

Dancing Against Patriarchy: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Crisis of Manhood in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

Dr. N. K. Vivekanandhan¹, Dr. P. Sakthivel²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College of Engineering, Salem - 636011, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

Criticism of Indian English drama has tended to read patriarchy chiefly as a system that benefits men at women's expense. That framing has left one thing underexamined: the same ideology also disciplines and marginalizes men who do not conform to its own image of manhood. Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* (1989) is a useful case because its central figure, Jairaj Parekh, is not a beneficiary of patriarchy but its casualty — a Bharatanatyam dancer whose vocation puts him at odds with his father Amritlal's narrow idea of what a man should be. Using R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, Judith Butler's account of gender as performance, and Michael Kimmel's work on masculinity as something men must continually prove to other men, this paper offers a close reading of the play, drawing its evidence directly from the text as printed in *Collected Plays* (2000). The argument is that Jairaj's breakdown is not a matter of personal weakness; it is what happens when a culture insists that manhood equals authority, income, and emotional control, and then refuses to recognize an alternative. Read this way, dance in the play becomes less a hobby than a form of resistance, and Dattani's target turns out to be patriarchal masculinity itself, not only the women it subordinates.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani; *Dance Like a Man*; hegemonic masculinity; gender performativity; patriarchy; Indian English drama

1. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani writes the Indian middle-class family from the inside — not as backdrop but as the site where gender, sexuality, and authority actually get negotiated, usually without anyone announcing that a negotiation is taking place. *Dance Like a Man* is a good example of how quietly this happens. In his note on directing the play, Mithran Devanesen recalls using his own late father's chair on stage for Amritlal, the domineering patriarch, because in his own family no one but his father had ever been allowed to sit in it — "a metaphor of the unwritten rules of authority that so many of us come to accept as part of the Indian joint family" (Dattani 385). That detail says something true about the play before a single line of dialogue is spoken: authority here is not so much exercised as inherited, absorbed so completely into daily habit that it stops looking like authority at all.

The play moves between two generations of the same family. Jairaj and his wife Ratna are both trained Bharatanatyam dancers whose careers are shadowed, at every turn, by what Jairaj's father Amritlal considers appropriate. Amritlal is a well-regarded social reformer in public — the sort of man newspapers

describe as progressive — and privately an unbending enforcer of conventional gender roles. He tells his son bluntly that dance "doesn't give you any income" (Dattani 416), which is really only the beginning of his objection; what troubles him more is the idea that a man could want to do it at all. Jairaj's attachment to Bharatanatyam is therefore never simply a career choice in the play. It reads as a challenge to his father's whole conception of manhood, and the argument that follows — carried on across four decades, two marriages' worth of arguments, and one devastating family tragedy — leaves Jairaj a man who has internalized his own failure long before anyone in the audience is asked to judge him.

It matters, too, that Dattani sets the play across two time periods rather than one. The scenes set in the 1940s, when Jairaj and Ratna are young and still fighting Amritlal directly, sit alongside scenes set roughly four decades later, when Jairaj is an old man still narrating the same arguments to his daughter's fiancé. Nothing about the family's basic conflict has actually been resolved in the interval; it has simply gone quiet, the way old arguments do once everyone involved has run out of energy to keep having them. That structural choice is itself an argument about how patriarchal expectation works — not as a single confrontation a man either wins or loses, but as a slow, cumulative pressure that outlasts the specific disputes that produced it.

Most existing scholarship on the play treats it as a study of female oppression, and that reading is not wrong — Ratna's position in the household is genuinely constrained. But the emphasis on Ratna's oppression has tended to crowd out a second story running alongside it: a man being punished, over decades, for failing to look and behave like the men around him expect. Jairaj's unhappiness usually gets filed under "family conflict" in the criticism, rarely under the more specific heading of masculinity itself — as though his vulnerability were incidental to the play's argument rather than central to it. This paper tries to correct that imbalance, reading the play through masculinity studies to argue that Jairaj's crisis comes directly from the collision between who he actually is and what patriarchal culture insists he ought to be, and that manhood in the play functions less like an identity than like a performance under permanent surveillance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism on *Dance Like a Man* has grown steadily since the 1990s, much of it shaped by feminist and performance-studies approaches. Beena Agarwal reads the play as an exposure of the contradictions in middle-class Indian society, focusing on how patriarchal custom limits individual freedom — particularly Ratna's — but her account of Jairaj stops largely at calling him indecisive, without asking what produced the indecision (Agarwal). Nilesh Thakre's reading covers similar ground, treating Amritlal's authority as an instrument that primarily suppresses female ambition and artistic freedom in general, again leaving Jairaj's own subordination as a man mostly unexamined (Thakre).

