

## Experiencing the Traditional Indian Middle-Class Family in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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**Abstract:** Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* (1989) explores the conflict between tradition and modernity, reflecting a critical viewpoint on the concept of an Indian middle-class family. This idea will also be explored through a theoretical and intertextual approach to underline the subtle and universal familial nature. The study highlights how Dattani critiques the concept of family within a political and cultural context, where tradition may conflict with individual aspirations, desires, and identities. Dattani also explores the multifaceted nature of gender, power, and generational conflict within contemporary Indian society and family culture. This analysis provides an exploration of tradition along with cultural negotiation within Indian middle-class family households. Dattani, here, not only presents the idea of the Indian family in a domestic setting but also attempts to humanize its experience.

**Keywords:** Generational Conflict, Indian Family, Modernity, Negotiation, Tradition.

### Introduction:

'Family' has always been a long and significant concern in Indian literature. It acts as the centre of culture, authority, identity, and power that reproduces societal norms and shapes the lives of individuals. Especially in post-independent India, the Indian middle-class family emerges as a microcosm of modernity, continuity, and social transition, making further groundwork for literary explorations. A.M. Shah observes that family is a space "where each person in a household is involved in a complex pattern of behaviour with every other member" (Shah 21). Mahesh Dattani, one of the most eminent figures in the modern Indian English theatre, is known for his exploration of middle-class Indian life, especially in his plays such as *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), and so on. In these writings, he attempts to portray the familial dimensions in terms of political and social power dynamics. This representation of family can be experienced in one of his major plays, *Dance Like a Man*, where he foregrounds the tension between personal ambition and the reputation of the family.

According to Erin Mee, "Dattani's work claims a place for marginalized people onstage and by extension in society, and his work challenges notions of what is acceptable in society and what constitutes acceptable subject matter for Indian theatre" (Mee 267). Significantly known for exploring psychological dimensions, Dattani in *Dance Like a Man* attempts to project an Indian family through the story of two Bharatnatyam dances – Jairaj and his wife Ratna, their father Amritlal, and their daughter Lata. As the play unfolds, it exemplifies how individual aspirations, desires, expectations, and ambitions are negotiated within an Indian family household. This play also reveals the formation of masculinity and femininity, extending

to greater societal hierarchies and cultural discourses. The paper, thus, explores the idea and depiction of the Indian middle-class family and how it negotiates between tradition and modernity in *Dance Like a Man*. The idea behind the family that Dattani wants to depict is not only descriptive but interrogative, as it offers a space for artistic and individual aspirations.

#### Literature Review:

In existing Indian English literature, few scholarly works distinctly examine the representation of the Indian middle-class family in *Dance Like a Man* (1989). Therefore, this paper aims to fill this research gap by analysing the idea of family as the central space of negotiation. Though the play specifically argues patriarchy, it also reveals middle-class aspects to foreground societal practices and cultural norms. To understand these dimensions, several critics argue with their insights, and these ideas can be studied in the following manner:

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Michel Foucault offers the idea that discipline and punishment are deeply rooted in contemporary societal structures. Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's model of surveillance called "panopticon," where he attempts to represent contemporary society as a disciplinary structure. As Foucault remarks, "... the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). Within these structures, the individuals are regulated through powerful institutions such as the police, military, family, prison, schools, and so on. These institutional frameworks attempt to make subjects subject to monitoring, correction, or punishment. Foucault terms it as "docile bodies" and further remarks, "the body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism" (Foucault 156). Hence, discipline and punishment function as a continuous process of controlling behaviour. This Foucauldian paradigm can be applied in Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, which foregrounds the idea of tradition, gender, authority, and aspirations within the disciplinary structure of an Indian middle-class family. The characters of the play expose the ways in which familial expectations and cultural demands operate. For both Dattani and Foucault, the idea of discipline works as a powerful force that sustains social hierarchies and regulates individual identities.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir critiques the historical construction of women as the "Other"; in relation to men. She famously remarks, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 14), attempting to argue that how the idea of womanhood is constructed by numerous political, social, ideological, cultural, and historical forces. Her work destabilizes the narratives that portray women as dependent, passive, and confined to domestic space. She critically argues that "the representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth" (Beauvoir 196). This Beauvoirian reading becomes an essential framework to analyse the play *Dance Like a Man*, where family reputation, gender role, and individual aspirations come into conflict in an Indian middle-class family. In the play, Ratna's personal ambition to become a dancer gets thwarted under patriarchal subjugation. Dattani's play thus foregrounds the necessity to dismantle the long cultural representation of gender in order to establish a place of artistic autonomy and individual identity.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler develops her idea of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is something that a person ‘performs’ to create an illusion of a constructed identity: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). The repeated construction through gestures and behaviours creates the impression of a persistent gendered subject. Hence, “Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (Butler 12). Here, Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man* presents a significant ground to analyse Butler’s theory of performativity in the context of Indian society. The wish that Jairaj expresses to become a dancer can be interpreted as the failure to conform to the conventional definition of gender, masculinity, and societal requirements.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha explains the term ‘hybridity’ where the meaning of culture is constituted through a state of negotiation. As Bhabha remarks, “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal.... It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (Bhabha 112). This theoretical approach can be applied in Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man* to understand the tension between tradition and modernity. This hybridity is also known as the third space that Bhabha explains, “it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 37). This play projects this space of Bhabha where culture and identity are continuously rediscovered through conflict, tension, and negotiation.

Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus” reflects a critical viewpoint to understand the process of internalization. According to Bourdieu, habitus is “the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations in order to attain them” (Bourdieu 53). In the realm of social hierarchies, habitus presents a space of negotiation to attain individual aspirations, even at an unconscious level. This theoretical prism can be considered to understand Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man*, where an intergenerational tension arises to cope with contemporary cultural practices.

The representation of the Indian family has always been a central argument in Dattani’s plays, especially in the contemporary Indian context. *Dance Like a Man* shows how this internal familial tension connects with broader cultural and social norms. Therefore, the above theoretical perspectives can be put together to illustrate the family and its dynamics of power.

#### **Methodology:**

This paper offers a qualitative, analytical, and interpretative approach to explore the idea of an Indian middle-class family in Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man*. The study is based on close reading, thematic explorations, and theoretical frame-

works to examine how the family becomes a microcosmic space of conflict and negotiation. To understand the play, the primary sources include narrative techniques, dialogues, symbolic structures, and stage directions, along with the secondary sources of various theoretical frameworks and scholarly writings on Dattani. In this analytical study, textual analysis foregrounds both external and internal meaning. Theoretical analysis uncovers some of the critical approaches to understand the dynamics of the family. Lastly, intertextual analysis projects the universal, political, and cultural aspects to get a nuanced understanding of the Indian family.

### **Analysis and Discussion:**

#### **1. Amritlal: A Figure of Patriarchal Authority:**

Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* puts a sharp critique on the oppressive force of patriarchal authority. In both familial and societal levels, this play exemplifies the plight of Jairaj and Ratna - two Bharatanatyam dancers, whose ambitions are throttled by their father Amritlal. Once a freedom fighter, Amritlal becomes a figure of rigid patriarchy in his own household. This paradoxical depiction reflects how the systematic power structure functions in a family. Amritlal is an ideal representation of patriarchy who always believes that art, especially dance, is not a manly thing to do, it makes men effeminate. In this play, there is a reference to a brocade shawl that was gifted to him by the Mysore Maharajah, which also stands as a symbol of power and authority.

As the centre of the family, the power of Amritlal is exercised through a regulatory behaviour and can be compared to Foucault's idea, where Jairaj's artistic ambitions are always under surveillance. As Foucault mentions, "power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions - an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated" (Foucault 26-27). The play is an enactment of a generational conflict where the older generation always tries to preserve certain societal norms and the younger generation strives for artistic freedom and individual identity. It is not only Jairaj, but patriarchal domination also extends to Ratna, who is subjected to power structures and strives for her own recognition.

In the post-independent Indian scenario, *Dance Like a Man* projects the tension between tradition and modernity. According to Aparna Dharwadker, "the counterarguments to these positions of traditionalism, cultural nationalism, and populism have come from such playwrights as Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, and Dattani, who choose realist representations of contemporary urban social experience as the appropriate subject of drama and theatre" (Dharwadker 92). Thus, patriarchal authority is not only confined to gender roles but also reflects the dimensions of power to shape individuality within the Indian family household. This becomes more evident in the relationship between Amritlal, Jairaj, and Ratna together, such as:

