

# Dattani's Jairaj: A Victim of Gender Discrimination

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**Abstract:** Gender discrimination is the unequal treatment or prejudice or discriminatory attitude towards a gender based on the grounds of a person's gender or sex. It arises from differences in the unwritten norms by the society for socially constructed gender roles. In Gender disparity, one gender is considered superior to the other; most of the times, men are considered superior to women but sometimes, men are also discriminated in the hands of the society because of the unwritten social norms. Gender discrimination has been depicted by different writers in their works. As it is very apparent in India, Indian literature is a corpus of gender discrimination. In this article, I'll be discussing Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* as a critique of gender discrimination.

**Key Words:** Gender discrimination, play, Hindu patriarchy, domination, Bharatnatyam.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

According to sociological aspect, the word gender refers to the definition of man and woman by societies which distinguishes and assigns them different roles in society. Gender discrimination or inequality is the notion that men and women are not equal. It is the unequal treatment or prejudice or discriminatory attitude towards a gender based on the grounds of a person's gender or sex. It arises from differences in the unwritten norms by the society for socially constructed gender roles.

Gender discrimination or sexism is prevalent in every region, religion and community in the world, but in India it has existed for generations and affects both the genders physically, psychologically, financially and emotionally. Although, there are various provisions in the Indian Constitution regarding equal rights of men and women, gender discrimination still persists. Discrimination on the basis of gender is the violation of both human and fundamental rights. In Gender disparity, one gender is considered superior to the other; most of the times, men are considered superior to women but sometimes, men are also discriminated in the hands of the society because of the unwritten social norms. There are various instances of gender disparity such as:

- Female infanticide and preference for male child ("May you be the mother of hundred sons"- a common Hindu blessing) is one such example which strongly reflects gender biasedness in India. According to 2011 census, 914 females stand against 1000 males (the lowest since India's Independence), dropping from 927 in 2001.
- Although, Indian Government is providing various facilities for the free education of children, yet females are devoid of this opportunity because of the archetypal mind-set of the Indian parents that their daughters will eventually get married and live with their husbands as parasites; and to educate girls is a waste of money and time and even they don't want to bear the criticism and stigma of the society because they believe that they are hands in society. So, literacy rates for females is lagging behind, which stands at 65.46% according to 2011 census, which is very low as compared to 82.14% for males.
- The process of gendering starts as soon as a child is born in a family. Birth of a son is celebrated whereas the birth of a daughter is filled with pain and they are encouraged to be homebound and shy. Females (daughters) are treated unequally at their parental homes whether in context of household chores, education, freedom, choices, opinions, decisions or facilities as compared to males (sons). Daughters do not own property under their own names because land and property rights are weakly enforced, especially in rural areas.
- Females are facing domestic violence, molestations, rapes, humiliation at the homes of in-laws and work places too. They are beaten and killed by their in-laws for the want of dowry. Cases of domestic violence, rapes, honour killing and dowry killing are increasing day by day.
- Females are not getting their due and deserved positions as better-halves but are considered as maids who are wholly responsible for the household chores. In spite of having legal rights, females don't have any rights. They are not free to speak their hearts, desire, and act, opine or work as per their choices; rather they are made meek, submissive, disrespectable and suppressed beings. This has led to their lack of respect, autonomy and authority.
- However, most of the times, women are the victims of the society but men also face discrimination because of being men. They are restricted to fulfil their heart desires because they are not supposed to do something which is not meant for them. Men are not supposed to cry and express their emotions just because they are

men. Sometimes, husbands are ill-treated by their wives as they are falsely alleged for the crimes which they have not committed. Men are considered the culprit by default even if they are innocent.

Gender discrimination has been depicted by different writers in their works. As it is very apparent in India, Indian literature is a corpus of gender discrimination. In this article, I'll be discussing Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* as a critique of gender discrimination

## 2. DANCE LIKE A MAN:

Actor, director, dancer, playwright and screenplay writer Mahesh Dattani was born in Bangalore on August 7, 1958. After reading Edward Albee's play *'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf'* in his early life, he was interested in writing. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's a Will*. His other important plays are *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* etc. In 1998, Dattani won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays, *Final Solutions and other plays*, thus, becoming the first English language playwright to win the award.

