

**REPRESENTATION OF GENDERED IDENTITIES IN
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA: A STUDY OF
MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS, TARA AND
DANCE LIKE A MAN**

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ABSTRACT:

Mahesh Dattani stands as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Indian English drama, particularly for his bold engagement with marginalized identities and socially silenced issues. Among the most persistent concerns in his dramatic oeuvre is gender – its construction, performance, and the systemic inequalities it produces. This research paper examines gender perspectives in two of Dattani's most critically acclaimed plays, *Tara* (1990) and *Dance Like a Man* (1989). Through a close textual and thematic analysis, the study explores how patriarchal norms shape individual identities, familial relationships, and social expectations, often resulting in psychological trauma and emotional alienation.

Tara foregrounds gender discrimination within the family structure, revealing how female children are systematically devalued even by women themselves. The play exposes the internalization of patriarchy and critiques the cultural preference for male heirs through the tragic fate of the female protagonist. In contrast, *Dance Like a Man* interrogates gender roles by challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, particularly through the lens of classical dance – a space culturally marked as feminine. The male protagonist's struggle to assert his identity as a dancer highlights the rigid boundaries imposed by hegemonic masculinity.

By situating these plays within feminist and gender theory, this paper argues that Dattani does not merely depict gender inequality but actively destabilizes normative gender binaries. His characters resist, negotiate, and sometimes succumb to social prescriptions, making gender a dynamic and contested site. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Dattani's drama functions as a powerful critique of patriarchal ideology in Indian society while advocating for individual freedom and gender inclusivity.

KEYWORDS:

Mahesh Dattani, gender studies, patriarchy, Indian English drama, feminism, masculinity.

Objectives

The present study aims to examine Mahesh Dattani's dramatic treatment of gender as a complex social and cultural construct. The following objectives are formulated to guide a critical analysis of patriarchal ideology, gender identity, and resistance in *Tara and Dance Like a Man*.

- To critically examine the representation of gender discrimination and patriarchal ideology in Mahesh Dattani's plays *Tara and Dance Like a Man*.
- To analyse how familial and social structures contribute to the construction and reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities in the selected plays.
- To explore the psychological and emotional consequences of gender bias on individual identity, with particular reference to marginalization, alienation, and trauma.

1. Introduction

Indian English drama witnessed a significant transformation with the emergence of Mahesh Dattani, whose plays shifted focus from mythological or historical themes to contemporary social realities. Dattani's theatre is marked by its engagement with issues

that are often relegated to silence – gender discrimination, sexuality, disability, and identity crises. Among these, gender occupies a central position, functioning both as a thematic concern and a structural force shaping character relationships. This paper undertakes a comparative study of *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* to analyze how Dattani constructs and critiques gender norms within the Indian socio-cultural framework. Both plays interrogate patriarchal ideologies, yet they do so through different narrative strategies and character dynamics.

While *Tara* exposes the brutal consequences of gender bias against women, *Dance Like a Man* problematizes the marginalization of men who transgress traditional masculine roles. The relevance of this study lies in its exploration of gender not as a fixed biological category but as a socially constructed phenomenon, perpetuated through family, culture, and tradition. Drawing on feminist and gender theory, the paper argues that Dattani's plays reveal the deep-rooted anxieties surrounding gender performance and social acceptance in Indian society (Butler, 1990; Dattani, 2000).

2. Theoretical Framework

Gender and Patriarchy: Gender theory offers a crucial critical lens for understanding Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy, particularly his sustained engagement with questions of identity, power, and social regulation. Central to this framework is the recognition that gender is not a natural or biologically fixed category but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, ideological practices, and institutional structures. Dattani's plays repeatedly expose how these constructions are internalized and enforced within the private sphere of the family, making gender oppression both intimate and systemic.

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Simone de Beauvoir 1949/2011) foregrounds the process through which femininity is culturally produced and disciplined. Patriarchy, as de Beauvoir argues, operates

by assigning unequal value to gendered roles, positioning masculinity as normative and authoritative while relegating femininity to a subordinate and dependent status. This hierarchy is starkly visible in *Tara*, where the female child is considered less valuable than her male counterpart, despite being biologically identical. The discriminatory medical decision that privileges the male child exposes the deeply entrenched patriarchal logic that governs familial choices, inheritance, and notions of worth. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further deepens the analysis by challenging essentialist understandings of gender identity. Butler contends that gender is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and performances that create the illusion of a stable identity (Butler, 1990).

