

Negotiating Gender, Art, and Patriarchy in Mahesh Dattani's _Dance Like a Man_: A Socio-Cultural and Theatrical Reading

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* constitutes a seminal intervention in contemporary Indian English drama, interrogating the confluence of gender, aesthetics, domesticity, and social respectability through the narrative of Bharatanatyam practitioners Jairaj and Ratna, and their daughter Lata. The play dramatizes the friction between individual artistic aspiration and the regulatory apparatus of patriarchal, middle-class domesticity, foregrounding the processes through which notions of masculinity and femininity are constructed, surveilled, and performed in urban India. It engages critically with the contested genealogy of Bharatanatyam—from its devadasi origins and colonial stigmatization to its postcolonial reinvention as a respectable, middle-class cultural practice—and demonstrates how these histories are inscribed upon the bodies and subjectivities of the protagonists. Through non-linear temporality, temporal doubling, and vernacular “urban speak,” Dattani produces a stratified dramatic text amenable to performance studies, gender theory, and socio-cultural critique. This article analyzes *Dance Like a Man* through three intersecting frameworks: gender performativity and the construction of masculinity, the politics of Bharatanatyam and respectability, and the family as an apparatus of discipline, failure, and intergenerational trauma. It contends that Dattani's play not only questions the conditions under which artistic labor is legitimized, but also exposes the psychic and social cost of “dancing like a man” within a society that pathologizes aesthetic androgyny and non-normative desire. The study seeks to contribute to scholarship on Indian English theatre by situating *Dance Like a Man* within contemporary debates on patriarchy, cultural nationalism, and embodied identity.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani; *Dance Like a Man*; Indian English drama; Bharatanatyam; gender performativity; masculinity; patriarchy; middle-class respectability; performance studies; trauma; cultural capital

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani occupies a pivotal position in postcolonial Indian English theatre, recognized for dramatizing contemporary urban concerns—gender, sexuality, class, and intergenerational conflict through accessible yet critically dense dramaturgy. *Dance Like a Man*, first staged in

the 1990s, is widely regarded as one of his most accomplished works due to its synthesis of intimate domestic narrative with broader socio-aesthetic interrogations of art and identity. The play centers on the domestic space inhabited by Jairaj and Ratna, whose lives are circumscribed by their commitment to Bharatanatyam and by the hegemonic authority of Jairaj's father, Amritraj. Dattani's deployment of non-linear temporality juxtaposes the protagonists' youthful aspirations with their middle-aged disillusionment, while positioning their daughter Lata's emergent career against the backdrop of unresolved guilt and thwarted ambition. This temporal oscillation enables Dattani to illustrate how prior investments and traumas continue to structure the present. *Dance Like a Man* is particularly productive as it converges multiple theoretical concerns: the politics of classical dance, the construction of masculinity, gender performativity, and the disciplinary mechanisms of middle-class patriarchy. The subsequent sections will delineate the socio-historical context of Bharatanatyam and Indian English drama, followed by a detailed analysis of gender and masculinity, the family as a disciplinary institution, and Dattani's dramaturgical strategies.

Socio-Historical Context: Bharatanatyam and the Politics of Respectability

Dance Like a Man must engage with the genealogy of Bharatanatyam, given the play's sustained preoccupation with questions of access, legitimacy, and social sanction. Bharatanatyam, now institutionalized as a "classical" South Indian dance form, was historically associated with devadasis temple dancers whose practice was embedded in ritual and local patronage, yet who were subjected to pathologization under colonial and reformist discourses as morally degenerate. The Anti-Nautch movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries contributed to the criminalization of hereditary performance traditions, resulting in the marginalization of devadasi communities and the subsequent reconstitution of the form under elite, predominantly Brahmin, female custodianship. By the mid-20th century, Bharatanatyam had been reconfigured as an emblem of Indian cultural nationalism and middle-class respectability. It was rearticulated as a refined, spiritual practice suitable for educated daughters and public display, often disavowing its earlier social histories. Dattani situates Jairaj and Ratna within this reconstituted milieu: they are not devadasis but urban, aspirational artists seeking recognition and autonomy through a practice laden with historical contradictions. The Madras Devadasis Act of 1947 legally criminalized the dedication of girls to temples, effectively dismantling the hereditary system and pushing devadasi communities to the economic and social margins.

Parallel to this process of erasure was a project of reclamation and re-branding. Urban, upper-caste, and predominantly Brahmin reformers such as Rukmini Devi Arundale sought to "purify" and "classicize" the dance form. They excised elements deemed "erotic" or "temple-specific," codified technique, established institutional academies, and repositioned Bharatanatyam as a spiritual, aesthetic, and nationalist practice.