#### **I. Jairaj and Gender Performativity:**

The passion of Jairaj to become a Bharatanatyam dancer (a dance form that is traditionally and culturally constituted as feminine) is one of the central themes of the play. His attempt to dance dismantles patriarchal structures of masculinity. Being an autocratic father, Amritlal asserts that Bharatanatyam is the art form of the prostitutes. It may be further understood when Jairaj tells Viswas: "The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares—what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So, no man would want to learn such

a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man” (Dattani 25). While discussing gender performativity, Butler famously remarks that, “... identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). In this play, therefore, Dattani foregrounds how the identity of Jairaj is performed according to social and cultural norms. The play also unveils the role of patriarchal psychological suppression. While practicing, Amritlal tells Jairaj: “You can’t have a decent rehearsal in this house? I can’t have some peace and quiet in my house! It’s bad enough having had to convert the library into a practice hall for you” (Dattani 36).

Echoing Butler’s idea, Amritlal practices the repetitive construction of gender that “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” (Butler 140). Hence, the repetitive patriarchal forces compel Jairaj to perform his own gender roles. Amritlal also asks Jairaj where the dance form is ultimately going to lead him; there is no future in it: “I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you. Why must you dance?” (Dattani 36). Amritlal also adds, “I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an . . . obsession” (Dattani 36). Amritlal’s idea regarding gender does not approve a man to keep long hair because, usually, a man does not have long hair. He literally tells Ratna: “Tell him that if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and throw him on the roads” (Dattani 40). Although Jairaj tries to negotiate with patriarchal structures, at the same time also internalizes them. Moreover, Jairaj’s attempt to learn Kuchipudi (another dance form where costumes are interchanged in terms of gender) makes Amritlal disappointed. Jairaj also wishes that when his son Shankar grows up, he will take revenge on Amritlal by performing tandava nritya (a dance of destruction) on his head. In this way, Jairaj tries to foreground a change within the effeminate tradition of Indian male dancers. His individual identity reflects the idea that any particular art form has nothing to do with any gender in terms of its performance.

## **II. Negotiation of Ratna:**

Ratna is one of the central characters in the play who reflects the paradox of women and their “Otherness.” With great ambition, she aspires to be a recognised Bharatanatyam dancer but also understands that her aspiration has to be negotiated with patriarchal authorities of Amritlal, the insecurities of Jairaj, and the future prospects of her daughter Lata. The ambition of Ratna drives her to discourage Jairaj’s desires to pursue dance as a career. By doing so, she recreates the same structures that often place women in the familial household and domestic responsibilities as their destiny. As put by Beauvoir, “the destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution” (Beauvoir 502).

The process of resistance and reinforcement makes Ratna an ambivalent character. In the familial sphere, certain compromises of Ratna enable her to continue with her artistic career, but it also brings several marital tensions between Jairaj

and Ratna. The argument between Amritlal and Jairaj proposes a revaluation of one of the most ancient Indian dance forms called Bharatnatyam. For a long time, this dance form was practiced by devadasis in southern Indian temples. Amritlal also becomes critical when he comes to know Ratna's close proximity with Chenni Amma, one of the living exponents of old dance styles. But Ratna replies to Amritlal:

"I have always been taught to speak to my elders with respect, but since I haven't done anything wrong there's no reason why I shouldn't speak up. Chenni amma is the oldest living exponent of the Mysore school and is the only link we have with the old school .... What she is really frustrated about is that in her youth she did not have the freedom to express her art.... When she came to know that I was a dancer, she greeted me and pleaded, yes, pleaded with me to learn the art of abhinaya from her. She even tempted me by offering to teach me some old dance compositions which she knew by memory. It was important for her that she should impart her knowledge to someone worthy of it. And it was important for me to learn what she had to offer. So, instead of going to the temple every Monday, I go to her house" (Dattani 42).

Through this form of resistance, Ratna attempts to overcome certain confined structures of patriarchy. She tells Amritlal that Jairaj, being her husband, is aware of where she goes on a regular basis. However, as a patriarch, Amritlal remarks, "your husband happens to be my son, And you are both under my care. It is my permission that you should ask for" (Dattani 43). But Ratna resists this imposition by saying, "You can't stop me from learning an art!" (Dattani 43). This negotiation of Ratna later opens up the possibilities for Lata to pursue dance with a greater individual freedom in Indian society. Here, Lata exemplifies the idea that womanhood, which was once strictly determined by patriarchal structures, can also be understood in the light of individual identity.