In the Indian socio-cultural context, these performances are closely monitored and regulated through norms related to family honor, cultural respectability, and social conformity. Dattani's dramatic characters inhabit these performative roles under constant surveillance, and their deviations often invite punishment, exclusion, or emotional withdrawal. In *Dance Like a Man*, Butler's notion of performativity is particularly relevant, as classical dance becomes a contested site of gender expression. Jairaj's desire to pursue Bharatanatyam disrupts conventional associations of masculinity with authority, rationality, and physical dominance. His father's resistance reflects the operation of hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by R.W. Connell, which legitimizes certain masculine traits while marginalizing alternative expressions. Jairaj's struggle thus reveals how patriarchy disciplines men as well, restricting emotional expression and creative freedom in the name of normative masculinity.

The family, in Dattani's plays, functions as a primary ideological apparatus through which patriarchal values are transmitted and normalized. Women, too, become agents of this system, as seen in *Tara*, where the mother's complicity in gender discrimination illustrates the internalization of patriarchal ideology.

This complicity complicates simplistic binaries of oppressor and oppressed, suggesting that patriarchy sustains itself through consent as much as coercion. Both *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* can therefore be read as dramatic spaces where gender norms are not merely represented but actively interrogated. Dattani exposes the emotional and psychological costs of conforming to rigid gender expectations—alienation, resentment, loss of selfhood, and fractured relationships. His plays demonstrate that patriarchy inflicts damage across gender lines, silencing women and constraining men who fail to embody socially sanctioned ideals. By situating Dattani’s drama within feminist and gender theory, this study highlights his contribution to destabilizing normative gender binaries in Indian English theatre. Rather than offering didactic solutions, Dattani foregrounds gender as a contested and dynamic site of struggle, thereby compelling audiences to confront the pervasive yet often invisible operations of patriarchal power in everyday life.

3. Gender Discrimination and Female Marginalization in *Tara*

Tara stands as one of Mahesh Dattani’s most searing critiques of gender discrimination within the ostensibly liberal, urban Indian family. By situating the narrative in a middle-class, educated household, Dattani dismantles the assumption that patriarchy is confined to traditionally conservative spaces, exposing how deeply entrenched gender bias operates even within families that outwardly espouse progressive values.

The central metaphor of the play – the separation of conjoined twins, *Tara* and *Chandan*, serves as an allegory for gender injustice. Although medical opinion suggests an equal chance of survival, the family ensures that the male child receives the greater share of bodily resources. This decision, cloaked in the rhetoric of pragmatism, results in *Tara*’s physical impairment and premature death. The surgical act thus becomes a symbolic enactment of patriarchal violence, where the female body is sacrificed to secure the “normalcy” of the male heir.

Tara's body emerges as a contested site upon which patriarchal power is inscribed. Her disability is not merely medical but a social condition produced by deliberate gendered choices. By privileging Chandan's mobility and future prospects, the family denies Tara autonomy and equal opportunity, reflecting a broader cultural logic in which female bodies are routinely sacrificed for male advancement.

One of the most unsettling aspects of the play is the role of Bharati, Tara's mother, in orchestrating this decision. Her complicity complicates feminist binaries of victim and oppressor, revealing how women internalize and enforce patriarchal values within the domestic sphere (Dattani, 2000). Tara's marginalization extends beyond physical disability to emotional and social exclusion. Constant reminders of her dependence erode her self-worth, producing profound alienation. Critics observe that Tara symbolizes "the silenced girl child in Indian society whose potential is systematically denied" (Trivedi, 2003), transforming her into a powerful social metaphor.

Structurally, Dattani employs irony and non-linear narration to intensify the ethical impact of the play. The fragmented timeline mirrors fractured identities, particularly Chandan's guilt and survivor's remorse. The delayed revelation of the surgical truth exposes how gender injustice often masquerades as familial care. Through Tara, Dattani delivers a scathing critique of a society that claims modernity while sustaining regressive gender hierarchies. The play exposes the devastating consequences of valuing male lives over female ones, functioning as a broader indictment of patriarchal ideology.

4. Internalized Patriarchy and Female Complicity

One of the most striking aspects of Tara is its portrayal of female complicity in patriarchal oppression. Bharati's role complicates simplistic notions of male dominance by revealing how women themselves enforce gender hierarchies. Her guilt and psychological breakdown suggest the destructive impact of

internalized patriarchy (Walby, 1990). The grandmother's insistence on privileging the male child further reflects generational transmission of gender bias. Tara's tragedy is therefore not an isolated incident but part of a systemic pattern where women's bodies and lives are negotiated within patriarchal power structures. Through these characters, Dattani suggests that true gender equality cannot be achieved without dismantling the ideological foundations that normalize discrimination.

