

## **The Creative Launcher**

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### **Gender Subjugation Revisited; a Study of Mahesh Dattani's Play *Dance like a Man***

**NaeemulHaq**

Ph. D. Scholar, School of  
Studies in English,  
Vikram University, Ujjain

#### **Abstract**

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions. Of course, not all men accept patriarchal ideology, and those who don't—those who don't believe, for example, that because men generally have been endowed by nature with stronger muscles, they have been endowed with any other natural superiority—are often derided, by both patriarchal men and women, as weak and unmanly, as if the only way to be a man were to be a patriarchal man. This paper aims at highlight the ways in which patriarchal gender roles are destructive for men as well as for women. Traditional gender roles dictate that men are supposed to be strong (physically powerful and emotionally stoic), they are not supposed to cry because crying is considered a sign of weakness, a sign that one has been overpowered by one's emotions.

**Key Words-** *Patriarchy, Decisive, Dominating, Performativity.*

Patriarchy literally means rule of the father and is generally understood within feminist discourses as asserting the domination of all men over all women in equal terms. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues, “one is not born, but rather becomes a

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woman". This has become a catch line for the later feminists and they explored female exploitation in these terms. They have concentrated on how a woman's gender is to be constructed. But this feminist based theory of patriarchy has been challenged because it is not only females but also males who have become the victim of patriarchy that is male dominating male. In this paper the researcher aims at to highlight how the playwright has exploited the role of patriarchy in the play, *Dance Like a Man*, and to show how the play depicts the predicaments not of females but of males under the tyranny of patriarchy. The society has imposed gender stereotypes on both men and women and if anyone does not follow these stereotypes, they are considered as outcasts. This issue of gender construct has been explored in Dattani's *Dance like a Man*. The playwright is talking of gender construct; not of female but of male. He does this by portraying Jairaj, the protagonist, who wants to deviate from his father's wishes in order to fulfill his own dreams by pursuing his passion of dance. In the play Amritlal represents the patriarchal society that imposes manliness on his son. He comments, "a woman in a man's world can be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (42). Dancing is considered to be something meant only for women and according to Amritlal these men who want to dance are not men enough

If we look into the character of Amritlal Parekh, he is a self-proclaimed freedom fighter agreed to the marriage of Jairaj and Ratna because, according to Jairaj, it suited his "image – that of a liberal minded person – to have a daughter-in-law from outside your own community". (174) But dance, remains for Amritlal, a craft of prostitutes and thus a man who learns dancing is not manly. Amritlal thought that dance was "just a fancy" for Jairaj. He would have happily made a cricket pitch for his son to play as because cricket epitomizes manliness. He resists his son from taking up dancing as his career because it does neither give him social status nor any income. He is baffled as Jairaj goes against social norms. "Why does he grow his hair long?"(414) is the question that Amritlal asks his son and says that men are not supposed to grow hair long. The underlying fear is obvious-it makes him feel Jairaj womanly. To Amritlal, Jairaj's decision to grow long hair is 'abnormal'. Amritlal's

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concern has always been to make his son a 'man'. In a question that he asks to Ratna (Jairaj's wife), 'Do you know where a man's happiness lies?' (189) he immediately answers back 'In being a man'. But Dattani questions the norms/rules of being a man. If the question remains of social acceptance and strict adherence to the patriarchal gender construct then Jairaj's conversation with his daughter Lata regarding 'erotic numbers', reveals that Jairaj has hardly accepted his father's proposal of gender performativity.

LATA. Daddy, you make it sound so crude. 'Erotic numbers'? JAIRAJ. There's nothing crude about it. I danced the same item. For the army. A friend of ours arranged a programme and the money was good. Your mother was too scared and they only wanted a woman. So I wore your mother's costume, a wig and... whatever else was necessary to make me look like a woman, and danced. They loved it. They loved it even more when they found out that I was a man. ( 435)

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* argues that phallogentricism is understood as regimes of power and hence Amritlal is afraid that his dancing son would loose power in the heterosexual society that he lives in. In a bourgeois society power is synonymous to earning money and Amritlal believes that dance cannot be a way of earning money for Jairaj because in a highly gendered society dancing can never be considered to be a man's profession. In a recent popular Hindi film *3 Idiots*, we find how a son commits suicide as he fails to pursue his father's dreams of taking up engineering as his career. He wanted to pursue Literature as against engineering the shortcut to economic success and social acceptance. Jairaj also considers himself to be equally oppressed by his father and the social conventions. The father figures do not understand that their sons do not want to grow under their shadows. With the growth and development of education and employment opportunities, the young men today have become individuals and can make their destinies without their support.

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Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* argues that social power lies in the hands of the patriarchy. Amritlal plays an ideal sexual politics as he robs his son Jairaj of his dreams. Ratna falls in the patriarchal troupe set up by Amritlal and forms an unlikely alliance with him. She comments that audience comes to watch a young beautiful woman's dance and not of a man. Thus Ratna is echoing Amritlal and giving away her stance as an ideal heterosexual/programmed patriarch. She has the same stereotypical idea of gender as Amritlal and plays sexual politics to get what she wants. Both Ratna and Amritlal achieve what they want to get in expense of Jairaj's dream. The theme of the gender runs in a pathetic way in the play in which the whole identity of the protagonist seems to be in crisis. His father Amritlal failed to recognize his son's interest in dance, for him dance is a degraded kind of art performed by devadases. He is discouraged by many desperate comments from his father, "where will you go being a dancer? Nowhere. What will you get being a dancer? Nothing. People will point at you on the streets and laugh and ask, "Who is he? He is a dancer." (14)

Jairaj is also humiliated by his wife. She is not able to understand his husband's desire. She also rebukes him, "You, you are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn't leave his father's house." (21). Jairaj is totally dominated by his father and even by his wife. This makes his doubt about his existence as a man. He asks Ratna, "Will finding a musician make me a man?" (21). Dattani has written the whole play about gender construct and the tension and conflict that create upon a man's life.

Thus, Jairaj becomes an ideal symbol of gender trouble. The do's and don't's that society imposes on every gender, becomes a nemesis for Jairaj. The problem with Jairaj is that he does not opt to perform gender. Jairaj tries to defy the "expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity" but his defiance ends in a tragic note.

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