A second strand of criticism engages gender theory more directly. Chhavi Bhardwaj and Rajiv Bhushan describe Jairaj as an androgynous figure whose refusal to fit conventional gender categories produces his identity crisis — a useful observation, though their interest lies more in psychology than in the social mechanics that produce that crisis in the first place (Bhardwaj and Bhushan). S. A. Borkar applies Judith Butler's theory of performativity directly, arguing that gender in the play is something enacted rather than given, and that Bharatanatyam becomes a space where that enactment gets contested (Borkar). Jaitra Bharati extends this into the register of the body, treating dance as an embodied discourse that unsettles received ideas about male and female physicality, though with less to say about the family structures that police that body offstage (Bharati). Chitrangada Deb, working from communication theory, reads the

play's tragedies as products of a family that simply cannot talk to one another — true enough, but the analysis never asks why emotional honesty is so unavailable to the men in this family specifically (Deb). More recent work has begun approaching the play as a study of masculinity in its own right. Prashant Kumar looks directly at Jairaj's failure to meet conventional masculine standards, arguing that the play defines manhood through income, authority, and self-control rather than biology — a claim close to the one advanced here, though Kumar does not put it in conversation with Connell, Butler, or Kimmel (Kumar). R. Suganya and K. Arun likewise treat masculinity as a construct destabilized by cultural resistance, but their argument stays mostly at the level of resistance without asking how hegemonic masculinity produces its subordinate forms in the first place (Suganya and Arun). Other critics widen the lens further: M. Suwathi reads the Parekh household through Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity (Suwathi), and Rajiv Gandhi and N. Prathiba Lakshmi situate the play within Dattani's broader commitment to social realism (Gandhi and Lakshmi).

What most of this scholarship shares is a tendency to pick one lens and stay with it — feminist criticism keeps its eye on Ratna, performance studies keeps its eye on the body, communication studies keeps its eye on the family's silences. Few studies combine these approaches to explain how masculinity gets performed, ranked, and enforced all at once, and fewer still notice that patriarchy in this play does not treat all men equally — it produces a hierarchy among men, with Jairaj on the losing end of it. Even Kumar's and Suganya and Arun's turn toward masculinity treats Jairaj's marginalization largely as an effect of individual resistance or personal frustration rather than as the predictable output of a system with its own internal logic, one that can be described with some precision once Connell's, Butler's, and Kimmel's separate insights are read together rather than in isolation. This paper tries to close that gap, on the assumption that Jairaj's marginalization is not incidental to the family drama but is what the family drama is, at bottom, about.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The method here is close reading: attention to dialogue, stage direction, recurring objects (the shawl, the cupboard, the dancing bells), and the play's habit of sliding between past and present without warning. Masculinity is treated throughout not as something a man simply has, but as something produced and monitored by the people around him — a premise borrowed from three theorists who approach the problem from different angles.

R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is the backbone of the analysis. Connell's claim is that no society has one masculinity; it has several, arranged in a hierarchy, with one culturally dominant version — usually built around economic independence, emotional restraint, and public authority — sitting at the top and licensing the subordination of the rest (Connell). Connell also distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from complicit, subordinate, and marginalized forms, a distinction that maps neatly onto the Parekh household: Amritlal occupies the hegemonic position, and Jairaj, as a sensitive, financially dependent dancer, occupies the subordinate one. Read this way, Amritlal stops being simply a strict father and becomes something closer to an institution — the position from which acceptable manhood gets defined and enforced.

Judith Butler supplies the second piece: an account of how gender gets produced in the first place. For Butler, gender is not an expression of some inner truth but something constituted through repetition — gestures, habits, and social rituals performed so consistently that they come to feel natural (Butler). This is useful for a play built almost entirely out of performance in the literal sense: Jairaj dances on stage, and

simultaneously performs, much less successfully, the role of a patriarchally acceptable son and husband off it. The play's own title becomes interesting under this lens. "Dance like a man" sounds like an instruction, but it assumes there is a specifically masculine way to move through an art form whose whole appeal lies in the opposite — expressiveness that refuses to sit still inside a gender category.

Michael Kimmel's third contribution is sociological rather than philosophical: his observation that masculinity, unlike most other identities, has to be proven again and again, usually to other men, and is never simply achieved once and kept (Kimmel). This explains something the play returns to repeatedly — Jairaj's inability to stop measuring himself against his father's judgment even decades after any hope of winning that judgment has passed. Taken together, these three frameworks suggest that what happens to Jairaj is not a private failure at all. It is the predictable outcome of a system that defines manhood as a performance requiring constant public approval, then withholds that approval from anyone who dances instead of earning.