5. Masculinity and Gender Performance in Dance Like A Man

While Tara foregrounds the systemic oppression of women, *Dance Like a Man* shifts critical attention to the restrictive and disciplinary nature of patriarchal masculinity. Through this play, Mahesh Dattani interrogates the cultural construction of manhood and exposes how rigid gender roles constrain male identity, creativity, and emotional expression. The play centers on Jairaj, a male Bharatanatyam dancer, whose artistic passion places him in conflict with dominant notions of masculinity upheld by both family and society (Patel, 2003).

In the Indian cultural imagination, classical dance—particularly Bharatanatyam—has been feminized, associated with grace and emotional expressiveness. Jairaj's choice to pursue dance destabilizes conventional expectations that associate masculinity with authority and economic productivity. His father, Amritlal, perceives this deviation as a threat to both Jairaj's manhood and familial honor, turning dance into a contested space where masculinity is vigilantly policed (Gokhale, 2010).

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a valuable framework for understanding Jairaj's predicament. Gender identity, Butler argues, is constituted through repeated social performances rather than biological determinism (1990). Jairaj's enactment of a dancer's identity disrupts the script of normative masculinity, exposing its constructed and fragile nature. Amritlal embodies hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by R.W. Connell

(1995), equating manhood with authority, rationality, and public achievement. Jairaj's dedication to dance is interpreted as failure, prompting ideological and paternal control that excludes vulnerability and artistic labor. The resulting conflict reveals the emotional costs of enforcing hegemonic masculinity. Jairaj's alienation and insecurity reflect how patriarchal systems sabotage alternative masculine identities, producing what Connell terms "gendered anxieties."

The play further complicates gender politics by portraying women's participation in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Ratna, Jairaj's wife and dance partner, navigates these structures strategically, often prioritizing professional success over emotional solidarity. This dynamic underscores Dattani's critique of patriarchy as sustained through negotiation and internalized discipline (Kothari, 2011). Structurally, Dattani's use of memory and generational conflict reinforces the cyclical nature of gender regulation. The ironic title *Dance Like a Man* exposes the absurdity of prescribing gendered rules to artistic expression. Ultimately, the play challenges the assumption that patriarchy benefits men uniformly, advocating a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender identity (Chakraborty, 2012).

6. Women, Art, and Ambition in *Dance Like A Man*

Interestingly, the play also portrays women negotiating gender roles in complex and often contradictory ways. Ratna, Jairaj's wife, is ambitious and career-oriented, yet she consciously manipulates patriarchal structures to advance her artistic goals and secure professional recognition (Chaudhuri, 2014). Unlike Jairaj, she adapts strategically to existing power hierarchies, revealing how gendered dynamics shape access to success and authority in cultural spaces. Lata, representing the next generation, symbolizes a tentative shift toward greater gender fluidity and creative autonomy (Dharwadker, 2005).

However, the play resists easy optimism, suggesting that social change is gradual, uneven, and mediated by inherited

constraints. Dattani thus presents gender as a site of continuous negotiation rather than definitive resolution (Mukherjee, 2006).

7. Comparative Analysis of Tara and Dance Like A Man

Both plays expose the pervasive influence of patriarchy, yet their approaches differ significantly. Tara emphasizes biological and social discrimination against women, while Dance Like a Man foregrounds the policing of masculinity and artistic expression. Together, they offer a holistic critique of rigid gender binaries. In Tara, the female body is controlled and sacrificed; in Dance Like a Man, the male body is disciplined and restricted. Dattani thus reveals that patriarchy functions through exclusion, regulation, and normalization, ultimately harming all genders. In both plays, the family emerges as the primary site where gender norms are enforced, transforming private spaces into deeply political arenas of power and resistance (Trivedi, 2003).

8. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's Tara and Dance Like a Man offer profound insights into the construction and consequences of gender roles in Indian society. By dramatizing the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, Dattani challenges audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about discrimination, complicity, and conformity within everyday social relations. This study demonstrates that Dattani's gender politics are neither simplistic nor didactic; rather, they operate through subtle characterization and symbolic realism. His plays invite sustained critical reflection, emphasizing the need for empathy, self-awareness, and ethical responsibility as prerequisites for social transformation. Through his nuanced portrayal of gendered identities and familial power structures, Dattani establishes himself as a vital voice in Indian drama and a significant contributor to global gender discourse.

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