



# Tangles of 'Framed' Identity in *Dance Like a Man*: Extirpating Gender Stereotypes

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## Abstract:

The primary focus of the paper revolves around the concept of gender stereotypes and the issue of identity. Essentially, a framed identity suggests that an individual's true self is confined by preconceived notions and expectations based on their gender. The crux of this concept is in comprehending the intricate role of gender which in turn shapes one's identity. The concept of 'gender' is a socially constructed norm that dictates the behaviors, from traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' actions. Gender plays a significant role in shaping society. An individual's identity plays a significant role in shaping their sexuality and professional pursuits. This paper examines this notion through the prism of the play *Dance Like a Man*. The present paper explores the internal struggles of individuals in the Mahesh Dattani's groundbreaking play *Dance Like a Man* as they navigate their identities in a society full of constraints. As the characters strive to break free from gender stereotypes, they also confront the pressures and opinions of their families and community. By boldly defying societal expectations and following their passion for dance, the characters not only challenge strict norms, but also challenge damaging stereotypes that limit individuals from pursuing their dreams. Moreover, it also addresses the question that how does the play boldly challenges the conventional notions of masculinity through the character of Jairaj who stands in opposition to patriarchal standards.

**Keywords:** Identity, Patriarchy, Gender Disparity, Hegemony, domestic discord

Understanding the complexity of human identity in our modern lives requires a multidisciplinary approach. Identity has been examined through the lens of gender studies, focusing on the role of agency within the framework of the heterosexual binary. Nevertheless, the continuous evolution of gender roles beyond traditional binaries raises doubts about the accuracy of conventional frameworks. Through the exploration of gender performativity, one can understand the dynamic nature of gender and how it allows for the reinterpretation of gendered identities.

Erikson was the first to define the concept of developing one's own identity. He described identity as a fundamental organizing principle which develops constantly throughout the lifespan (Rageliene 98). The concept of 'framed identity' acknowledges the ever-changing and intricate process of individual identity development within the larger social and cultural framework. It highlights the continuous process of balancing one's true self with the societal pressures that individuals face throughout their lifetime. This idea proposes that individuals may face a conflict between their true identities and the responsibilities and assumptions imposed on them by society. The use of a frame as a metaphor suggests a limit or framework that molds and outlines one's sense of self. These frames are impacted by a variety of elements, such as societal constructs, cultural norms, familial obligations, and traditional gender roles.

In terms of gender, individuals may find themselves constrained by societal norms that dictate their behavior, appearance, and interests. However, breaking free from these expectations requires confronting and redefining these conventional standards, embracing one's unique self, and asserting the autonomy to craft one's own identity.

Judith Butler in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" recounts, "Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 519). The above argument shifts the understanding of gender from a fixed model of identity to one that emphasises the role of social construction over time. As Heidi Brocius describes identity, "Identity is a complex construct. There is overlap where one's personal, racial, ethnic, and group identity domains merge to form an overall understanding of "who am I?" and "how do others seem?" ("Erickson's Identity Theory and the Importance of Ethnic Exploration for Transnational Adoptees" 322).

The core features of heteronormativity involve categorising all aspects of life into the binary of male/female or masculine/feminine, with any deviation from this norm regarded as unacceptable and shameful. The play's title itself alludes to the presence of a binary relationship between dance and masculinity. The phrase 'like a man' is used to describe the play's main idea, but different characters (Ratna, Jairaj, and Amritlal) have different ideas about what dance 'like a man' really is. In the article "Being a Man: A Critical Study of Masculinity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*" masculinity is defined as "The definitive characteristic of masculinity is manliness or the possession of manhood. The concept of masculinity is completely created by society" (kumar183).

The captivating play *Dance like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani delves into the gripping concept of framed identity. The main character, Jairaj, finds himself trapped in the societal norms set by his male-dominated household. With the weight of these expectations on his shoulders, Jairaj falls into a spiral of despair and resorts to alcohol as a coping mechanism. The play bravely challenges traditional gender roles and exposes the harmful hierarchy that exists between men and women. This deep dive into society's conventions also sheds light on the critical ideas of socialization and power dynamics within the familial setup. Furthermore, the play masterfully unravels the complexities of power, wealth, and social status, unravelling the ways in which these forces shape the characters' lives. Through Jairaj's journey, *Dance like a Man* powerfully examines the resistance against oppressive patriarchy and the tragic consequences of being confined to rigid gender norms.