4. THE PATRIARCHAL PRODUCTION OF THE "IDEAL MAN"

The conflict at the heart of *Dance Like a Man* is not really about dance. It is about what counts, in this family, as a proper man — and the play is careful to show that the answer to that question is manufactured rather than natural. Amritlal's objection to Jairaj's dancing begins, characteristically, with money: "Why must you dance? It doesn't give you any income" (Dattani 416). But the economic argument is only cover for something deeper, which Jairaj later reconstructs, almost verbatim, for his future son-in-law Viswas: dance is "the craft of a prostitute to show off her wares," and so, by his father's logic, "no man would want to learn such a craft," and therefore "anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man" (Dattani 406). Jairaj's own comment on this reasoning — "How could I argue against such logic?" (Dattani 406) — is worth sitting with. The logic is not persuasive; it is closed, circular, built to survive any counterargument by defining its own terms in advance.

Amritlal's policing does not stop at occupation. He tells Jairaj flatly that "normal men don't keep their hair so long" (Dattani 418), turning a stray remark about his son's guru into an accusation about masculinity itself — the implication hanging in the room without needing to be stated. The same instinct shows up in his treatment of Ratna, whom he forbids from continuing dance lessons with an elderly former devadasi: "I don't want you seeing that woman again, that's final" (Dattani 422). Whatever Amritlal's public reputation as a reformer, his authority at home tolerates no deviation — not in his son's profession, not in his daughter-in-law's choice of teacher.

That authority is stated most nakedly after Jairaj and Ratna's brief, failed attempt to live independently. They return within days, and Amritlal frames his forgiveness as a set of conditions rather than a reconciliation: "I will allow you to dance," he says, before immediately adding, "don't think you have a right to all my wealth" (Dattani 426). Alone with Ratna soon after, he is blunter about what he actually wants from the arrangement — not a happy son, but a corrected one. "Help me make him an adult," he tells her. "Help me to help him grow up" (Dattani 428). When Ratna, thinking of her own future as a dancer, asks what will happen to Jairaj once he stops performing, Amritlal doesn't hesitate: "Make him worthy of you" (Dattani 429). It is a small, chilling line, because it turns Ratna herself into an instrument of her husband's correction — and it makes clear that, for Amritlal, masculinity is not something Jairaj already has and might lose, but something that has to be built into him by other people.

Amritlal is, in fact, quite explicit about the double standard at work. When Ratna asks him directly whether he means to stop Jairaj from dancing while allowing her to continue, he does not deny it: "A woman in a

man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (Dattani 428). The line is worth pausing on, because it shows that Amritlal's objection was never really about dance as an activity — he is entirely willing to let his daughter-in-law build a career on it. What he cannot tolerate is a man occupying that same territory, which suggests that his real investment is not in artistic standards at all but in keeping the boundary between masculine and feminine domains intact, regardless of who suffers for it. Connell's account of intra-masculine hierarchy is useful here precisely because it explains why Amritlal reacts so differently to the same activity depending on who performs it: patriarchy, in his household, is not simply a matter of men ranking above women, but of some men — the disciplined, income-earning, authoritative kind — ranking above other men.

Jairaj's resistance to all this is never total, and that incompleteness matters. His declaration on leaving home — "As from now we are no longer under your care. And will never be again. Never" (Dattani 425) — collapses within the same scene sequence into something closer to defeat; his own bitter echo of the phrase, "As long as we are under his care!" (Dattani 424), sounds less like defiance than like a man watching himself fail to escape. Kimmel's point about masculinity needing constant outside validation explains why this keeps happening: Jairaj cannot simply walk away from the system that judges him unworthy, because his own sense of manhood is still, stubbornly, tied to the approval of the man denying it to him.

5. DANCING AGAINST PATRIARCHY: BHARATANATYAM AS GENDER TRANSGRESSION

Bharatanatyam in this play is never just an art form. It is a battleground for what a man's body is allowed to do in public. Amritlal's own contradiction is instructive: he admires classical dance as heritage in the abstract while finding it intolerable the moment his son proposes to make a living from it. His objection, in other words, is not aesthetic. When he insists the musicians and the guru be gone before his guests arrive — "I want this din to stop. I want Guruji out, that's what I want" (Dattani 414) — and dismisses the guru's professional standing outright — "Then why is he spending his entire day in my house?" (Dattani 415) — he is not commenting on the quality of anyone's dancing. He is trying to make the evidence of it disappear from a house he controls.