## **2. The Second Generation: Jairaj and Ratna:**

In the play, the second generation of the family, represented by Jairaj and Ratna, plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of tradition, family, and artistic expositions. Both of them have a passion for dancing, but as time flows, tension begins in their relationship. After their marriage, Ratna slowly gains a position in the family. As an ambitious woman, she does not want to compromise with the traditional legacy. Jairaj, however, is a sensitive person who just wants to dance, but is also affected by certain societal and cultural stigmas. Ratna also attempts to discourage Jairaj by saying that his father does not want him to become a dancer; rather, he wants him to be a man. Therefore, in the play, dance is not just a form of art, but it is a space where tradition and individual expression collide. Jairaj aspires to be a dancer, but his father, Amritlal, disagrees by asserting that a man should not dance, as it makes men effeminate. Although equally enthusiastic about dance, Ratna also feels subjugation under the authority of Amritlal, but when it comes to her career, she conspires with him to discourage Jairaj's passion. These dynamics compel Jairaj to think about his mediocrity as an artist, which leads to further bitterness in their relationship.

The character of Amritlal reflects a pseudo liberal nature; being a freedom fighter, he allows Jairaj to marry a woman from a different community, yet cannot even imagine his son as a Bharatanatyam dancer. This foregrounds how gender discrimination functions within patriarchal structures. As Amritlal remarks, "a woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a

woman's world is pathetic" (Dattani 50). To him, a man's happiness always lies in being a man. Amritlal very intelligently makes Ratna believe that Jairaj can never be as good as she can be at dancing. This clarification increases Ratna's ambitious nature so that she can discourage Jairaj and undermine his self-esteem as an artist. She questions the masculinity of Jairaj in different situations, blaming his mediocrity, which causes his own failure. Jairaj is also accused of being a spineless boy when he came back to his father's house after two days. This reflects his insufficiency as a man, as Ratna asserts, "You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't 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 21).

Moreover, the family becomes a space of generational repetition. As parents, Jairaj and Ratna want their daughter Lata to become more successful as a dancer and wish her to achieve their unfulfilled desires because, as dancers, their expectations are always thwarted. Ratna remarks, "Finished! Just like me. Yes, your father was right. Dance has brought us nowhere. It's his curse on us. . . You should have listened to your father. He was right. We were never anything great, never will be, and nor will our daughter be anything but an average human being" (Dattani 21). In the play, another form of conflict arises in the relationship between Jairaj and Ratna when their first son, Shankar, dies. For this tragedy, both of them blame each other. Jairaj feels that it is Ratna's negligence because she gets too busy to fulfil her ambition, and thus, cannot perform her maternal duties. Ratna, on the other hand, accuses Jairaj of being equally careless, keeping Shankar under the supervision of an ayah, and pursuing his own desires. Their conversation is more about accusation rather than a personal loss. This form of argument exemplifies the conventional thought that a woman always bears the responsibilities of the household, including caring for the child, by compromising her aspirations. So, the death of Shankar stands as a symbolic cost of pursuing individual aspirations in an Indian family.

### 3. The Third Generation: Lata and Viswas:

*Dance Like a Man* juxtaposes the viewpoint of the traditional older generation with the younger generation's aspiration for artistic expression and individual freedom. The third generation, represented by Lata and Viswas, holds the central resolution of the play. Lata becomes the witness of both familial legacies as well as the phase of transition. She stands out as a shift towards the resolution and individual aspiration. While discussing with Viswas regarding dance and marriage, Lata foregrounds the tension of her parents that they once had. She claims while talking to Viswas: "When I was a little girl, I used to stand near the door and watch mummy and daddy practise. It was magic for me. I knew then what I wanted to be. Viswas, when we are married—you will let me come here to practise, won't you?" (Dattani 6). In contrast to Jairaj, whose aspirations are thwarted by patriarchal norms, Lata negotiates her freedom and ambition with Viswas. Like any other Indian family, Jairaj and Ratna also try to get the best person for their daughter to be married to. They are especially concerned with whether Viswas will let Lata dance or not. This becomes evident when Lata remarks to Viswas: "Actually they couldn't care less who or what you are. As long as you let me dance." (Dattani 4).