It delves into the intricate webs of constructed selfhood, presenting a captivating portrayal of characters who challenge and overthrow societal norms of gender. Through their unwavering passion for dance, the protagonists in this play disrupt the conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity, carving out unique identities for themselves. Jairaj's bold decision to pursue a career in dance defies societal expectations and exposes the duplicity attached to the profession, which had commonly been viewed as a solely feminine pursuit. His arduous struggle to defy traditional gender roles serves as a poignant reminder of the oppressive grip of patriarchy, proving that men can also be affected by gender prejudice and stereotypes. Jairaj's journey serves as a powerful testament to the limitations imposed by societal expectations, and the liberating power of self-discovery and defiance.

## Challenging Conventions: Identity and Gender Dynamics in the World of Dance:

In this theatrical work, Dattani undertakes an exploration of two significant elements: the play serves as a sophisticated critique of gender stereotypes, juxtaposed with the artist's quest for creative expression within the confines of societal norms. Which leads to their identity problem. The second element is the societal taboos that confront a man aspiring to pursue a career in dance, a traditionally female-dominated art form, and the dynamics within a marital relationship. Despite the public perception of a contented and compatible couple, the husband and wife have gradually drifted apart and inflicted emotional damage upon each other. Their disillusioned relationship has an impact on their daughter, who is romantically involved with an individual who is entirely disconnected from the realm of art.

Three generations are at the centre of the story. Ratna and Jairaj both want to make a living as dancers. They love to dance, and it's truly a part of their lives. They want to move up in their jobs in this area. Society has set ideas about how men and women should behave, but Jairaj still works hard to become a dancer. There are stereotypes about 'gender' problems that say only women are hurt by society's oppressive power structures. Gerda Lerner, a prominent figure in the field of American women's history, made a significant contribution in 1977 to consolidate her extensive experience and profound knowledge into a comprehensive theory regarding to the historical role of women:

The conviction that women have played a far more active and central part in history and historiography has ascribed to them. Women's history is therefore neither just the history of oppression nor an additional supplement for the sake of completeness. Neither is patriarchy the works of men alone. The central puzzle that must be explained is 'women's participation in the construction of the system that subordinates her. (Lerner 229)

This is the playwright's twist on those stereotypes. The play starts from the opposite gender's point of view and demonstrates that even men can experience victimization in similar situation by being silenced and pushed down by society and the opposite gender.

Our culture lacks appreciation for classical dance and the performers who perform it. However, there are those artists who are willing to give up everything in order to keep it going. Through the performance of this play, Dattani focuses on the assistance that Devdasis can do in the preservation of this art for future generations.

Devdasis did not give up and continued to develop and preserve this art form in spite of the fact that it was ignored and mocked by society as well as the fact that they had to deal with a great deal of financial difficulty.

### Shattering Frames:

The main character, Jairaj, holds a strong passion for classical dancing and is determined to challenge the prevailing preconceptions. Jairaj and Ratna reside under the dominance of the patriarch, Amritlal, who is Jairaj's father. It portrays the story of two Bharatanatyam dancers who have surpassed their prime age, Jairaj and Ratna, and their daughter Lata, who is about to become a great classical dancer. The lives of Jairaj and Ratna, together with their daughter Lata and her fiancé Viswas, serve as the centre of the story. Through the use of the flashback technique, the history of Jairaj, Ratna, and Jairaj's father, Amritlal Parekh, is revealed finely. Both Jairaj and Ratna are forced to face the anger of Amritlal Parekh, because Amritlal Parekh is unable to comprehend their enthusiasm and their commitment to dance, particularly Jairaj's. Amritlal Parekh, a character portrayed by Mahesh Dattani, represents the conventional Indian perspective on dance. Parekh is of the opinion that dance was created solely for women. He does everything he can to stop his son from becoming a dancer because he doesn't want him to get that job. Taking them out of his house and land and not giving them any money to live on, he disowns them. The presence of numerous conflicting circumstances compels him to enter into a pact with Ratna. He believes that his daughter-in-law can help him change his son at the very least. She also loves dance very much. He will let her become a dancer only if she helps him get Jairaj out of his obsession and turns him into a 'masculine man'. The two of them can feel safe because of his wealth. The two of them can feel safe at their own zone. Amritlal says:

Amritlal: Help me make him an adult. Help me to help him grow up.

Ratna: How?