Butler's account of gender as performance clarifies why Jairaj finds himself so stuck. If masculinity exists only because people keep performing the behaviors a given culture recognizes as masculine, then Jairaj is caught between two performances that cannot coexist. On stage, Bharatanatyam demands expressiveness, physical grace, emotional openness. At home, he is expected to project authority and restraint. Nobody in the play asks him to choose, exactly — it is simply assumed, by everyone around him, that the second performance is the real one and the first is a kind of hobby he needs to grow out of.

Ratna's own dancing is treated rather differently, though not, in the end, more freely. When Amritlal discovers she has been secretly training with the same devadasi guru who once taught his generation, his fury is immediate: "I will not have our temples turned into brothels!" (Dattani 417). His objection here is about company and visibility, not the dancing itself — he had, after all, just promised Ratna she could keep dancing so long as she helped "make him worthy of" being her husband (Dattani 429). Bharatanatyam does not liberate Ratna from Amritlal's oversight so much as get folded into it: permitted, even useful to him, when it can be used as leverage against Jairaj; intolerable the moment it threatens to become Jairaj's actual profession.

One of the play's sharpest moments on this question comes when Jairaj, much later, tells Viswas about

performing in drag for an army audience decades earlier — Ratna was too frightened to go on, and "they only wanted a woman," so he "wore your mother's costume, a wig and . . . whatever else was necessary," and the soldiers, he says, "loved it even more when they found out I was a man" (Dattani 436). It is told almost as a dare, and it insists that his masculinity survived — even flourished within — the very act of gender transgression his father had once used to disqualify him from manhood altogether. But the play does not let this stand as a clean triumph either. In the very same scene, Viswas admits that he found an erotic ashtapadi Lata had just performed "too erotic" for his comfort (Dattani 436), a small but telling sign that Amritlal's discomfort with expressive, sensual dance has not disappeared with his generation — it has simply resurfaced, more quietly, in the next one.

6. JAIRAJ'S CRISIS: VULNERABILITY, FAILURE, AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Jairaj's collapse over the course of the play is not the kind of downfall built from one clear flaw. It comes from something slower: the ongoing mismatch between who he is and who he is continually told he should be. The play's structure — sliding without warning between decades — reflects this directly. We never meet a settled man looking back on a finished life; we meet someone still relitigating arguments from thirty and forty years earlier, because those arguments were never actually resolved, only survived.

Late in the play, Viswas asks Jairaj what is bothering him, and the answer he gets is less a complaint than something close to a diagnosis: "It's not worrying that's worrying me... Stopping. And looking back. And seeing that you haven't gone very far. And won't go much further" (Dattani 405). It is worth noticing that Jairaj locates the problem not in any single failure but in the act of measurement itself — in having spent a lifetime being assessed against a bar he was never going to clear. His drinking, introduced in the same scene, is hidden inside his father's old cupboard; asked directly whether that is why he hides it there, he simply tells Viswas to shut up and drink (Dattani 405). The detail is small but exact: even his coping mechanism has been absorbed into the architecture of the house that produced the need for it.

Ratna delivers the play's harshest verdict on Jairaj in a single line, late in Act One: "You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house" (Dattani 403). What makes the line land is that it comes from someone who has herself lived under the same authority — proof of how completely hegemonic standards of manhood can be absorbed and then redeployed by the very people that system also constrains. Jairaj's response is not denial. "For forty years you've been holding that against . . ." (Dattani 403), he says, and the sentence trails off because there is nothing left to argue. In an earlier version of this same fight, a younger, drunker Jairaj puts the demand plainly: "I want you to give me back my self-esteem!" (Dattani 445). The grammar is worth pausing on — self-esteem, in his mouth, is something someone else can hand over or withhold, which is more or less exactly how Kimmel describes masculine identity: dependent on other people's judgment rather than anything Jairaj can simply decide for himself.

This same dynamic surfaces earlier, in a drunken late-night quarrel that the play stages as a flashback within a flashback. Jairaj accuses Ratna of having systematically undermined him — "You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow" (Dattani 445) — and reminds her, bitterly, of a sacrifice she never acknowledged: "For one full year. For one full year I refused to dance — turning down offers because I didn't want to dance alone" (Dattani 444). Whether or not Ratna's ambition is really to blame, as Jairaj insists, is almost beside the point; what the exchange reveals is a marriage in which two people who might have supported each other's art have instead been positioned, by the household around them, as rivals for a scarce and narrowly defined form of recognition.

Patriarchy does not simply oppress Ratna and privilege Jairaj, or the reverse. It manufactures competition between them, and then blames them individually for the damage that competition causes.

