratna: Only those who are curious enough to peep over her wall to see where the sound of dancing bells are coming from.

Amritlal: Your bells. The sound of your bells.

Ratna: Yes.

Amritlal: The sound of your bells coming from the courtyard of a prostitute.

Ratna: She is seventy-five years old.

Amritlal: And people peer over her walls to see my daughter-in-law dancing in her courtyard.”  
(Dattani)

Further, her claims that she doesn't think of Jairaj as a man because he went back to his father's care, she further exemplifies the contradictions that come with gender roleplaying. This reveals gaps and inconsistencies between tradition and practice, illuminating the uncertainty of social expectation. When Viswas tries to mimic the stern Amritlal by putting his shawl over him, he shows us the ridicule in imitation that can be seen in the forced portrayal of stereotypes. His performance establishes the upper bound on the frequency of acts specific to a given gender role, which always impedes the ideal performance of gender. He expresses the same patriarchal viewpoint on dancing as Amritlal, but because he lacks authority, his performance amounts to a parody of patriarchy. Jairaj, however, tells Viswas a story of having to perform as a lady in front of an army. In such a situation, dancing turns becomes a vehicle for marginalized people to assert their queer identity, which is placed beyond the heterosexual community's narrow confines.

*Dance Like A Man* skillfully skirts the boundaries of acceptable definitions of masculinity and femininity and asks how such frail structures can provide a solution to the possibilities found in the subversive repetition of identities. It centers on Jairaj and Ratna, a husband and wife team that compete against one another in gender roles. They continue to examine their gendered roles and relive their life of servitude under the patriarch Amritlal Parekh as they do so. The play's in-depth examination of dance's role in societal function reveals how important it is for creating personal identities. Ratna and Amritlal's power play explores the power structures that control tradition and mainstream traditional identity. The playwright portrays the stigmatization of male dancers through Amritlal, which revisits the historical truth of the Devdasi tradition. In Viswas and Jairaj, masculinity is portrayed as a performative aspect of the male body. While the latter subverts such codes by ingesting diametrically opposed feminine codes, the former can only copy the patriarchal gender codes of masculinity.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance like a Man: a Stage Play in Two Acts*. India: Penguin Books, 2006.
- [2] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- [3] Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- [4] Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005
- [5] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, p.519. doi:10.2307/3207893.
- [6] Bharti, Jaitra. "Performing Identity: Gendered Bodies in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, vol.8, no.1, p.160. <http://interactionsforum.com/new-academia>