Amritlal: It is hard for me to explain. I leave it to you. Help me and I'll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done. (Dattani, 427)

Indeed, Jairaj, driven by his profound passion for dance, is poised to dismantle these prevailing preconceptions. As S. Pandya observes, for him dance is "defiance, revolt, negation of a particular way of life that was decided by his father, Amritlal" ("Mahesh Dattani's Dance Like a Man as a Drama" 177). He is aware of the disgrace that arise from upholding relationships with artists such as the long-haired dancing mentor. His protest serves as a

means of avoiding potential blemishes or humiliation. Dance is his way of existence. He is incapable of imagining his life without it. But Amritlal fails to comprehend the interest of his son and he has pre conceived notion as he says, “A woman in man’s world may be considered progressive but a man in woman’s world is pathetic” (Dattani, 427).

These narrative recounts the challenges the couple faced in pursuing a career path of their own preference, both for themselves and their daughter. As Braj M. Sinha in his article “Swadharma and Swabhava in the Bhagavadgita” points out:

*Dance Like a Man* embodies the conflict between these two definitions of ‘swadharma’ with the patriarchal father-figure siding with ‘swadharma’ as the heteronorm to be obeyed while jairaj fighting for the right of his subjective ‘discriminatory intelligence’ that gives him his ‘swabhava’, ‘swadharma’ and the resoluteness (dhr̥t̥ih) to remain steadfast in it. (Sinha 145)

In the 1940s, Indian culture had rules about what it meant to be a man. The play primarily talks about these rules. While the central focus of the narrative centres on a pair of dancers and their familial relationships, the core emotional and societal dynamics of the play are predominantly expressed through the medium of dance. Jairaj's dancing was influenced by his father, his talented wife who is also a dancer, and the societal expectations surrounding him. Consequently, this ultimately leads him to a state of aimlessness and lack of progress. He became the subject of taunting by his father and spouse, “Ratna: You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who could not leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours. ... You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house” (Dattani, 402).

Being a man is not just determined by biological sex, but rather by possessing qualities such as determination, perseverance, assertiveness, and resilience, which are necessary for effectively leading and managing one's family. Since Jairaj was unable to meet the standards of masculinity. As a result, his wife persistently taunts him. Jairaj's lack of confidence stems from his failures. It caused him to become an alcoholic. As K. Ramya has argued in her article “Patriarchal Subjugation in Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man*”:

Patriarchy literally means ‘the rule of the father. Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power, predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and controls of property in the domain of the family, where fathers are father- figures hold authority over the members of the family. (Ramya 542)

The issue of patriarchy is a prominent and repeating element in Dattani's this play. Here Amritlal represents patriarchal authority, expecting his son and daughter-in-law to adhere to his command. Amritlal refuses to let his daughter-in-law to attend a devdasi. He is unable to embrace her due to her affiliation with a different culture. The father denies his son's desire to pursue a career as a Bharatnatyam dancer, so rejecting his freedom of choice. He took away his freedom and told him he couldn't do what he wanted. And the aforementioned incident resulted in his mental instability and subsequent alcohol dependency. He talks of freedom, yet he is not allowed to have it, "Jairaj: where is the spirit of revolution? You didn't find to gain independence. You fought for power in your hands" (Dattani 416).

The play significantly revolves around the theme of identity crises. In her article "Understanding Metaphors in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*" Preetha Krishna L. highlights how Dattani's play captures the essence of real life, exploring themes such as intensity, discrimination, regret, dishonesty, and compromise. She says, "Dattani's characters struggle to attain freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition and cultural constructions of their identity by society. The dramatic canvas of Dattani is colored with metaphors of real-life conditions and the vivid experiences of human beings" (Krishna L. 65). Amritlai is attempting to preserve his prestigious ancestral lineage, but his efforts are becoming futile. He desires for his kid to grow into a bold and respected person with a strong sense of identity. On the contrary, Jairaj aspires to train his son Shankar to become a dancer who's capable of performing the Tandava Nritya, a dance that resembles the masculine movements of Lord Shiva, on his grandfather's head.

### **Art as a Means to Liberation:**

The play showcases the profound impact of art, particularly dance, as a recurring theme. Through *Dance Like a Man*, it is clearly depicted that how artistic expression can serve as a powerful tool for self-discovery and empowerment. Through their passion for dance, the characters find a way to break free from societal norms and fully embrace their true identities. This highlights the transformative potential of art and its ability to liberate individuals from their imposed limitations.