*Dance Like a Man* is one of the best plays written by an Indian in English. It was first performed in Bangalore on September 22, 1989 as part of the Deccan Herald Festival with the playwright Mahesh Dattani playing young Jairaj/Vishwas. *Dance Like a Man* has also been filmed by Pamela Rooks; starring Anushka Shankar as Lata Parekh, Mohan Ahashe as Amritlal Parekh, Arif Zakaria as Jairaj Parekh, Shobana as Ratna Parekh and Samir Soni as Vishal; and has won the National Award for the best feature film in English (2003). Dattani calls this play "One of my favourite plays". In this play, Dattani shows how the society and the oddity of the individuals work. To quote Michael Willing, there is something very "Indian" about the play. It is a play in two-acts and Dattani incorporates the traditional Bharatnatyam dance form and brings together the historic India and the property-minded, money-minded society of the 1990s, with a drama moving between generations and across time in ways which are technically astounding.

The story revolves around three generations; first generation represented by Amritlala Parekh, second generation represented by Jairaj and Ratna (Amritlal Parekh's son and daughter-in-law respectively) and the third generation represented by Lata (Jairaj and Ratna's daughter) and her fiancée, Vishwas. The setting of the play is of Chennai, where dance is an integral part of life and a favourite mode of aesthetic expression. The story of the play is based on Dattani's own experience when he was learning Bharatnatyam.

There are various themes in the play but strictly speaking, *Dance Like a Man* is a critique of gender discrimination. There is an on-going battle between society and individuals (discriminated on the basis of gender). The impact of patriarchal authority in a joint family and kowtowing to the rest of the family has been highlighted here. The result of such high-handedness is quite natural, as in the play in which the family- family as the microcosm of society- lays down the unwritten rules.

Jairaj is the only son of the social reformer, freedom fighter and rich autocrat, Amritlal Parekh. Our first encounter with Amritlal Parekh is when he is seen shouting at his son Jairaj who is busy rehearsing his dance steps with Ratna under the guidance of Guruji and the musicians. Jairaj signals to the musicians to stop and shouts back at his father. When he shows up, Amritlal shouts at him: "When I call for you, please show your face". Jairaj has been practising the whole day and will pack up only when Guruji decides it. But Amritlal wants this to stop at once as he is expecting visitors. But Jairaj replies that he just can't ask them to leave.

It is coffee break for the musicians but Amritlal Parekh is still fuming that he can't have some peace and silence in his own house. Turning to Jairaj, he comments on his son's unusual hobby: "I thought it (dance) was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on your 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."

Amritlal's own obsession, he tells his son, was his involvement in fighting for the country's freedom. Jairaj retaliates: "You had yours. Now allow me to have mine". Amritlal is stunned. How can his son compare fighting for India's freedom with something like Bharatnatyam which, according to him, is the "craft of prostitute" since it has its origins in the Devadasi system.

In its earlier days, Bharatnatyam was associated with temples and rituals. The art was preserved by "Devadasis", who were professional dancers in temples. They were, however, exploited by the priests and rulers, and eventually, out of economic necessity turned to prostitution. Hence a stigma came to be attached to the dance form itself. Till the 1930s and 1940s- the time of action- the dance form was ignored and neglected. Added to this was the British prudish attitude, which dubbed Bharatnatyam as "erotic". The English educated elite, the "brown sahibs", endorsed this view

and considered the art form as “a debased and licentious remnant” of our barbaric past, says Dattani in his note to the play. But in spite of this, in the same decade, a few young dancers from well-to-do and respectable families like Ratna in the play came forward to learn the art form from the “Devadasis” like Chenni Amma.