The play's most devastating scene is not an argument at all. It is the revelation, implied rather than confirmed outright, that Jairaj and Ratna's infant son Shankar died after being given opium by an ayah instructed to keep him quiet during Ratna's performances. Jairaj's interrogation of Ratna builds to a single repeated question — "What did you say? She too has given Shankar?" (Dattani 448) — before the scene breaks off into a scream the play never fully resolves into a confession. What matters here is not assigning precise blame but what the scene exposes about a household where a child's safety came second to two adults' competing need for recognition — one chasing a career, the other chasing something closer to self-respect — and where neither parent, in the end, was positioned to protect him.

The play ends, decades later, not with triumph but with something closer to a shrug. In his closing monologue, the older Jairaj — speaking, in effect, to Ratna's memory — offers no vindication and no self-pity, only: "We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God" (Dattani 449). It is a line that refuses to blame Amritlal outright and refuses to let Jairaj and Ratna off the hook either. It simply places both their failures and their achievements inside an ordinary, fallible humanity that patriarchal ideology — with its impossible standard of masculine mastery — never had room to acknowledge in the first place.

7. CONCLUSION

Read together, Connell, Butler, and Kimmel explain three different parts of the same problem. Connell explains why Jairaj's talent, however considerable, cannot simply be added to the existing definition of manhood — it has to be treated as a threat to that definition, which is why Amritlal works so hard to keep it out of sight. Butler explains why the play's title works ironically rather than sincerely: "dancing like a man" turns out to be a contradiction dressed up as an instruction, because manhood itself, in this play, is nothing more than a performance repeated until it looks natural. And Kimmel explains the mechanism that keeps Jairaj tethered to his father's judgment decades after there is any realistic chance of winning it — his sense of self-worth, on his own account, belongs to someone else's keeping.

None of this amounts to an argument against masculinity as such. What the play seems to want, quietly, is a version of manhood spacious enough to hold vulnerability and artistic ambition without forfeiting legitimacy. Ratna's own compromised position — allowed to dance chiefly because it makes her useful in her husband's correction — is a reminder that this is not simply a story about oppressive men and their victims. It is a story about a shared structure that damages differently rather than sparing anyone outright. And the play's refusal of a tidy ending — its insistence on returning Jairaj to an "only human" scale instead of either redeeming or condemning him — is itself the argument. The real cost of patriarchal masculinity is not measured only in the men it crowns. It shows up, just as clearly, in the relationships its narrow definitions leave permanently strained.

It is worth being honest about the limits of this reading, too. Nothing here is meant to suggest that Ratna gets off lightly in the play, or that her constraints matter less than her husband's. She dances only within terms Amritlal sets, is recruited without her full consent into disciplining her own husband, and spends much of the play defending a marriage that gives her very little in return. The claim is narrower: that her constraint and Jairaj's are produced by the same mechanism, not by two separate and unrelated stories, and that criticism which treats only one of them risks describing half a system as though it were the whole of it.

This paper has argued, then, that *Dance Like a Man* deserves to be read as more than a feminist critique of women's subordination — as, equally, an early and still under-recognized contribution to Indian masculinity studies. Its portrait of a man disciplined for practicing an art rather than rewarded for mastering it, and of a household organized around watching for and correcting deviant manhood, has not dated in the way one might expect a 1989 play to date. Future work might extend this line of inquiry by setting Dattani's treatment of masculinity against that of other Indian English playwrights, or by asking how caste and class complicate the alternative masculinities this play only begins to sketch.

Works Cited

1. Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian English Drama*. Book Enclave, 2011.
2. Bhardwaj, Chhavi, and Rajiv Bhushan. "Androgyny and Gender Identity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1-8.
3. Bharati, Jaitra. "Body, Performance and Gender Politics in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2018, pp. 143-51.
4. Borkar, S. A. "Gender Performativity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*: A Butlerian Reading." *LangLit: An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2018, pp. 92-98.
5. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
6. Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., U of California P, 2005.
7. Dattani, Mahesh. *Dance Like a Man*. *Collected Plays*, Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 384-449.
8. Deb, Chitrangada. "Communication Breakdown and Family Relationships in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 314-20.
9. Gandhi, Rajiv, and N. Prathiba Lakshmi. "Social Realism in Mahesh Dattani's Plays." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2017, pp. 235-40.
10. Kimmel, Michael S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 4th ed., Oxford UP, 2018.
11. Kumar, Prashant. "Being a Man: Masculinity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 8, 2019, pp. 180-90.
12. Suganya, R., and K. Arun. "Masculinity and Cultural Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2019, pp. 34-39.
13. Suwathi, M. "Hybridity and Cultural Identity in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *Language in India*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2018, pp. 45-54.
14. Thakre, Nilesh. "Patriarchy and Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016, pp. 220-27.