It is strange that Lord Shiva, whom humanity worships, is the deity associated with dancing while being masculine. However, in our society, there exists a prevailing notion that men should not engage in dancing due to its association with femininity. Dance being associated with females is a social norm.

The title of the play *Dance Like a Man* gives the impression that a man is expected to engage in employment that is appropriate for a man and should avoid pursuing a career in anything else that would make them appear less masculine. The title of the work explicitly conveys the notion that the father of the protagonist does not want his son to adopt feminine characteristics or pursuing a profession in dance. He doesn't want his son to act or look like a woman as being a man. During moments of melancholy and depression, Ratna may find solace in the kitchen, shedding tears. In contrast, Jairaj copes with the same issue by resorting to alcohol. He claims to never shed tears, and Ratna ironically remarks that he refrains from crying because he considers himself to be a 'man'. Dattani highlights the gendered nature of crying emphasising that it is mostly associated with women rather than males.

In the opening of the play, Dattani raises inquiries regarding an individual's identity and sexual orientation, as implied by the title. The play explores the concept of selfhood and the influence of societal expectations in relation to gender-specific roles. It highlights the consequences of deviating from these societal norms, resulting in marginalisation by both individuals and society at large. According to Gouri Nilakanta Mehta's observation in her article "Dismembering Traditions within Postcolonial Contexts: A Retrospective Look into *Dance Like a Man*", "*Dance Like a Man*, in its finality, exercises a strong imprint on the minds of the audiences" (Mehta 106).

Dattani used the style of traditional dance as a means to depict the conflict surrounding gender problems within the play. Therefore, it may be argued that his plays possess a lasting relevance that will endure for years to come. Dattani effectively depicts Jairaj and Ratna as members of a marginalised social group within the dominant societal framework. Agrawal cites the perspective of Gayatri Spivak regarding the concept of patriarchy. She quotes that, "All subjugated classes of society are not permitted to speak of their rights and duties. They are left to survive in the confined spaces of domesticity, kept in the dark to bear the burden of patriarchy in silence and sobbing" (Agrawal 69).

The play raises thought-provoking inquiries within the reader's consciousness. This phenomenon prompts individuals to engage in introspection and critically evaluate the influence of societal norms on their behaviour, as well as the tendency to accept these norms without scrutiny. The process of conditioning, which commences during early childhood, is not attributable to any individual's culpability. It is hard to stick to the rules that were



made based on the society at the time, especially since society is always changing. Dattani, as an Indian writer, adheres to a distinct Indian writing style, which has the potential to bring about positive societal transformations.

By writing the play like *Dance Like a Man* (1990), the Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani emphasizes the social realities such as gender inequality, miseries, and despair suffered by both men and women. The play effectively portrays the prevalent social difficulties inside modern Indian society. The drama explores various themes including tradition, interpersonal relationships, job pursuits, and societal dynamics. Gender stereotypes have been imposed by society upon individuals of both genders. Those who do not conform to or embrace the prescribed gender norms are often marginalized and labelled as 'outcasts' within the context of a patriarchal society. The play depicts the challenges that women face in realising their aspirations within a patriarchal society, such as compromising, manipulating, being discreet, experiencing jealousy, and feeling profound guilt. These struggles are portrayed as Jairaj's inevitable fate. Dattani examines the phenomenon of gender discrimination within a culture. Many contemporary writers choose to emphasize such bitter truth of society, believing that by doing so, they might prompt positive change in the world. Dattani does the same as he effectively depicts this aspect of social consciousness. There exists a significant disparity between the principles advocated and the actions implemented. Dattani skilfully employs language to effectively depict the postcolonial setting and reveal the realities of Indian society by both incorporating and dismantling traditional elements.

Hence, the play is a real critique of gender stereotypes. It clearly breaks the notion through the character Jairaj, who breaks societal expectations by following his love for dance, becoming a symbol of freedom. His actions inspire others to challenge rigid gender norms and restrictions. Through their rejection of traditional ideas of masculinity, they bravely push back against societal restrictions and create room for diverse expressions of identity. Their actions pave the way for a society that celebrates the fluidity and diversity within human identities, leading to a more inclusive and open-minded community. With effortless grace, *Dance Like a Man* expertly unravels the intricacies of identity, delving into the intricate webs of gender dynamics and societal pressures. Through the captivating medium of dance, the play champions for the eradication of limiting gender roles, urging individuals to embrace their unique identities. As this compelling narrative aptly illustrates, it serves as a poignant reminder of art's ability to challenge societal conventions and create a more inclusive and liberated worlds.

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