Jairaj follows his heart’s desire and becomes a dancer, but has enraged his father in the process. Amritlal Parekh is disappointed because his son’s ideas of happiness do not fit in with his. He says: “I have always allowed you to do what you wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you. Why must you dance?”. Amritlal has allowed his son to marry Ratna, a Bharatnatyam dancer, to keep with his image of a liberal-minded person. Ratna, in turn, has married Jairaj because he will allow her to continue her passion for dance after marriage. When Jiraj comes under the influence of his wife and wants to partner her in dance, he is riled. He is convinced that dance is not a vocation that can enable a man to earn his livelihood. Nor is it respectable for a man, moreover his own son, to become a professional dancer.

Amritlal puts restrictions on his son’s dance although he doesn’t deny him pocket money or the money to pay Guruji and the musicians for his dance practice. He tells Jairaj “not to grow his hair any longer” and he is against Jairaj going by the dictates of his wife. He asks Ratna “not to learn the Mysore dance of dance from Chenni Amma. Jairaj and Ratna decided to rebel against this and they leave Amritlal’s house in a huff. But they have to return within forty-eight hours because Ratna’s uncle, to whose house they go to live in, wants to sleep with his niece. And when they return to his house, Amritlal gloats over his grip over them and extracts a promise from Ratna to wean Jairaj away from dancing if she wants to pursue her own career. Amritlal remarks: “I can recognise a clever woman when I see one....And you are intelligent enough to realise now that the decision to let you dance is in my hands, now”. He tells Ratna that man’s happiness lies “in being a man”. He assures her that she would be allowed to dance if she helps him in making Jairaj “an adult”, who could be worthy of a woman. He wants Ratna to help him make Jairaj an adult. “Help me to help him to grow up.” After striking this deal with her, Amritlal Parekh disappears from the scene. It appears as if he has handed over this responsibility to Ratna who thus buys her freedom to dance at the expense of Jairaj’s ambition to become a male Bharatnatyam dancer.

Ambition overtakes Ratna. In order to prove herself as a dancer, she destroys Jairaj by undermining his ‘self-esteem’. Ratna starts neglecting him in her stage performances till he is reduced to a ‘stage-prop’. Jairaj starts feeling that he is used as a tool, as a stage prop, or as a choreographer to Ratna’s dance items, but seldom as a co-dancer. This, combined with his father’s disdain for dance, plays havoc with his personality. He takes to drinking, holding Ratna responsible for his drunkenness because she has, under a deal with his autocratic father, deprived him of dancing. On her part, Ratna blames his addiction to alcohol for his mediocrity. Jairaj’s tragedy is that he stopped being a man when he started learning Bharatnatyam and for his wife when he returned to his father’s house within forty-eight hours and she calls him ‘a spineless boy’.

Jairaj’s only ambition in life is now to train his son Shankar as a dancer so that Shankar can dance Lord Shiva’s *tandava nritya*, the dance of destruction on Amritlal’s head and avenge his humiliation. But Shankar dies in childhood because of an overdose of opium by the ayah to help him sleep successfully. This comes about because Ratna, in single-minded pursuit of her own career, neglects the child. Jairaj has been accused of lacking in manliness by his father when he took to dance as a career, which is a woman’s prerogative and which can at best be a hobby for a man. He is weighed down under his censure. This stunts his growth as a dancer. He is unable to ‘dance like’ a man’.

*Dance Like a Man* questions the propriety of a man over stepping his jurisdiction by taking to dancing. He is ostracised for he chooses to dance like a woman though his dancing is a way of expressing his identity. Jairaj, the protagonist, is shown the door because he goes against the unwritten norms of the society in choosing to dance his way through life. This lands him in great trouble. In real life, he is no match for either his father or his dominating wife. So he can neither behave nor dance like a man. One of Jairaj’s deepest regrets till the end is that he has not been able to dance like a man. This is the tragedy of his life, which he tries to explain away at the end: “We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God”. Alas! Jairaj’s fault is that he has tried to march to the defeat of a different drummer in this gender biased society.

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