In a conventional Indian household, marriage becomes one of the essential dimensions. The idea of marriage gets prominent in the conversation between Viswas and Lata as Viswas tells Lata: "My father almost died when I told him I'm marrying outside the caste" (Dattani 6). This anticipates how a traditional and typi-

cal Indian family functions, where marriage against one's own community becomes questionable, rather than accepted. Later, it is also reflected in the conversation between Lata and Viswas, where Viswas aligns with certain expected gender roles for Lata: "When my mother comes here, she'll want to watch you make coffee. Be prepared.... She has eyes like a hawk, my mother! She'll even check to see how far up your legs are tanned so she'll know whether you wear miniskirts or not!" (Dattani 12). Though positioned in patriarchal structures, Lata still negotiates her artistic expressions that embody her individual identity. Even Viswas, who is reluctant to marry a dancer at first, finally considers it. It marks a major shift away from the idea that a woman should not prioritize her career over her womanhood. Therefore, Lata represents Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus' or Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' where she not only inherits the interest of her parents for dance, but also negotiates to achieve individual identity and artistic expressions. Viswas's acceptance of her artistic profession signifies how the standards of family norms accommodate the transition. Therefore, the third generation in the play stands not as a mere reflection of tradition and lineage but also foregrounds the horizons of possibilities.

#### **4. Family: A Microcosm of the Society:**

Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* (1989) posits family as a microcosm of the larger power structures, social hierarchies, gender norms, generational tension, cultural anxieties, and individual struggles. Dattani always places family in a significant space where personal ambitions and aspirations are constantly negotiated with traditional social obligations, as Aparna Dharwadker remarks, "in thematic terms, the persistence of home-as-setting has created a "typology of home" in post-independence Indian theatre, within which the practice of each major playwright forges distinctive connections between the private world of the family as an emotional and psychological entity and the public world of social and political action" (Dharwadker 270).

The tension between Amritlal and Jairaj reveals how a family represents broader patriarchal structures to uphold expected gender roles. The idea of marriage also signifies that a family can be a space of compromise and accusation; it functions as a site of both repetition and transition across the generations. The play mediates between familial mechanisms and artistic aspirations, where dance itself is turned into a metaphor of conflict between social conformity and individual expression. By placing the situation within an Indian family, Dattani generalizes the family experience where the Parekh household embodies the microcosm of larger sociocultural conflicts and individual struggles.

#### **Key Findings:**

The paper exemplifies that Dattani's idea of the Indian family is not just confined to personal space but also extends to the political domain. Amritlal's patriarchal authority stands as an example of disciplinary power that is exercised not through oppressive forces but through cultural norms, rigid structures, and constant surveillance. An Indian middle-class family also foregrounds the limitations of gender that can be seen through Jairaj, who struggles as a male Bharatanatyam dancer. It brings out the fact that traditional gender norms are not only confined to women but also to men, especially when they aspire to perform a desire that is usually coded as feminine. Although Ratna is a dancer, she has to negotiate to fulfil her dreams and ambitions in a traditional family household. Lata, being the successor of the new generation, inherits these ambivalences and witnesses a genera-



tional transition. The play ends with Jairaj and Ratna's embracing vision of dance without "missing a step or a beat" (Dattani 74), implying the grace that they lack as human beings: "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God." (Dattani 74) Therefore, in *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani attempts to show how dance as an art form is used as a lens to understand an Indian family that allows people to perform an art form only within expected and accepted frameworks.

### Conclusion:

In Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, the Indian middle-class family becomes a site of both repression and adaptation. The traditional patriarchal view presents tension, which results in a form of negotiation across generations. In the play, Dattani addresses issues like authority, negotiation in marriage, and compromise of individual aspirations. The play places the family as the centre of tension where powerful structures are supposed to be performed. Therefore, the family that is represented here simultaneously supports but also limits the individuals by imposing conformity. Dattani shows that a family can operate as a microcosm of the broader cultural constraints and social hierarchies.

Through the play, Dattani asks his readers to critically assess the patterns of how a family can shape, impose, and constrain individual identity. It reflects that artistic expression and aspiration can never be entirely individual acts; rather, it is always influenced by family reputation, power structures, cultural constraints, and social expectations. To conclude, it can be said that *Dance Like a Man* remains a significant contribution to the literary field as it presents multifaceted dimensions of how an Indian middle-class family functions. This play, therefore, not only posits Dattani's extraordinary genius in the sphere of Indian theatre but also offers an opportunity to explore the wider cultural, social, and theoretical aspects of Indian families.

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