



The Exploration of Gender Roles and Societal Expectations in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's play Dance Like a Man is a thought-provoking exploration of how gender roles and societal expectations shape individual identity, career choices, and familial relationships. Set in the context of a conservative Indian society, the play examines how gender identity, particularly masculinity, is policed and how individual dreams are often sacrificed at the altar of social conformity. Through the lens of Bharatanatyam dance and the lives of three generations, Dattani addresses deeply rooted patriarchal norms and challenges the traditional understanding of masculinity and femininity. This paper aims to analyze the play in the context of gender politics, generational conflict, and cultural expectations in Indian society.

Keywords: conformity, generations, patriarchal, masculinity femininity.

Mahesh Dattani is one of India's leading contemporary playwrights known for his ability to handle complex social themes with subtlety and power. *Dance Like a Man*, is a landmark play that deals with gender identity, societal pressure, artistic passion, and the generational clash between tradition and modernity. Gender roles are enforced and challenged within the play and how these roles affect personal freedom and ambition.

Dance Like a Man places the characters at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, especially in relation to gender roles and expectations. The

characters are living in a post-colonial India, where the legacy of British rule intertwines with a resurgence of traditional cultural values. The play critiques how these traditional values can inhibit personal freedom, especially for men who wish to pursue passions that do not fit into rigid definitions of masculinity.

Jairaj's passion for Bharatanatyam, a traditional dance form, contradicts the societal view that such an art is only suitable for women. His father, Amritlal, represents the older generation's rigid adherence to traditional norms, and this conflict reflects the larger



tension in Indian society between preserving tradition and embracing modernity. Ratna, in contrast, represents a more modern approach to gender and ambition. She wants to carve out a career for herself as a dancer, which at that time is a challenging feat for a woman. However, Ratna's method of achieving this success is also bound by societal constraints; she must sometimes manipulate or compromise her relationships to achieve her goals.

Jairaj's relationship with his father reveals the societal pressures placed on men to suppress their emotions and conform to ideals of masculinity. His love for dance, an expressive and emotional art form, is viewed as a threat to his masculinity by his father, who associates emotions and artistic expression with weakness. Jairaj's life is a painful struggle to reconcile his emotional desires with the expectations of masculinity.

Jairaj's inability to express himself fully leads to a life of regret and unfulfilled potential. His tragic emotional repression is underscored by the fact that dance, a medium of artistic expression, becomes his primary means of confronting his inner turmoil. Jairaj's failure to live up to his father's ideals and societal expectations ultimately leads him to a sense of personal failure. Dattani explores how toxic masculinity restricts emotional growth and creativity, especially for men who are conditioned to suppress their vulnerabilities.

In *Dance Like a Man*, women navigate a world of deeply ingrained gender roles. Ratna, while achieving success in her field, faces her own challenges. She both challenges patriarchal expectations by pursuing a career in dance and, at times, reinforces the same structures by manipulating her relationships with Jairaj and Amritlal to gain power.

Ratna represents a woman who thrives in a male-dominated space by using whatever power she can muster. She plays a significant role in furthering the plot, sometimes acting as a support to Jairaj and, at other times, using his vulnerabilities to her advantage. While she is a strong female character, her character arc is nuanced; she, too, must

compromise and conform to patriarchal structures to succeed. Between Empowerment and Complicity Ratna's character illustrates the paradox of women's empowerment in a patriarchal society. She pursues a professional career in dance, an unusual ambition for women of her era. Yet, her success is partially built on suppressing her husband's growth. By aligning with Amritlal to control Jairaj, Ratna becomes a complex figure, both victim and agent of patriarchy. She highlights how women, too, can internalize and perpetuate gender roles.

Although Ratna makes significant strides in her career, her relationships particularly with Jairaj are overshadowed by power struggles. Her ability to manipulate Jairaj highlights how women, despite their achievements, still must navigate a patriarchal world that limits their agency.

Bharatanatyam in the play is a symbol of both liberation and repression. For Jairaj, it represents the one area in which he can express himself and break free from his father's oppressive ideals. However, it also becomes a source of conflict, as he is unable to pursue his passion without his father's disapproval. Dance also symbolizes a means of reclaiming personal identity in a society that seeks to impose its views on how men and women should behave. Through dance, Jairaj attempts to assert his identity, but his struggle to gain approval from his father complicates this desire. The act of dancing becomes a form of rebellion against societal constraints a way of declaring independence from familial and cultural expectations.

Dance in *Dance Like a Man* is gendered; it is a form of artistic expression that, in Jairaj's case, does not conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity. The characters' relationship with dance reflects their broader struggles with gender identity, as both men and women are constrained by societal expectations of what is considered appropriate for their gender. Dattani critiques the power structures that dictate gender roles. The family unit is presented as a microcosm of the larger societal framework. The characters are trapped within the confines of societal expectations that are often passed down through



generations. While Lata, the daughter, represents the possibility of change, her liberation is limited by the weight of history and the persistence of patriarchal norms.

The *Dance Like a Man* demonstrates the difficulty of challenging long-held beliefs. While the younger generation, represented by Lata, appears to have more freedom, they are still influenced by the traditional values imposed by their elders. Lata's journey suggests that while change is possible, it is slow and fraught with resistance.

The family dynamics in *Dance Like a Man* emphasize the role of patriarchy in shaping personal identities. Amritlal, as the patriarch, enforces traditional gender roles that stifle the desires and ambitions of both his son and wife. The cycle of control and manipulation continues as each generation struggles to break free from these constraints.

The *Dance Like a Man* explores the psychological toll of adhering to rigid gender roles. Jairaj's depression and the eventual breakdown of his family are a direct result of the pressure to conform. The tragedy of the play is not just in the failure of the individual characters to achieve their dreams, but in the way these societal expectations destroy their relationships and well-being. Jairaj's inability to reconcile his passion for dance with the demands of masculinity leads to his downfall. The emotional toll of conforming to a gendered identity is evident in his life choices, relationships, and eventual alienation from his wife.

The emotional strain on the family is a direct result of the rigid gender expectations. Amritlal's dominance over Jairaj and Ratna's manipulation of

both men exemplify the destructive effects of gendered power dynamics. The breakdown of communication and understanding within the family underscores the play's tragic tone.

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* is a masterful exploration of how gender and societal expectations impact lives. By focusing on a single family and their relationship with dance, Dattani opens a broader conversation about identity, tradition, and freedom. His work serves as a reminder that true progress lies not just in changing laws, but in transforming attitudes. The play invites audiences to break free from the limitations of gender roles and embrace individuality. It is a timeless exploration of how deeply ingrained gender roles shape individual destinies. Through its richly layered characters and their struggles with identity and societal expectations, the play raises essential questions about the intersection of gender, tradition, and modernity. Though set in the past, the play's themes are still highly relevant today, where individuals continue to grapple with societal pressure to conform to gendered norms.

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