Cultural nationalism reinscribed patriarchal norms

By the mid-20th century, following Indian independence, Bharatanatyam was successfully reconstituted as a marker of Indian cultural nationalism and middle-class respectability. It became a desirable accomplishment for educated daughters, a vehicle for diasporic identity,

and a symbol of India's "ancient" yet "refined" civilization. Crucially, this new respectability was contingent upon the figure of the chaste, educated, upper-class female performer. The dancing body had to be desexualized, domesticated, and distanced from its devadasi past in order to be deemed culturally legitimate.

It is within this reconfigured landscape that Dattani situates Jairaj and Ratna. They are not hereditary practitioners, but urban, middle-class aspirants seeking professional recognition within an art form that now carries the burden of this history. Amritraj's vehement objection to his son's dancing therefore cannot be read merely as personal conservatism. It echoes a much longer anxiety: the anxiety that male participation in a form that has been aggressively feminized and moralized will contaminate both the art and the family's social standing. For a man to dance, and particularly to train under a devadasi guru as Jairaj does, is to risk association with the very stigma that the reform movement sought to eliminate. Furthermore, the play exposes the gendered asymmetry of this new respectability. While Ratna can leverage Bharatanatyam to consolidate her position as a teacher and cultural arbiter within the home, Jairaj's pursuit of the same art renders him suspect. The postcolonial construction of Bharatanatyam as a "suitable" art for daughters thus simultaneously forecloses it for sons, revealing how cultural nationalism reinscribed patriarchal norms even as it claimed to revive tradition. Dattani uses this historical tension to demonstrate that "respectability" is not a neutral category, but a political apparatus that regulates gender, class, and artistic legitimacy.

Thus, the socio-historical context of Bharatanatyam provides the ideological backdrop against which *Dance Like a Man* unfolds. The play stages what happens when individual desire collides with a cultural form that has been thoroughly disciplined by colonialism, reform, and middle-class aspiration. Amritraj's insistence that dance is inappropriate for a male body—unless contained within normative parameters—resonates with entrenched anxieties regarding gender and aesthetic labor. The postcolonial respectability of Bharatanatyam was largely predicated on the figure of the "virtuous daughter," whose femininity legitimized the form. A male dancer therefore destabilizes these norms and exposes the fragility of the gender binary that associates classical dance with idealized womanhood.

Gender Performativity, Masculinity, and "Dancing Like a Man"

The title *Dance Like a Man* signals the play's engagement not merely with choreography, but with the gendered epistemologies through which dance is evaluated. To "dance like a man" entails embodying a socially sanctioned masculinity while participating in an art form that has been feminized and moralized. Jairaj's struggle thus extends beyond vocational choice to encompass the negotiation of masculine subjectivity within a context that equates male dance with effeminacy or moral deviance. Amritraj functions as the primary embodiment of patriarchal ideology. He provisionally tolerates Jairaj's engagement with dance only insofar as it does not threaten normative masculinity. When Jairaj trains under a devadasi guru and inhabits spaces Amritraj deems morally suspect, paternal intervention ensues, demanding the renunciation of "corrupting" influences and the adoption of a responsible, masculine vocation. The regulation of Jairaj's body and pedagogy thus operates as a mechanism of gendered surveillance.

Ratna, initially Jairaj's collaborator, becomes complicit in this regulation. She negotiates with Amritraj to circumscribe Jairaj's practice and gradually assumes the position of the "legitimate" artist within the household. Jairaj internalizes a sense of failure—as son, man, and dancer—culminating in resentment and withdrawal. Through a Butlerian lens, this dynamic illustrates gender performativity: Jairaj is interpellated to repeatedly enact masculinity, while his embodied desire to dance remains coded as transgressive. "Dancing like a man" thus emerges as a paradoxical imperative: it demands artistic engagement without aesthetic excess, movement without perceived femininity, and creative pursuit without compromising the breadwinner model of middle-class masculinity. The structural impossibility of fulfilling this demand underwrites Jairaj's psychic collapse.

The Family as Apparatus of Control and Intergenerational Trauma

Beyond gender and art, *Dance Like a Man* functions as a study of the family as a site of power. The domestic sphere is not neutral; it is the primary locus where authority is exercised, subjectivities are formed, and trauma is transmitted across generations. The living room functions as a theatrical space for competing memories and recriminations. Amritraj mobilizes familial structures to enforce ideological conformity. Through control over finances, habitation, and social networks, he circumscribes Jairaj and Ratna's professional possibilities, making explicit that artistic desire must subordinate itself to patriarchal and economic imperatives. When Jairaj asserts autonomy, he confronts the limits of agency within this domestic regime. Patriarchal power is thus materialized in quotidian negotiations over space, capital, and recognition.

Ratna instrumentalizes the family to advance her own career. She accommodates Amritraj's conditions to sustain her practice, eventually becoming the central figure in the household through teaching and pedagogical authority. However, the family is fractured by the death of their son Shankar, an unresolved trauma that haunts Jairaj and Ratna and informs their interpersonal antagonism. This grief is both professional and affective, embedded in their experience of parenthood. The presence of Lata and Vishwas in the present timeline reveals the intergenerational transmission of this trauma. Lata appears poised to realize the ambitions her parents were denied, while Vishwas embodies a new iteration of middle-class masculinity—curious about art yet anxious about respectability. Their interactions demonstrate how unresolved conflicts in prior generations continue to inform subsequent ones.

Bharatanatyam, Cultural Capital, and Class

A further dimension for PhD analysis concerns class and cultural capital. In *Dance Like a Man*, Bharatanatyam functions not merely as aesthetic practice but as symbolic capital that confers status and social mobility. Ratna's establishment as a teacher leverages the middle-class valorization of "classical" arts. Pedagogy becomes a respectable vocation for a married woman, generating income and prestige without overtly contesting patriarchal norms. Ratna's studio exemplifies the intersection of culture and class: parents enroll daughters not solely for artistic training but for the social markers of grace, discipline, and refinement. Dance is thus commodified and domesticated into an acceptable middle-class pursuit.

Jairaj's position is more precarious. As a male dancer, he lacks the default legitimacy accorded to female practitioners. His inability to convert dance into sustainable cultural capital—through performance or institutional recognition—relegates him to marginality. The play thereby exposes a gendered asymmetry in accessing cultural capital: Ratna can mobilize Bharatanatyam to consolidate authority, whereas Jairaj's attempts are consistently undermined. The material conditions of professional dance—patronage, audiences, institutional support—are also foregrounded. Jairaj and Ratna's reminiscences of missed opportunities implicitly reference structures of cultural production that exceed the family yet determine their trajectories.

Dramaturgy, Temporality, and Urban speak

Theatrically, *Dance Like a Man* is distinguished by non-linear temporality, overlapping dialogue, and colloquial diction. Dattani's oscillation between past and present within a single spatial frame enables the audience to perceive the continuity of conflict and the recurrence of patterns. The doubling of younger and older Jairaj and Ratna emphasizes corporeal and affective transformation without resolution of underlying tensions. From a performance studies perspective, this temporal layering invites actors to modulate physicality and vocality to convey the "weight" of time. Dattani's "urban speak"—a hybrid of English and Indian idioms—grounds the characters in contemporary middle-class discourse. Humor and irony, particularly in exchanges with Vishwas, mediate the play's serious themes and enhance audience engagement. Key events such as Shankar's death occur offstage, shifting focus from spectacle to psychological aftermath. This dramaturgical absence foregrounds the lingering effects of trauma rather than its immediate occurrence.

The Title and the Politics of Androgyny

Dance like a man condenses the play's central contradiction. On one level, it presupposes a masculinized choreographic idiom controlled, forceful, and non-ornamental. On another, it reveals the absurdity of gendering an art form historically characterized by androgyny. Bharatanatyam itself encompasses both tandava and lasya, masculine and feminine energies. The demand that Jairaj perform only "masculine" dance thus seeks to foreclose this androgynous potential. Dattani critiques this regulatory impulse. Jairaj's tragedy derives from his inability to inhabit his artistic identity free from surveillance. The attempt to discipline and masculinize dance produces psychic and aesthetic damage. Ratna, while apparently successful, achieves this through complicity with patriarchal logic and the suppression of alternatives. The title therefore invites interrogation of who authorizes "masculine" performance, what is foreclosed by the stigmatization of androgyny, and how the dancer's body becomes a terrain of ideological contestation.

Conclusion

Dance Like a Man endures as a critical text because it exposes the violence inherent in gendering artistic practice and subordinating individual desire to familial respectability. By interweaving the history of Bharatanatyam, the imperatives of middle-class patriarchy, and the

aspirations of three generations, Dattani produces a drama that is both theatrically compelling and theoretically rich.

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